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Question time: Specialised schools

What are the effects of having more English language students?

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As might be obvious to anyone who sees them enjoying all that Malta has to offer, the number of English language students visiting the islands this year seems to have increased. This would mean that 2017 is going to be even better than last year, which saw almost 77,000 students visiting Malta, or a growth of 1.6 per cent. What it also means is that the English language teaching sector is developing further thanks to Malta's international reputation as a quality destination. With such development, the entire country stands to benefit. A cursory look at some figures confirms this.

English language students constitute four per cent of all tourist arrivals and they contribute almost 11 per cent of all guest nights. Moreover, more than eight per cent of total tourist expenditure is made by students. A report produced by Deloitte estimates that this amounts to around €139 million. Most importantly, while the average length of stay of a student is almost 21 days, that of other kinds of tourists is around eight days. This suggests that the financial contribution made by a student is rather significant.

Students come to Malta from around 40 countries. Whereas in the past the main countries of origin were almost exclusively in Europe, the sector is now registering a more diverse mix of nationalities. In fact, in 2016 more than a quarter of all student weeks were from countries that are not usually considered tourist source markets for Malta. These included Turkey, Colombia, Brazil and Japan. The average length of stay of students from these countries was longer than that of students from EU countries such as Italy, France and Germany, which have for a long time been important source markets for the sector.

“ *Thousands of people stand to gain from a larger volume of students* ”

Some might associate the English language teaching sector with students in their early teens; however, half of all students are adults, with 29 per cent of them being over 26 years of age. Quite significantly, those who spend the longest time in Malta are over 18.

The English language teaching sector generates revenue from three main sources: tuition, accommodation, and activities. In 2016, the gross revenue for every student week grew by seven per cent. Tuition amounted to more than half while accommodation contributed to 39 per cent. Accommodation was the main source of revenue growth.

Last year the increase in revenue corresponded to an increase in costs. Direct costs increased by more than 10 per cent for every student week when compared to the previous year. According to the Deloitte report, two of the main increases in direct costs were in teachers' payroll and accommodation. The latter is quite significant for Maltese families given that more than a quarter of all student weeks were spent in accommodation provided by host families. Indirect costs increased by almost nine per cent per student week, the main expenditure being on marketing, rent, and the payroll of non-teaching staff. What these figures indicate is that this sector contributes to the revenue made by other sectors in Malta, and provides work to many people.

Even though the busiest period in terms of student arrivals is from June to August, this sector operates all year round and hence relies on the services provided by employees occupying a wide variety of positions. It employs more than 1,200 teachers and is an important source of employment for women and for individuals aged between 18 and 24. Moreover, around 800 people are employed in non-teaching positions, the large majority of them being on a full-time basis.

Some might object to the increase in the number of students, but what they seem to forget is that Malta's economy and thousands of people stand to gain from a larger volume of students spending longer in the country. The main effect of more students choosing Malta as their preferred destination for an English language learning experience is that more businesses, families and individuals benefit.

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