

Malta Journal of Health Sciences

<https://doi.org/10.14614/ENVIRONMENT/10/23>

<https://www.medra.org/servlet/view?lang=en&doi=10.14614/ENVIRONMENT/10/23>

*Undergraduate Graduation Ceremony Oration, November 2022*

## Environmentally Sustainable Healthcare: Challenges and opportunities

**Josef Trapani (josef.trapani@um.edu.mt)**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Nursing & Deputy Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta.

Graduation ceremonies offer a good opportunity to take a look back, reflect, and then look forward with passion and purpose.

Looking back. The past couple of years, since graduation ceremonies were last held in their full glory, have been particularly difficult for all of us. But we rose to the occasion. Despite the setbacks imposed by the pandemic, our students persevered with their studies, completed their placements, worked on their dissertation...and in the process, undoubtedly developed resilience, adaptability, critical thinking, problem solving and other 21st Century skills that they will definitely utilise in their professional practice and in life in general. After all, as Nora Ephron once remarked, “Your education is a dress rehearsal for a life that is yours to lead.” And what a rehearsal it was for your cohort, dear graduands!

As academics, we had to reinvent ourselves and rethink our ways of working and communicating, our methods of teaching and our assessment strategies. We supported our students who needed more time and encouragement to complete their studies. We conducted research during an extraordinarily challenging period.

Universities are often accused of being detached from communities and societies at large. Yet, several lecturers, administrators and students took on an active role in the

COVID response team, at testing and call centres, in the vaccine roll out at the University Campus and various other sites.

But we now need to look forward.

As we strive to regain some semblance of normality, we need to make sure to retain the lessons learnt through the pandemic, in terms of flexibility; creativity; sustainability; our use of technology in supplementing (not replacing!) face to face teaching and learning, for instance by redesigning tasks in ways that would have been inconceivable without technology; working in a paperless manner; being more judicious in our travels. Indeed, a recent case study suggested that approximately one third of the carbon footprint generated by academics is related to travel for conferences.<sup>1</sup>

While the coronavirus pandemic was, and still is, a cause for concern, it has also partly diverted our attention from the more catastrophic and long-term effects of global warming, climate change and person-made disasters that are already evident and being felt.

We often – and understandably – focus on the negative impact of deteriorating environmental conditions on our health. Indeed, worsening air pollution and extreme heat increase the risk of non-communicable diseases such as respiratory and cardiovascular disease and cancer. A study published last June in *The Lancet Planetary Health* showed that one in every six deaths occurring globally between 2015 and 2019 was attributable to diseases

Correspondence to Josef Trapani

(josef.trapani@um.edu.mt)

Received: 20.03.2023

Revised: 15.05.2023

Accepted: 15.05.2023

Published: 30.06.2023

© 2023, Malta Journal of Health Sciences

<sup>1</sup> Ciers, J. et al. (2019). Carbon Footprint of Academic Air Travel: A Case Study in Switzerland. *Sustainability*, 11, 80; doi:10.3390/su11010080

caused by air pollution.<sup>2</sup> This equates to approximately nine million premature deaths per year being caused by pollution, which exceeds the mortality attributable to drugs, alcohol, war, terrorism and road traffic accidents, and is three times the number of deaths from AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined.

However, health and the environment are inextricably linked in the other direction as well. The notion of *Primum non nocere* – first do no harm – has underpinned healthcare delivery for centuries. Yet, according to the Health Policy Partnership (UK), the healthcare sector itself is responsible for almost 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, and has a carbon footprint equivalent to more than 500 coal-fired power plants. If the healthcare sector were a country, it would be the fifth largest polluter in the world.<sup>3</sup>

By far, the majority (71%) of greenhouse emissions from the health sector consist of indirect – and, therefore, overlooked – emissions, such as those from supply chains. These include the production, transport and disposal of medications, food, medical devices and hospital equipment. This was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a tremendous increase in the amount of personal protective equipment and other single-use items to protect staff while caring for patients.

This, dear graduands, is one of the most pressing issues impacting our planet as you formally join the workforce. And unless you – we – challenge the status quo, and radically rethink our way of doing things, emissions from healthcare facilities could triple between now and 2050. As graduates, you are now in a position to influence this, first by raising your awareness on these challenges and ways to address them, and subsequently by improving your own practices, influencing policy and leading by example. To quote the American journalist Tom Brokaw:

*You may think of [your degree] as the ticket to the good life. Let me ask you to think of an alternative. Think of it as your ticket to change the world.*

Although we can do more, the University is striving to impart the principles of sustainability. For instance, the Department of Nursing, which I form part of, signed up to the *Climate Challenge Europe*, which provides nurses with resources to educate fellow healthcare professionals, students, communities and service users about the health consequences of climate change and the impact of the healthcare sector on the environment.<sup>4</sup> We took an active part in developing the *Nursing School Commitment*, which serves as an opportunity to empower nursing students at all levels to encourage environmental stewardship.<sup>5</sup> And we joined forces with several European universities and healthcare entities in an alliance that seeks to design and deliver a course on planetary health for health science students, with a strong focus on sustainability and climate advocacy within healthcare facilities. Crucially, sustainability is one of the themes of the University's strategic plan (2020-2025) with ambitious but achievable commitments related to waste reduction, reuse and recycling; water conservation; energy efficient measures; sustainable transport; and training and research on sustainability amongst others.<sup>6</sup>

But today is mainly about celebration. So congratulations to you, graduands, on having persisted and completed your studies in more challenging times than usual, and to your parents, family and friends who supported you in this journey. I have no doubt that your journey as undergraduate students has equipped you with several transversal skills, that will enable you to assert yourselves as competent, conscientious and caring professionals.

Needless to say, this is a first step. Keeping abreast with research is not optional. And the sky is the limit in terms of opportunities for further education and training. Of course, these include various postgraduate programmes

2 Fuller, R., et al. (2022). Pollution and health: a progress update. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 6, e535-47. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(22\)00090-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00090-0)

3 Smith, L. (2022). The nexus between climate change and healthcare. *The Health Policy Partnership*. <https://www.health-policypartnership.com/the-nexus-between-climate-change-and-healthcare/>

4 Health Care Without Harm (2021). *Nurses Climate Challenge Europe*. <https://eur.nursesclimatechallenge.org/en>

5 Health Care Without Harm (2021). *Nursing School Commitments*. <https://eur.nursesclimatechallenge.org/en/school-of-nursing-commitment>

6 L-Università ta' Malta (2020). *Strategic Plan 2020-2025: Serving students, scholarship and society, sustainably*. Malta: University of Malta.

and standalone continuing professional development courses offered by our University, including a number of new courses geared at facilitating specialisation that are being offered for the first time this year.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Arie Pencovicie:

*Graduation is only a concept. In real life, every day you graduate. Graduation is a process that goes on until the last day of your life. If you can grasp that, you'll make a difference.*

On behalf of the University of Malta, I wish you the very best in your professional and personal lives and encourage you to do your utmost to make a difference.