



**PROFESSOR MANWEL DEBONO**

*Associate Professor, Centre for Labour Studies*

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### **Strengthening HR and Labour Market Expertise:**

**The Development and Impact of The Bachelor in Work and Human Resources Honours Programme**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the rationale and development of the Bachelor in Work and Human Resources Honours programme at the University of Malta. It discusses the programme's evolving curriculum and its alignment with industry needs. Additionally, the paper investigates the career outcomes of programme graduates, their attitudes towards the programme, and the positive impact it had on their professional growth. The findings underscore the effectiveness of the programme in equipping graduates with the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence to excel in HR and related fields. The paper concludes by emphasising the continued need for the programme to adapt to emerging trends and challenges in the dynamic world of work, while also

advocating for further initiatives to strengthen the HR profession in Malta.

**Keywords:** bachelor degree; work and human resources; professionalism; career outcomes; graduates' attitudes; curriculum development; labour market; programme effectiveness.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This brief paper delves into various aspects of the Bachelor in Work and Human Resources Honours (B.WHR) programme, shedding light on its evolution and outcomes. The findings from a tracer study conducted among WHR graduates provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and relevance of the programme, as well as the career paths pursued by the graduates. Additionally, the paper discusses the attitudes of graduates towards the programme and highlights the positive transformations they experienced. Ultimately, this paper aims to showcase the achievements of the B.WHR programme in strengthening the HR and related fields in Malta, and underscores the importance of continuous improvement and ongoing professional development within the HR profession.

## **THE CONTEXT AND RATIONALE BEHIND THE PROGRAMME**

The development of the B.WHR programme was mainly driven by the aim of strengthening the field of human resources (HR) by enhancing the professionalism of its workforce. The HR field is not well developed in Malta. HR jobs are not legally regulated, and the interests of practitioners are not promoted by an independent professional association. Until a few years ago, organisations tended to have a limited appreciation for the optimisation of workers' performance and the role of HR practitioners in Malta. Dealing with people has often been perceived as obvious, assuming that understanding human behaviour comes naturally because we are all human.

Indeed, many organisations in Malta, especially family-owned businesses, still adopt traditional personnel management practices, focusing on administrative and transactional practices rather than the broader,

strategic approach of HR management. However, employers and leaders are increasingly recognising the benefits of having a dedicated HR function in their organisations, as seen from the vacancies being advertised. They acknowledge the importance of effective employees in a changing labour market characterised by shifting demographics, evolving skill requirements, and diverse career aspirations. There appears to be a growing recognition of the need of employee engagement, motivation, and the fostering of a positive work culture to drive higher performance and organisational success.

The myth that experience alone is sufficient to become an effective HR manager is gradually dissipating. Traditionally, individuals were often recruited for personnel management or HR positions without specific qualifications. However, this trend is changing as more organisations now require candidates to possess relevant qualifications. As a result, over the past two decades, a growing number of individuals interested in the field have started seeking qualifications in HR, often embarking on correspondence courses. Until the B.WHR programme was established, the University of Malta (UM) did not have specialised undergraduate degree programmes focused on HR or the labour market. Instead, aspects of such topics were often covered in more general programmes.

Recognising the need to fill this gap, the Centre for Labour Studies (CLS) in collaboration with the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy (FEMA) developed the B.WHR programme to provide a dedicated and comprehensive education in HR and the labour market. By offering theoretical knowledge and practical skills, this programme aims to meet the increasing demand for qualified HR professionals in Malta. Through its 'work' component, the programme also provides a macro view of the labour market that benefits not only HR practitioners but also trade union officials, other stakeholders in industrial relations, and policy makers, among others.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

The B.WHR is a five-year part-time evening programme of studies. Students who discontinue the programme after successfully completing their second year are entitled to a diploma. The programme has been offered seven times (biennially) since 2010, and over 140 students have graduated to date with a diploma or a bachelor's degree.

The programme of studies targets workers who already work or wish to work in HR management, industrial relations, employment policy, or related fields. Similar courses offered in other European universities and the changing needs of the Maltese labour market were considered during the development of the programme.

The programme bridges the gap between traditional personnel management approaches and the broader, strategic perspectives of HR management, delving into a wide range of HR and labour market topics. It has an interdisciplinary approach, “including perspectives from management, sociology, organisational psychology, education, economics, statistics, public policy, law, accountancy, and health and safety among others” (University of Malta, 2022). The programme aims to balance teaching from UM academics with that of practitioners in the field.

The programme was structured in such a way as to give a general theoretical understanding in its first two years and then gradually focus on more applied elements. The programme has evolved over the years, reflecting the changing realities of the labour market and students' feedback. The CLS Board, which includes representatives from the government, trade unions and employers, is an important contributor to the programme's evolution. Several study units were amended or discontinued, and others were introduced. In particular, more applied elements were added to the programme, focusing on issues such as employment law, payroll, employee relations, disciplinary processes, dismissal, and more. The research component of the programme was also strengthened to meet the increasing professional need for conducting research, writing reports, and analysing data. Significant revisions to its

assessment methods were carried out, streamlining them and ensuring they are varied and reflective of the established learning outcomes.

In recent years, following students' requests, the course started to be offered in a hybrid mode, with some of the lectures conducted online in real time. This change was facilitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the strengthening of the technical facilities for online teaching and reducing institutional and lecturers' resistance to such developments. This change was greatly appreciated by students who consistently request more flexibility.

## **GRADUATES' CAREER OUTCOMES**

Investigating the career outcomes of graduates enables the assessment of the effectiveness of a programme of studies that focuses on the professionalisation of workers in HR and labour market fields of work. Tracer studies can reveal whether a programme adequately prepares students for relevant employment opportunities. They can shed light on the relevance and alignment of the programme with industry needs and demands, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the programme's curriculum, teaching methods, and support services.

A tracer study was conducted among WHR graduates in April 2023. 106 graduates replied, resulting in a response rate of 76% (out of a population of about 140 graduates). 28% of the respondents graduated with a diploma, while 72% graduated with a bachelor's degree. 68% of the respondents were women, and 32% were men. Most respondents (55%) were between 25 and 39 years old, 35% were in the 40 to 55 age bracket, while 10% were older than 55 years.

Virtually all respondents were employed on a full-time basis (97%). Out of those employed, nearly all were employees (98%) and had indefinite employment contracts (96%). Most graduates (52%) worked in the private sector. Graduates worked across a spectrum of economic sectors, with the largest groups employed in public administration and defence (16%), education (14%), manufacturing and energy (11%), gaming (10%), and audit,

banking and finance (10%). Half of the graduates (50%) earned a net income of EUR 1,501–2,500 in the month preceding the survey, while about a fifth (19%) earned EUR 2,501–2,500, another fifth (20%) earned more than EUR 3,000, and only 11% earned less than EUR1,501.

The career paths of graduates varied. 38% held two different jobs since they graduated with a diploma or bachelor's degree in WHR, about a third (32%) held only one job, while the remaining graduates (31%) held three or more jobs. The large majority (95%) of graduates were never unemployed and seeking employment since graduating, with only 4% being unemployed for less than 6 months.

65% of graduates worked as senior officials or managers, 17% as professionals, 6% in technical occupations, and 10% in clerical jobs. Most of the graduates' occupations were directly related to HR. Indeed, the job titles of more than half (53%) of the respondents included the terms HR, people management, or more specific aspects of HR such as recruitment, training or compensation. Many other jobs such as those in administration, management, and industrial relations benefit from a good grasp of HR or/and the labour market. Half of the graduates (50%) stated that the WHR qualification was a requirement to apply for their current job. Graduates with a B.WHR were significantly more likely to have required their qualification to apply for their current job when compared to those with the diploma. The majority of graduates (60%) stated that their current job matched their expectations, 33% stated that it moderately did so, while only 8% stated that their current job did not match their expectations. The latter graduates were significantly more likely to be among the 11% of the respondents who were seeking employment or alternative employment.

After concluding their WHR programme, 44% of the respondents pursued additional qualifications.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these (68%) successfully completed or were in the process of completing a Master's degree. The Master of Business

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1 One should note that some graduates obtained tertiary qualifications (including at master's level) before joining the WHR programme.

Administration (MBA) was the preferred area of specialisation, chosen by 47% of those who pursued a Master's degree. Another 17% specialised in work psychology or organisational behaviour, while only 10% opted for HR. The low latter figure appears to be due to reasons unrelated to graduates' interest in the field. Indeed, two-thirds (75%) of the respondents stated that they would be interested in furthering their studies in a topic related to work and HR.

## **GRADUATES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE PROGRAMME**

The WHR programme left a significant impact on the lives of its graduates. The survey revealed that numerous graduates credited the programme with propelling their careers forward. Many acknowledged that their WHR qualification acted as a crucial entry requirement for their current jobs. It expanded work opportunities, opened doors to advancement and attracted better salaries. Notably, the WHR programme even facilitated graduates' further educational development, not only by providing them with the necessary background and skills needed to pursue further education, but also by inspiring and motivating them. Graduates mentioned that the programme's recognition provided tangible evidence of their professional competence, and in some cases played a crucial role to be awarded scholarships to pursue master's degrees.

The WHR programme was credited by the graduates for their heightened professionalism and enhanced service delivery. Many highlighted their ability to apply the skills they had learned, enabling them to implement changes and handle difficult workplace situations constructively. However, some graduates confessed the challenges faced when their new ideas were met with resistance. The WHR programme instilled graduates with confidence in interacting with management. They reported better understanding and support for colleagues. The programme also provided networking opportunities, enhancing graduates' connections within the field.

The WHR programme broadened graduates' technical knowledge and skills. They specifically mentioned that they became aware of the strategic

aspects of HR, gained knowledge of employment laws, recruitment strategies, training and performance appraisal methodologies, and strengthened their understanding of workplace inclusivity and workers' needs and expectations. Additionally, graduates said that the programme gave them insights into the labour market and economic development and helped them acquire a holistic view of businesses beyond HR. The WHR programme also enhanced graduates' transferable skills. It instilled in them an appreciation for continuous learning, emphasising the importance of understanding the complexities of work situations and making informed decisions. Many graduates wrote about the utility of the analytical thinking abilities they developed during the programme. Graduates also developed organisational and leadership skills. They mentioned that they gained proficiency in managing teams, communicating effectively and providing critical feedback. They became adept at carrying out research, writing reports and delivering presentations. Many graduates stated that the WHR programme played a pivotal role in their self-understanding and personal growth. The programme fostered graduates' self-confidence, resilience, perseverance and self-discipline, enabling them to overcome challenges and excel in their professional endeavours. It stimulated their critical thinking and gave them a fresh perspective on tackling issues. For many graduates, completing the programme marked their first university-level achievement, giving them a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

## **CONCLUSION**

The B.WHR programme was developed to enhance the professionalism of HR and labour market practitioners and improve the services they offer. Findings from the tracer study highlighted the transformative impact of the programme on graduates' careers and personal growth. Meanwhile, the programme is successfully filling an increasing number and variety of HR positions with qualified practitioners. Graduates' feedback led to considerable improvements in the programme since its inception in 2010. To maintain



effectiveness, the programme should continue striking the right balance between theoretical and practical knowledge.

Moving forward, the programme must continue evolving to address emerging needs in the changing world of work. This includes aspects such as the growing recruitment of foreign workers, the disruptive impact of artificial intelligence, and the importance of HR metrics in analysing HR management. Consideration should be given to organising work placements or internships for students without prior HR experience. Currently, the CLS is developing a related Master's degree in response to the high demand and need for further specialisation in HR and organisational behaviour.

While educational programmes like the B.WHR are making significant progress in capacity building, additional initiatives are needed to further strengthen the field. Establishing an association of HR practitioners could play a vital role in further elevating standards, fostering ongoing development, and promoting professionalism within the field.

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