



## In a nutshell

The University of Malta Cottonera Resource Centre (CRC)<sup>42</sup> is a multidisciplinary, community-based lifelong learning and social support centre, which adopts a systematic and multi-targeted approach to promote lifelong education in the Cottonera and Kalkara area, a socially deprived area in the south of Malta. The main objective of the CRC is to help facilitate and develop inter-generational involvement in lifelong learning involving families, peer groups, the community, schools and the university. Secondary objectives include helping to promote leadership, self-awareness and active citizenship, while highlighting the tangible and intangible heritage in the area.<sup>43</sup>

**Category:** contribution, collaboration, co-creation

**Involved stakeholders:** students, service providers, NGOs, policy makers, different entities within the University of Malta, state and private entities

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Cottonera and Kalkara area, a socially deprived area in the south of Malta. Photo: © Fred - stock.adobe.com

# Case Study: The University of Malta Cottonera Resource Centre

## University of Malta

### How it began

The Centre was set up to explore the possibility of developing socially and culturally sensitive community engagement in 2012. Before opening, a needs assessment survey was carried out in 2009-2010, and interviews were conducted with stakeholders living and service providers working with people in the area. In the first months when the Centre was in operation, a tent was set up in the main squares of the Three Cities (Senglea, Bormla and Birgu) and academics organised activities to find out what different groups of people expected of the Centre. This dialogue proved crucial on a number of bases – it introduced the Centre to the different communities

and underlined the fact that a range of activities and services needed to be provided to address the needs of the various social groups. Other outreach activities included concerts, plays, film screening sessions, and lectures on topics which were of interest to the different groups living in the area. The most successful were the lectures held on famous personalities as well as those on the tangible and intangible heritage found in the area, followed by film screening sessions. This attracted the adults, and once they were there the organisers started a dialogue on the best way forward to help them and the younger generation.

<sup>42</sup><https://www.facebook.com/um.cottonerarc>

<sup>43</sup><https://www.um.edu.mt/services/resourcecentres/crc/aboutus/annualreports>

## Activities

From the outset, the Centre was in constant communication with the principal of St Margaret's College as well as the heads of the different schools in the area to design services which would help students become more interested in furthering their education beyond the compulsory years. This ongoing dialogue with the schools in the area led the CRC to create revision classes to help prepare 14 to 16 year old students for the 16+ examinations while providing them with informal vocational counselling so that they would feel more prepared to move on to post-secondary education, and eventually university.

The initial revision classes and talks were conducted by volunteers. The University of Malta started allocating the Centre a budget for the revision classes and summer school in 2015. This budget was augmented with income derived from activities organised by the Centre and educational material donated by private companies. Funds also derive from Xjenzamania and other activities held at the Centre. Xjenzamania consists of a summer school for students aged between 8 to 12, as well as short courses designed to promote STEAM related skills among young people. The objective behind the STEAM-related courses and projects is not limited to promoting STEAM among community residents. It helps attract people from all around Malta, ensuring that local students have the opportunity to mix with those from outside the area, therefore helping shatter pejorative connotations attached to people deriving from Cottonera.

The administrative board of the CRC realised at an early stage that it could not help promote further education in the area without addressing the educational needs of adults living there as well. To do this the organisers sought the help of the Lifelong Learning Directorate, which started providing educational programmes at the Centre in 2014. For the older generation, a branch of the University of the Third Age was established in 2013. Apart from these, a number of courses or talks are designed every year for adults after consultation with the leaders or service providers working with different groups living within and surrounding area. For example, a course on Easter related traditions - which are popular in the Cottonera area - was created and a publication ensued from this endeavour. A number of lectures are also held on social issues which affect the area, including sexually transmitted diseases, budgeting, rent, etc., depending on demand. These talks, which are held in the form of a forum – where the speaker introduces the sessions and a discussion ensues – have on a number of occasions made academics aware of which

issues are affecting different vulnerable groups within the area. Academics then work with NGOs in the area to raise this issue with policy makers and push for social justice.

The constant dialogue between the Centre, service providers, and stakeholders living and working in the area helps the Centre be more responsive to the needs of individuals, social groups and communities. When the Centre cannot do anything on its own to solve an issue, it resorts to academic experts. For example, the Legal Clinic and Counselling sessions started operating at the Centre in 2014 when demand for these services were flagged by service providers. These services provide university students with clients, while clients have access to free legal advice and counselling. The outreach initiatives in the community also help provide academics and university students with opportunities to develop socially and culturally sensitive academic, research, teaching and community projects.

## Award-winning

In 2016 the CRC was awarded the EPALE award for 'Outstanding community learning initiative'.

## Challenges

Constant dialogue and cross-agency cooperation are essential when it comes to facilitating access and retention of non-traditional learners in lifelong education, and to ensure their wellbeing to enable them to do so. All services have to be constantly promoted using various means, including traditional media, social media, NGOs, service providers, parishes, stakeholders, and community outreach events. Word of mouth is crucial when a new service is made available. This outreach has to be undertaken by people who are sensitive to the people of the area and are familiar with how they think. The efficacy of such outreach of course depends on the personnel at hand and their level of motivation when it comes to engaging the population in question. Sometimes it is difficult to reach the people who would benefit most from a service since this population might be hard to contact and/or do not trust people in authority. This is where the help of NGOs and religious leaders can prove useful. Working with NGOs, service providers and community stakeholders in the area is crucial for the success of this project.