University of Malta

Oration

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10 October 2017

Conscience and the University's impact

Everything must be weaved in Context. Today I am addressing the millennials, the first clicker generation. I am addressing the generation who, when born, have access to vast knowledge caches but are compelled with the need to tweet simplicities, upload or exhibit one's wares to all and sundry in an increasingly connected world.

In view of this, attempting to weave together society's foundational themes and technology through a focus on the *Alma Mater*'s role in keeping this small island state's sanity on the right track is a good place to start.

Compare our society to another social organisation - the ant colony: an aggregate and structured machine that works in tune to an organised core. The same for the state and our University. We have much to be proud of, but we must prepare our students to think critically to make the jump and move from data to information to knowledge to organised action.

And this is where conscience appears.

L'Università ta' Malta **IS** the state's conscience and has an obligation to society to guide, nurture and promote social change. Are we being reactive as against proactive? We have had some major impacts in changing society, such as the push-pull factors in studies on dementia, strategies on crime prevention, active ageing, medicine, architecture, chemistry, information and technology.

However, has it shied away from public discourse and criticism of the PREFET (Politics, Religion, Economy, Family, Education and Technology) structures in order to keep safe from being in turn criticised? Have we sat on our laurels and hence suffer society's anger at having waited too long to guide society along? Has society's conscience gone dormant?

Politics: The self-fulfilling prophecy of denigration

In a world where information is instant, society has assimilated hypernormalisation, where one is so part of a system that we fail to see beyond it, being assailed by alternative facts, fake reporting, blogs and dubious stats. The University has a lot of work to do: to enable students to seek facts and not conjure what one assumes should be facts. Between the expected and the observed there are chasms to cross.

Politicians have not helped, what with trumpism's "say it, repeat it, say it again" mantra, Maltese society is not immune to such entrapment and the latest round of political diatribes show that politicians have given in to the court of public opinion, having lost touch with their grassroots. Where was our conscience when the Maltese state depended on the strengthening of those social cohesion factors that sustain our social capital?

Academics should have been there to enlighten those who went to an alternative level of politics and resorted to parochialism and self-mutilation in their zeal for country bashing. Hedonism, panama, non-resignations, push-back, citizenship crusade u-turns, calls for insurrection, demeaning public figures, attacking the social capital entities and instigation in foreign fora have managed to dent the outsider's perception though we strive hard to reverse such. When the common enemy disappears, internecine warfare rears its head and we have seen this very recently inter-party and intra-party. It is time for this *Alma Mater* to beat some sense into its children or are we failing to nurture political debate? The University should call for a rehaul in political thinktanks, governance, a new republic and an active President who does not meddle again in politics but truly represents society. It should seek to ensure that its knowledge emanating from pensive reflection is turned into action by our students. This ensures that the University morphs into a proactive entity, having sometimes waited for an election to be announced in order to produce insights.

There is a silver lining though here we broke through. This relates to the universal acceptance of statistical sampling methods in determining election results that this University's academics have provided through sound methodology. One where 1000 persons can reliably vote in a government. Should we be the first country to remove general elections and partake to a sample to elect our government?

Religion: New Realities, Old Norms

Millennials are bombarded by the rise of new religions, whilst others seek internal peace through their own pathways. The traditional dogma of an award or punishment after death does not appeal to a generation used to instant gratification. Thus the appeal of new religions, the rise of Bobby Henderson's Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster against intelligent design; Ron Hubbard's Scientology hierarchy of wealth and others to come as the virtual world expands its realm. The University's role is in understanding that the younger generation's VIBES (values, interests, beliefs, ethics and slants) have been scribed by their new gods; the youtubers, the minecrafters, the pan-cultural mix of virtualisation teams… This is where our youngsters live, pray and converse. They do not partake to traditional religious fervor, what with rapidly diminishing church participation, the handling of child molestation cases, the bishopric's haste to tweet, the partaking to environmental ODZ protests in conjunction with interested politicians whilst applying to convert a massive ODZ area into an educational institution. How's that for undoing years of NGO gains in one fell swoop and the same youngsters' hope of a new environmental revival?

A Booming Economy

Malta's economic boom calls for a full employment realisation rendering a situation where our students are so used to benefits, stipends and easy-to-find jobs that they are not being prepared for a scenario where this boom may shrivel. How does the University prepare students to survive in post-boom societies and how they can bring the society back on track?

On another domain, we cannot afford a society where the poor are hidden: real poverty exists. The Okella Agius 2012 incident is a case in point, when together with McKay, we published a research-based map of poverty hotspots. To our disbelief, this was solved through the installation of a blue door which served to hide the problem and not solve it. A classic governmental reaction to an academic request for action based on empirical research!

Family and multiculturalism

The rapid changes wrought during the recent years have morphed this society into a new reality. Research shows that the Maltese family is not immune from being a source of both good and evil and has many forms. The University's role has been proactive on this count.

In terms of multiculturalism, this is here to stay and the nostalgia that we can all swear in the same language is past. Pride in being Maltese should be something achieved not ascribed. In terms of immigration, xenophobia and intolerance, let us pause a bit to review the choice of surnames: Vella (German), Muscat (English), Said (Arabic), Depuis (French), Dacoutros (Greek), Scicluna (Algerian), Cappello (Italian), Pace (Anglo-Norman-French), Battistino (Italian). Where did these hail from? The Ether? So enlightening was Wettinger in his studies.

This University has a faculty entitled "Social Wellbeing" which focuses on bringing the human aspect into research and policy. It does serve as the conscience and has already instigated major changes in society. However, we need to change its name to the **Faculty for Applied Social Sciences** and ensure that the focus is moved towards applied research.

Education: A new caste system?

Education has become status-based not skills-based. Are we teaching skills or simply awarding certificates to students in a perpetual cycle that gives graduates the perspective that they instantly become knowledgeable in all things PREFET? We have created a caste system based on MQF level... the new Brahmins, the new Vaisyas, the new Shudras. We have created the new Ayatollahs of knowledge who preside over the masses through access to information based on how many avatars we have or have not and how we can use those to do our work.

Education has become a rote in routine, such that students perceive university as just another step in their primary-secondary-tertiary transition and not as a source of pride based on the achievement of skills.

Technology

We are living in a world dominated by technology were societal space has shrunk to that of an armchair. What this has done for the new generation is that they have lost touch with the environment, with the need to experience reality through the physical senses. This is becoming blurred as technology becomes more sophisticated and more and more people are immersed. But is a cricket's song in virtual reality as sweet as the real one?

The University is a forerunner in the transitional process from Physical to Virtual to Augmented to Mixed Realities calling for a new set of VIBES. Once the new generations move entirely in online worlds, they would serve as the new conscience.

This calls for the University's push for data integration, the elimination of data hoarding, the understanding that the new power exists not in Marxian or Dahrendorffian models but in access or non-access to information. Here I mention the efforts put in to bring such systems within an integrated form through the SIntegraM project.

Hereby I call for the University to initiate a process in conjunction with the government to launch the first virtual country where the new generation already has a hold. Whilst we are currently researching such a process in the quest for security and scene reconstruction as well as economic models based on blockchain technologies and social media, it is time for the initiation of virtual worlds and their inherent citizenships. The University has the capacity to both research, guide and serve this means.

To our current students

Within these different realities, we need to ground our students to approach academic life with vigor and a realistic sense of the world out there. The lack of reading is worrying. References to wiki and junk is a knowledge killer as is the new plagiarism plague. One proposal would be that students should work for two years prior to initiating a University course, as such helps them to acquire knowledge on the relentless real world. In terms of democratic processes, here I challenge the students to overhaul the current structure that is the KSU: a questionable democratic process where those who backed the conceding parties are not represented. Accepting a one-side wins all during the formation years and then demanding equality and representation in the parliamentary and social circles is anathema. On another level, that related to transport and functional spatial terms, students should be incentivised and parking spaces abolished.

To my *Alma Mater* colleagues

Competition is good for this *Alma Mater* and we can notch it up in the league of universities. But we need drive, loyalty, cooperation, trust and a modern operand.

It is time to carry out a review of academic effort to encompass one's impact on society, particularly where more intra-inter-facility collaboration is enacted. The current siloisation of academia needs to be confined to history. Publications should be targeted at a minimum of one per quarter, whilst the lecturing *modus operandi* should be virtualised and lectures should be recorded for posterity as online virtual courses become the norm.

A few words of wisdom from my mentors

One of my mentors ventured this for you: your reputation and what you do in society is akin to *Glass: difficult to produce but easy to break*. Build slowly but gradually and ensure that you remain humble.

Life's not fair but through hard work it becomes fairer. My experiences were strange, scary and wondrous. I experienced war, fear, surprise, discoveries, self-reliance, friendship and fatherhood. This is what shaped me and it reflects reality out there: it is what we do to survive this and better it that makes us the country's conscience.

To the parents and guardians present or in memory, you have been relentless in guiding them through and for this we applaud you.

To the graduands, look to your left, look to your right; that is a person not a number. You might be married to that person in a few years' time. Find that partner and enrich your life... and ensure trust, commitment and love. Find a mentor or two as you will need those times to unwind and seek wisdom.

Some of you will go to work abroad, some will join Musk in his Martian endeavour and some will be pioneers in the virtual worlds. I wish you the best, but I cannot not wish you also failure in your struggle to achieve, as:

How can you know poverty if you never fell low?
How can you understand failure if you always passed or found an aide to push you through?
How can you understand your job understudies if you never started from the bottom?
How can you know hunger if you never wanted?
How can you understand fear if your worst nightmare is in CS Go?
How can you feel compassion if your boat trip was a boat party to Comino, Ios or Ibiza?
How can you understand the reality of war if you never smelt death?
How can you experience the natural environment if you never smelt dew?
How can you understand a pedestrian if you always drove a car?
How can you understand reality if you spend your life in the glass-ticking domain?

Learn from your mistakes: success is the culmination of a thousand errors committed over the years: those moments when someone's statement turns you face red, your brow creases and then you realise that you acquired an insight. Times of stress are times of growth. The talents parable is so apt here, don't hide that knowledge as it becomes rapidly obsolete.

Clouds, apples and windows

How reality has changed! When a cloud was something that dropped water, when an apple was something one ate, when a window was something one opened to allow light in... We saw these changed forever. You are the pioneers of the new frontier. Dare to dream: We dreamed and made discoveries: l-Ghariebel, white coral, a phoenician ship, the abyss, ic-corma... we were there.

We showed you methods to excel in theoretical and empirical study, to change data to information within a social reality. You have acquired knowledge, now go and revamp PREFET.

You graduates are tomorrow's conscience, do us proud.

I hope you have a wonderful inspiring life.