

PG Oration

Oration by Professor David Saliba Ph.D. (Edin.)

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Dear Chancellor, Rector, Pro-Rectors, Members of the Council and the Senate, Members of the Academic Body, Academic Registrar, Administrative members of staff, distinguished guests, parents, graduands,

It is an absolute honour for me to deliver the following oration, so I would like to first thank the Senate of the University of Malta for granting me this privilege.

Before congratulating the graduands on their achievements, I would like to thank the parents present here on this joyful occasion. On behalf of all academics, thank you! Thank you for supporting your daughters and sons through some tough times. I am sure many of you have been anchors of calm strength in rough waters. I appreciate that we are in a church and that pride is one of the seven deadly sins, but I am sure we can make an exception this once. So please, feel proud of what they have achieved today.

Today we are celebrating the generation of knowledge – a cornerstone of all academic endeavours. We are living in the information era where, paradoxically, misinformation and disinformation jeopardise generated knowledge, impacting in the process relationships between patients and healthcare professionals. Indeed, the WHO has warned that infodemics are spreading faster and more widely than pandemics, so that accurate information is not being delivered to the general public. This problem is widespread and amplified over many social media platforms where a few phrases are, unfortunately, deemed sufficient to make a coherent argument. So yes, today we celebrate the generation of

knowledge – not achieved through cursory Facebook or internet browsing, but hard and dedicated research by our graduands. I am therefore honoured to salute you and your achievements with immense pride. We owe it to you, dear graduands, that we gather in this beautiful building, in this way, to celebrate the creative values of our Alma Mater and what it has achieved.

The creation of ideas is crucial for knowledge generation that contributes to technological and economic development in the information era. We need to capitalise on human creative skills that cannot be emulated by automation, computers and artificial intelligence. Whilst creativity is a concept commonly associated with the arts, we now recognise that the creative process in science, technology, engineering and mathematics is very similar to that of the art world. We have come a long way as a country in setting up funding streams that invest in the scientific process. I am pleased to say that we now have funding that supports basic or as I prefer calling it: fundamental research projects. This was unheard of just 20 years ago. But what can we do to maintain and strive for even higher levels of excellence, which many people have benefitted from? The answer is simple: Do not stop! I would like to take this opportunity to appeal to policy makers present here today to continue pursuing this plan of funding Research and Innovation projects. The product of these research funding streams which we are celebrating today through the work and achievements of our graduands is a testament that this is the right way forward.

It saddens me to see a rise in willful contempt for intellect, creative thinking and consequently the truth. When people doubt the role of researchers, it means that we have failed to sharpen the critical thinking skills of our society. But it is also our role, as a university, to engage the public not only at events but even in daily conversations to transfer our knowledge to society in general. It is also our role as a nation to endeavour to become more creative and exploit the knowledge we

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have generated when making difficult decisions for the betterment of our society. We must pursue an education that is all-inclusive with the ultimate aim of making us life-long learners in a spirit of mutual respect for the societal roles of each and every one of us.

And yes, knowledge and education are not cheap, but to quote Abraham Lincoln: *“If you think education is expensive, try ignorance!”*

Apart from the inherent cost, scientific research is fraught with challenges and failure. Once again, I would like to applaud our graduands today as they have successfully navigated through their research projects. But here we have to rethink the concept of failure. Looking back now, many of you might have encountered difficult problems, which despite your best efforts, seemed insurmountable. We should shift from the negative connotation and fear of failure to a more accepting role in the process leading to novel discoveries. My advice would be to take comfort in your achievements and use this experience in your future projects which will inevitably be laden with similar circumstances.

Following your final exams or *viva voce* defence some of you might have experienced an anticlimactic feeling asking yourselves “That’s it! What now?”. Allow me to suggest one way forward. Wait! For now, be mindful of your achievement and celebrate it with your loved ones. In my experience, careers do not follow a linear path with a traditional trajectory from University into employment or indeed the trajectory you initially planned for. I must confess, I detest the “What is your five-year plan?” question in job interviews. Looking back five years ago I would have never imagined that I would be in my position today and delivering this oration to you right now. Whilst some of us might be disconcerted at uncertain career prospects, the most successful people I know have a flexible and open mindset and continually explore new avenues for career development.

You, dear graduands have decided to invest your time and efforts in furthering your education. If you benefited from uplifting mentorship, take a moment to cherish the difference that makes. I am certain your academic mentors have been supportive of your bright minds because they respect the importance of nurturing the creative and scientific process. We must strive together, in the spirit of collaboration, to continue searching for new knowledge and transfer this knowledge to our future generations. Dear graduands, one final piece of advice: surround yourselves with people who have

experienced different life paths and never assume you are the smartest person in a room. After all, we must be respectful of the human experience from all walks of life and work hard, cooperatively and intelligently so that we can be proud of ourselves as human beings.