



I focus

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Here to serve

Opening up tertiary education was probably one of the best decisions ever taken. The crucial role of tertiary education was fathomed. It was no longer just available for the privileged and elite but understood to be an important apparatus for our societal advancement.

University degrees are in many ways a concourse of ideas. They are also a mechanism that help us get in touch with the way our society is panning out and help us in identifying enquiry gaps and at the same time provide us with empirical data as part of the response.

Tertiary education really and truly is also about creating a level playing field. People coming from different walks of life converge together to learn and discover. It is about ensuring that the general public is better equipped to take on what life throws at them both on a personal level and at community level.

In other words, it is indeed virtuous that we had politicians who had the insight and the foresight to turn a privilege for the few to an opportunity for the many. Luckily people have warmed up to this prospect and many have been lured into 'reading' from the hundreds of courses available every academic year.

Naturally people who had been around the tal-Qroqq Campus 20 or 30 years ago will see the difference that these couple of decades have brought about. The resources available to students have increased exponentially and the density of the student population is nowhere like before. The changing landscape of the campus has made our University a conglomeration of people coming from all over the world and in terms of size, is bigger than many towns and villages in Malta. University is an opportunity to converge cultures, religions, beliefs and thoughts into one big pot.

Being around for over 425 years has ripened this Institution;

"The University of Malta traces its origins to the founding of the Collegium Melitense which was set up through direct papal intervention on 12 November 1592. This college was run by the Jesuits on the lines of their other colleges established elsewhere and known as 'Collegia Externorum', catering for non-Jesuit students." um.edu.mt/about/history

There are indeed some very positive indicators coming through; ranging from improved league tables to retaining our student intake notwithstanding the competitive market, from the



internationalization of our *alma mater* to a noticeable increase in research funds, from designing a UM strategy in collaboration with the grassroots to a consistent commitment towards quality. We are also starting to 'reach out' more pungently and more academics are taking it on themselves to state their positions on governance, social wellbeing, gender based violence, quality of life, politics, preservation of art to mention just a few - and I believe this is leaving its ineffaceable mark. We are no longer happy sitting pretty but really and factually interfacing with society.

Is it enough? Of course not, but it is so much better than ever before.

But, our core business remains our students.

Let's agree that we are completely contingent on our students. In fact, I repeatedly tell my students that choosing the Faculty for Social Wellbeing is an honour for us. With all the choice there is around, locally and internationally, this does not remain a Hobson's choice. Enticing them to study on this hill situated in the former "fisherman's dwelling" becomes a consciously taken decision that places greater weight on our shoulders.

We reach out to students to survive and have purpose and we need students to replenish our

knowledge and scholarly reservoirs because we owe this supply to our country, that is, assuming we want to re-calibrate what is not working, provide solutions where there is unease and afford ideas where society has unambiguous gaps.

These last years' we've witnessed a gradual but significant change in our style done with élan. The demographics seem to indicate that we are attracting a new strain of patrons. University is all-pervading into more junctions and even though we still have a number of blind corners that we need to address, we are starting to see a stronger engagement. Some important initiatives that have left an ineffaceable mark are The Cottonera Resource Center outpost, Community Work at the Valletta Local Council, the Gozo University Campus, the Legal Clinic, the Mobile Dental Clinic, Counselling services in schools and community centers, and this to mention just a few. These are a few of the many important enterprises that indicate that UM doesn't sit on its laurels but has actually institutionalized its outreach.

My guesstimate is that as the only State funded University in the Country, we have become more accessible through initiatives like RPL (Recognition for Prior Learning) through market-

ing campaigns like the ones my Faculty (for Social Wellbeing) runs and a change in our attitude in general; which is more open and all embracing.

We are now more self-conscious and conversant on how to democratize knowledge and making the data that we gather more accessible to the community. As a university we have seen myriad examples where the University pioneered a concept, a product, an idea or a service that was eventually tapped into society. I believe we haven't yet reached our optimum yet. We should be making better use of the data we collect through our scholarship and transfer it back into the community. The university has also expanded and dedicated more resources to increasing its PhD candidates. If you had to take our Faculty as an example, from the odd PhD candidate we now have almost 50 candidates in these last five years.

Some, in my opinion, still feel that the university is not accessible enough.

Yet our *alma mater* is not perfect.

We need more staff, more money dedicated to research, more research support officers, more physical space, more prospects where to debate (for example, as a faculty we invest a lot in the Dean's Forum) and places to knock ideas around. We

also need the state, in particular, the government, to realise that we are in the scholarship business and on the other hand as academics we should make ourselves even more available to politicians and policy makers.

We have the skills and the vocation to do what we are good at; collect statistics, analyse information, investigate the facts, scrutinise numbers and evaluate documentation. Others have the vocation to implement the solutions we come up.

We need to work closely with each other - the university is committed to stand shoulder to shoulder with the community.

But the needs are big.

We need more money for scholarships, more academic staff, more space where these candidates can conduct research and meet with their colleagues, and we need to keep replenishing our labs. In my opinion the money we are throwing into stipends needs to be re-thought. But I suppose there aren't many politicians ready to do that any time soon. That money should be invested in grants, to purchase more textbooks and online journals (which cost in the thousands) and lecture room and student spaces.

It is also important that we keep internationalising our university. A lot of effort has been dedicated to this major development in these last years. The fact that many of us have studied abroad means that we have so many contacts we can capitalise on. We should improve on the use of our consulates and embassies and the international reputation that most of us have developed in these last years which are 'capital', to encourage more international students and more scholarship to come in this direction. Our geographical positioning, our proficiency in languages and our strong international portfolio are feathers in our cap.

As a university we are a credible institution.

As societies become more complex and there is much more interaction happening, the university assumes a very important role in all of this process and this institution comes in to safeguard the interests of the individual needs. Not perfect, but trustworthy, reliable and dependable. And because of that we need to use our clout to push to the forefront of our national agenda, issues that are being placed on the back burner.

Our slogan gives us away - it's what we stand for 'Serving students, scholarship and society, sustainably'.