



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

What drives our passion is ideas

This week the Faculty for Social Wellbeing organised the Dean's Awards Ceremony, which is intended to celebrate the academic excellence of its students, the relationship it has with stakeholders and the social commitment that its students and student organisations are involved in.

On this day I am always particularly cheery because it is the moment when the faculty really comes together. The Dean's Award Ceremony is by far one of the most, if not the most, significant event in our calendar. It is estimated that we organise close to 100 events a year, ranging from conferences to symposia, from debating societies to brown bag seminars, from round table conferences to training sessions, meetings and fora – the list is endless.

This ceremony is testimony to the important work that this faculty has managed to carry out since its inception:

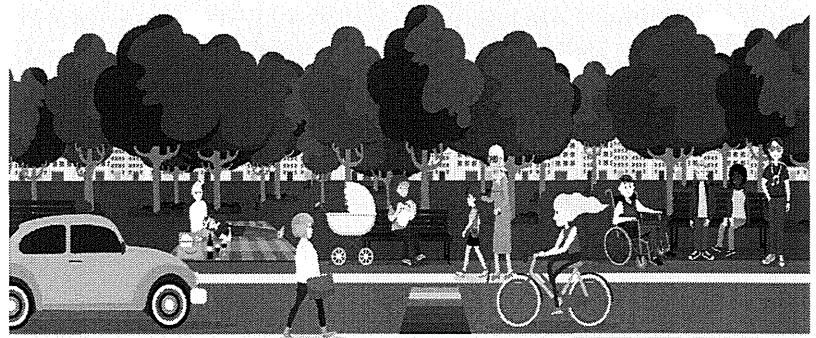
- Firstly, it celebrates excellence because we need to strive, as a faculty, towards excellence in scholarship that the social sector so aptly merits (symbolised by the Dean's List);
- Secondly, it confirms the commitment that our students have towards the social sector (symbolised by the Social Commitment Award);
- Thirdly, it is an event that ascertains the faculty's pledge to bridge-building with the social sector (symbolised by the Dr Jacqueline Azzopardi Social Engagement Award);
- Finally, it brings us together because we are most effective, affluent and better-off when we come together.

At this point I would like to quote one of my favourite authors, Slavoj Žižek, who embodies what university is. He says: "Universities should serve real people's needs" – a golden principle at the heart of our faculty. Žižek also says that we shouldn't "[turn] universities into factories producing experts and expert knowledge" and he goes on to warn us that we need to have tenacity because the bureaucrats might tempt us to go down that road.

Thirdly, Žižek continues to argue that "we should be doing stuff that we might not know what it will serve for," referring to liberty, freedom and autonomy as fundamental ingredients in academia. I couldn't agree more. Academia cannot be solely focused on achieving targets and KPIs as though life depended on that alone.

An alma mater, this "nourishing and kind mother of ours," is much more than that. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFyVOIkER3M>)

As public intellectuals, the impact we have on our communities through our respective disciplines is second to none. We are indeed embedded in the transformations that are happening around us and what needs to drive our pas-



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sion is ideas. Whether it is poverty, standards of living, social wellbeing, quality of life, family dynamics, youth and community issues, therapy, social and economic reform, minority studies, intersectionality – entrenched in all the swirl and froth of everyday debate are ideas that require arduous careful reasoning.

A faculty is not only obliged to see through its core business of teaching, mentoring, supervising and doing research, but there is another notable responsibility that we have as academics – that of putting the boot in the system, of representing the voiceless, of making sure that the social debate does not get relegated in the national agenda.

We exist as academics to speak about the 'Victoria's of this World' and condemn the thoughtlessness of letting a young man slip out of hospital and die in the most tragic of circumstances.

We exist to defend the women who are being beaten and those drug addicts who are trying hard to make it through but are finding all the doors closed.

We are here to talk about the challenges that exist in the housing sector.

We are here to talk judiciously and sensibly about the legalisation of prostitution, the recreational use of marijuana and against solitary confinement.

Naturally, this requires that we are audacious and plucky.

True, there might be some truth in what Protagoras, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, said – "Man is the measure of all things" – yet we still need to search for certainty which is based on ethical behaviour, because if we are not watchful, if we are not alert,

the next thing we will be doing is fraternising right with wrong – and we really cannot afford doing that.

Let's not forget, there is nothing to shy away from because we are a faculty founded on the spirit of social justice, coated with ethics and entrenched in inclusion.

My devotion for the social sector was stirred way back in the mid-1980s as I used to walk from the Siggiewi square to Dar tal-Providenza and back – sometimes two or three times a week (unless I managed to hitch a ride in the back of a truck). I remember the energy that oozed from me when I met my friends there – I was determined, spirited and resolute because I wanted to take on, like David, the Goliath of injustice and unfairness and prejudice and inequality. I wanted to finish Goliath off with my own sling of grit.

I am mentioning this event because I am in this sector to get results; I love the people I work with, I have an inherent desire to make things right and I aspire to have a better world, where people can live in harmony.

It is true that our social sector has grown since the document 'A Caring Society in a Changing World' was published in the 1990s. We have seen an improvement in the standards, better trained professionals and more widespread services.

But we still scuffle with the Goliaths of this world:

We struggle in a situation whereby professionals in the social sector are jumping ship because of the wages and glum conditions of work; a mental health asylum we still call a hospital falling to bits; children regularly reported as

having suffered abuse; and a crippling rent situation, just to mention a few.

In other words, we are not done here. We need to use the sling a couple of more times, it seems.

It is true that as a faculty we are starting to generate money for research, signing memoranda of understanding with our collaborators, and helping in the design of policies, strategies and action plans at a national level. This is a faculty that is attracting the likes of the European Observatory on Femicide and soon we will be setting up our own social research laboratory.

But there is still so much we need to do.

The faculty is nothing more than a space where knowledge is immediately reflected in the practical environment, where basically we add understanding to life.

The success factors are equally shaped by the academic prowess of our graduates, the force of destiny and their involvement with the people.

Our fundamental objective is to help students think more clearly, rigorously and expansively than they ever have done before. On the other hand, academics need to be 'thought leaders'.

We are here to shape the social sector, not to issue prescriptions – and as our university motto says: "We should bring forth fruit unto God."

Yet, what Oscar Wilde says in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' is also true and we need to be on the lookout: "To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all."

(<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>)

"Ghandi xi Nghid"

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