



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Academia matters

The new academic year has taken off. As usual, the hustle and bustle at the University of Malta is at their best. Students are chasing freebies on campus while others try to sort out their timetable clashes.

You get the odd fresher's hoping against all hope, that one or more of their colleagues from sixth form would walk into the same lecture hall drawing a sign of relief that 'they will not be on their own'.

The bonbon feeling of chaos and of people chasing their dreams and aspirations is intense.

The other side of this situation is that there is a large group of students who wouldn't have managed to see through their dreams and are now struggling to think on what their next step needs to be. Some might choose to use this lull and enter the world of employment, explore other potential avenues of furthering their training or take a gap year, possibly making up for the grades they might have lost out on in preparation for the next year.

The emotions of success or failure must be so intense as I write this piece.

But as so happens, this time of the year does raise a number of other important issues. Firstly, there are the hallowed 'stipends'.

It is a noose around the institution's neck. We might choose to sit on the balcony playing 'catch me', but the truth of the matter is that it is a massive impediment.

I believe that the stipend system needs to be rethought from the roots. But which politician or political party will do that?

I think we will have to wait forever for this to happen. The amount of money dished out

must be close to €30 million. Now if you had to take into cognisance that the University and MCAST are both struggling with space, need more money for infrastructure, laboratories, clinics, it says it all as to how we conceptualise our priorities in this country.

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing doesn't even have its own building and has to make do with having academics staggered in over 10 different sites all over the University campus, with no basic facilities like meeting rooms, boardrooms, storage rooms, adequate office space or specialised labs. We are at the mercy of funds that trickle in from the EU. This Faculty has been operating for some 6 years making do with the support of other Faculties and the constant pushing and struggling for basic operative space.

Since its inception, over 2,000 graduates have been awarded degrees ranging from social work and social policy to youth and community studies, from psychology to gender studies, from disability studies to counselling, from family studies and social wellbeing studies to criminology. In other words, the importance of this Faculty merits that the basics are made available. I believe that stipends come in the way of this progress. What I cannot understand is that it seems very difficult for the government of the day to understand the fundamental principle of fair distribution.

How is it difficult to understand that resources should only

be made available to those who present clear evidence that they wouldn't manage to study without these funds? I thought that was the spirit of stipends, to give the resources to students to study and not to gift young people with hard cash when they don't need it. Needy students should be given even more resources to meet those needs whilst others are better served with having that investment directed to more books in the library, improved infrastructure, modern labs, more equipment and better spaces for learning. Let's face it, 80 or so euros a month is nothing. In the grander scheme of things it is just used to top up their diesel or get themselves a packet of cigarettes.

Another concern is the issue of employment and students. So many students are now employed, practically all of them. Whilst I have always been in favour of young people getting a taste of what it means to work, I believe we are now going overboard. The black economy is exploiting young people who are being browbeaten into this market. In my opinion this factor is disturbing the development of young people and interrupting their pursuit of studies. We need structures and regulations.

We also need improved family friendly measures.

We do not have enough support systems to help the non-traditional learners to gain the best possible outcomes from their studies. Parents, whether single

or not, with older or younger children need to have improved systems that will allow them to learn serenely. We need more accessible child care on campus, better and possibly subsidized rates, more flexibility and improved hours. Not only that, we also need to pass on the message that they have the breathing space to study. Having said that, it is also fair to state that the UM introduced the Recognition of Prior Learning system, which made it more accessible for students to read a degree if they are on the autistic spectrum. The UM has also introduced English classes to facilitate the use of language which is so essential in today's globalised markets. But I still think that even though the UM seems to be attracting more non-traditional learners, we need a new mind-set to make it work for people who still have children who are highly dependent on them.

Critical thinking is another matter that merits our attention.

We need leaders. There is an 'army' of students and lecturers who should be the free-thinkers of this society and should make an impact on their communities. We have too many people that subscribe to party propaganda or allow the media to control them. We need people who think outside the proverbial 'box' and are ready to engage. Maybe our methods and the way we teach are not always conducive to this but our students need to be socialised within an experience of critical thinking. It is our duty as educators to make this happen.

Ghandi xh Nghid

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