

Studying at the Faculty of Theology: A Study of Student Data 2003-2011¹

Introduction

Not only is Theology one of the oldest disciplines taught on the Maltese islands but it is also among the very few disciplines to have been taught in various local higher education institutions. The permutations of the discipline have always very much depended on the social and economical milieu of Malta and of the Catholic Church. The future prospects for the studying and teaching of the discipline still depend mainly on external factors. As the main entity that provides education and research in Theology, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta would do well to look at trends concerning students' enrolment, progress and profiles over recent years with a view to reviewing its visions for education and formation within Maltese society and within the believing community. Ideally data gathered would be analysed in comparison with similar research conducted by other theological institutions world wide. However, while there are various studies concerning student admission and attrition rates in several non-theological faculties, no such studies were found for any Theology institution. This notwithstanding, such an introspective study should help the Faculty to identify measures that may lead to a maximisation of its output. Furthermore, one hopes that this paper might stimulate similar research conducted by other theological faculties and initiate comparative studies.

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¹ I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Registrar's office for providing the data, as well as the help and advice of Mr. Anthony Gellel, former Registrar of the University of Malta.

History

A brief overview of the historical background and tradition related to the study of Theology in the Maltese islands and of the current context should help us to better understand the existing resources and to articulate a number of proposals for the future. The first documented evidence of the formal teaching of Theology dates back to the end of the XVI and the beginning of the XVII centuries. During this period three higher education institutions were established or formally recognised; namely, the Jesuit *Collegium Melitense*, the Dominican *Studium Particulare* in Valletta, that was later to become the *University of S. Maria Portus Salutis*, and the Conventual Franciscan *Collegium Melitense S. Antonii* which had the right to confer degrees but which operated in Valletta only between 1618 and 1631.² By the late XVII century and all through the XVIII century, economic stability and the relative security in the region allowed the islands to become a modest centre of international studies, with the Jesuit and Dominican Faculties being given the right to confer degrees in 1727 and 1729 respectively.³ Yet, apart from these institutions there were still various students who either studied Theology abroad in such institutions as the Greek College in Rome,⁴ or locally under private professors.⁵ Furthermore, most religious congregations, and also the Archbishop's Seminary, offered in-house theological formation that in a number of cases was then accredited through admittance to examinations in local or foreign theological faculties.

In the late XVIII century, the members of staff of the Jesuit College were expelled and the Theology course was reformed with the input of new staff and the introduction of a more extensive programme that included Sacred Scripture, Hebrew, Greek, Church History and Canon Law. However, due to economic constraints, the new reformed course lasted only five years. A few decades later, the Theology course of the Dominican University ceased to be offered.⁶ Most

² See Francesco Costa, *Il Convento di San Francesco di Trapani e il suo «Collegium Melitense S. Antonii»* (Sicilia: Biblioteca Franciscana di Palermo, 2009); Vincent Borg, "The Faculty of Theology of Malta: A Historical Sketch," in Theology Students Association eds, *The Dove Homing in the Owl's Nest: Contributions to the Dialogue between Faith and Culture* (Malta: Theology Students Association, 1989), 123-136; Andrew P. Vella, *The University of Malta: A Bicentenary Memorial* (Malta: National Press, 1969); Andrew P. Vella, "The University of S. Maria Portus Salutis," *The Journal of the Faculty of Arts* 2 (1962): 164-180.

³ See Vella, *The University of Malta*; Vella, "The University of S. Maria Portus Salutis."

⁴ See Salvatore Bottari, "Studenti Maltesi nel Collegio Greco di Roma (1576-1640)," *Melita Historica* 11 (1993): 209-212.

⁵ See Vincent Borg, "Developments in Education outside the Jesuit 'Collegium Melitense,'" *Melita Historica* 6 (1974): 215-254.

⁶ See Vella, "The University of S. Maria Portus Salutis."

of the in-house formation continued through the XIX and through most of the XX century, with the Seminary being granted the right to award academic degrees between 1859 and 1874.⁷

It was however during the XX century that distinctiveness of local theological sciences took shape. The end of theological formation at the Seminary, the reformation of Theology according to the dispositions of the Apostolic Constitution *Deus Scientiarum Dominus* of 1931, the new impetus brought about by the Second Vatican Council after 1962, and the expulsion of the Faculty from the University in 1978 and its later reintegration in 1988 all contributed to the formation of the present day identity of the Faculty.

There is no doubt that the study of Theology has a long historical tradition on these islands even though there is clear evidence of fragmentation and discontinuity. The theological studies of the past centuries were in a number of cases rudimentary. For instance, in 1838, Austin and Cornewall Lewis and later, in 1865, Savona noted that the education imparted at the University was of inferior quality due to limited human and financial resources.⁸ However, there were also some signs of distinction such as, for instance, the academic contributions of Rispoli and Saydon in the XVII century at the Dominican Faculty and in the XX century at the University of Malta respectively.

The decisions of various Church authorities and the influences of theological currents were also decisive in constructing the course that theological education would take. Such was the case in 1865 when the Dominican Assistant Master General ordered that Dominican students had to study at Santa Sabina in Rome, or when in 1928 the local Church authorities decided to end theological instruction at the seminary.⁹ But besides political and economical factors, one must also take into account the philosophical and theological currents that were influencing Europe and Malta during different periods. For instance, the constitution of the newly founded University in 1771 specified that the professor of Moral Theology was to teach against the emerging philosophies of Beccaria and Rousseau who were then labelled as socialists.¹⁰ Similarly, it was the

⁷ See Borg, “The Faculty of Theology of Malta”; Vella, *The University of Malta*.

⁸ See John Austin and George Cornewall Lewis, *Copies or Extracts of Reports of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire on the Affairs of the Island of Malta and Correspondence Thereupon* (London: House of Lords 1938); See Sigismondo Savona, *The Necessity of Educating the People, with Suggestions for Improving the Local Educational Institutions: A Lecture before the Literary and Scientific Society, on the 4th of March, 1865* (Malta: Anglo-Maltese Press, 1870).

⁹ See Borg, “The Faculty of Theology of Malta”; Vella, *The University of Malta*.

¹⁰ See Vella, *The University of Malta*.

impetus of the Second Vatican Council that in 1967 led the Board of the Faculty of Theology to agree with the principle of offering its courses to the laity.¹¹

Context

During these past five decades, the renewed understanding of Theology and of the Church, the decline in religious vocations, together with the challenges and opportunities brought about by the changes in European, particularly Maltese, society have inevitably led to further shape the present characteristics of theological education. Furthermore, during the same period, in-house theological formation of members of religious congregations had almost been completely discontinued and replaced by the establishment of INSERM (*Institutum Nationale Studiorum Ecclesiasticorum Religiosorum Melitensium*) responsible for the formation of members of Religious Orders, and to the foundation of a number of academic institutes sponsored by religious congregations and by the diocese. Currently, the number of educational opportunities is wide and varied, ranging from short courses on Sacred Scripture, spirituality or ministry, to State recognised tertiary level courses in specialised areas of Theology.

The Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta has a central role to play in Maltese society, and particularly in the life of the believing community. To a certain extent, it is the heir of the different teaching and research theological traditions of these last four centuries since, due to the size and limitations of the island, the different institutions had to share resources and sustain each other when necessary. For instance, in the XVIII and XIX centuries, notwithstanding periods of tension and rivalry, the Dominican and Jesuit institutions did nonetheless collaborate with each other.¹² Even the composition of the present day Faculty is witness to the richness of the teaching and research traditions of the various religious orders and congregations that in the past offered in-house formation.

There is no doubt that the identity of the Faculty of Theology has in these past few decades changed drastically. From the two general theological disciplines that were taught for more than three centuries, the Faculty is now researching and teaching more than seventeen specialised theological disciplines. Similarly, from the two part-time professors employed during the first half of the XIX century,¹³

¹¹ See Peter Mayo, "University Continuing Education in Malta," *Journal of Maltese Educational Research* 1 (2003): 23-43.

¹² See Vella, *The University of Malta*; Vella, "The University of S. Maria Portus Salutis."

¹³ See Austin and Cornewall Lewis, *Copies or Extracts of Reports of the Commissioners; Università e Liceo di Malta, Statuti: Università e Liceo di Malta* (Malta, 1860).

the current Faculty has five departments with eleven full-time and sixteen part-time members of the academic staff, as well as sharing the department of philosophy with the Faculty of Arts.

From a primarily teaching institution, the Faculty is steadily finding its place within the teaching–research–service triad of higher education institutions. This progression, especially in the fields of research and teaching is placing the Faculty among what Wissema has labelled as second generation university institutions.¹⁴ However, even though there is some evidence of interdisciplinary research and taught-courses, it is still premature to speak of a Faculty that is aiming towards its integration within a third generation university institution augured by the present Rector of the University.¹⁵

Given that the Faculty’s contribution still heavily relies on teaching, and in the light of the local scenario, it is useful to analyse student data in order to trace trends and identify challenges and areas that need more attention.

Method

As from 2003, the University of Malta started inputting student records on *SITS:Vision*, a Student Information Management System (SIMS). The database manages students’ recruitment, study-unit registration and assessment records. Besides basic information regarding age, gender, qualifications, and town of origin, applicants for a University course are given the option to insert data concerning their own schooling and their parents’ educational background. Applicants are informed by the Registrar’s Office that the data may be used for statistical and research purposes. SIMS of course also includes data regarding each student’s progress in the course and any application to a subsequent new degree course.

After obtaining permission from the Registrar’s Office, the relevant data was extracted and analysed through SPSS. Personal information that could disclose student’s identity, specifically students name and address were not obtained. For the purpose of this study, the data pertaining to students who are or were registered with the Faculty of Theology between 2003-2011, both years included, was analysed and compared with the student data in other Faculties and Institutes. Only data pertaining to student records registered for courses that are recognised by the Malta Qualification Council as Level 6 or above was analysed.

¹⁴ See J. G. Wissema, *Towards the Third Generation University: Managing the University in Transition* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2009).

¹⁵ See Juanito Camilleri, *2020 Vision or Optical Illusion?* (Malta: University of Malta, 2010).

Trends

Number of Graduates

A survey of the list of graduates from the Faculty of Theology over these past four decades shows that although there has been an increase in the number of graduates, the growth in the amount of figures is not particularly significant especially when one compares these figures with the total number of graduates from the University.

	1970	1980 ¹⁶	1990	2000	2010
Theology	15	25	25	45	34
University	119	182	409	1718	2009

Table 1: Number of Graduates in Theology and at the University, ten year intervals

One obviously has to take into account a number of social and political factors. An incisive factor was definitely the re-founding of the University of Malta in 1988 which drastically changed the concept and vision of tertiary education in Malta.¹⁷ The number of faculties increased from seven in 1970 to 26 faculties, institutes and research centres in 2011. Similarly, the number of

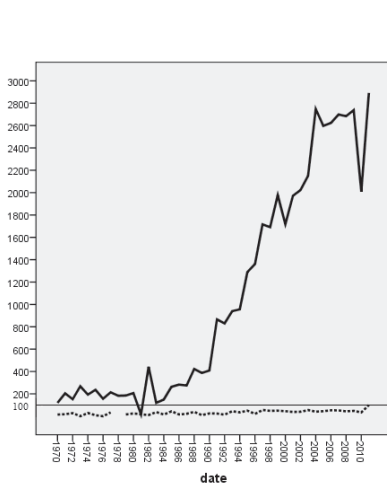


Fig. 1a: University & Theology Graduates 2011¹⁸

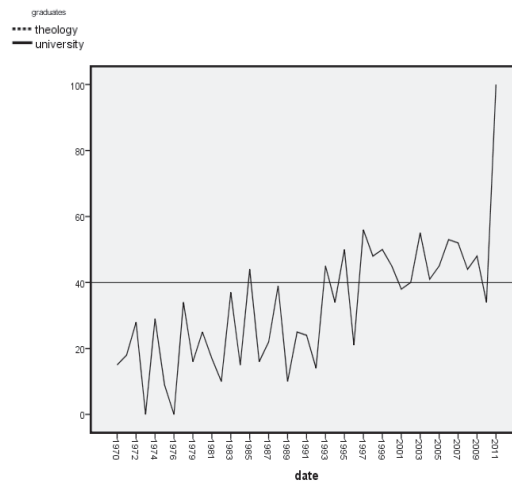


Fig. 1b: Theology Graduates 1970-2011

¹⁶ During this year, the Faculty of Theology was an independent institution outside the University of Malta. Source: Office of the Registrar/ Faculty of Theology.

¹⁷ See Malta. Laws, statutes, etc., *Laws of Malta: Chapter 327. Education Act* (Malta: Government Printing Press, 1988).

tertiary education courses increased from 11 courses in the 1970 graduation to 141 courses in the 2011 graduation.

However, the data over these past thirty years shows that while in the early nineties (fig. 1a), the number of graduates started to increase at a very fast rate, the faculty’s rate of increase in graduates remained relatively modest (fig. 1b).

Over these past two decades there was not any significant fluctuation in the number of non canonical degree graduates.¹⁹ Thus, while in 1990 there were only 5 graduates in canonical degree courses, in 2010 there were only 7 graduates. On the other hand, one notes a fair increase in the number of non canonical degree graduates. Thus, while in 1990 there were 20 non canonical degree graduates, as from 1995 the number of non canonical degree graduates was normally more than twice what it was in the 1990 graduation. Table 2 shows the list of graduates in canonical and non canonical courses over the past two decades at five year intervals.

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2011
Canonical Degrees	5	6	9	5	7	15
Non-Canonical Degrees	20	50	45	45	27	85

Table 2: Canonical & Non Canonical degree graduates²⁰

The graduation figures of 2011 are of particular interest as, with a total of 100 graduates the figures are noticeably higher than the average of 45 graduates per year in the previous decade. There is no doubt that the 37 graduates in the three new post-graduate courses in Bioethics, Spirituality and Spiritual Companionship contributed considerably to the overall increase. Moreover, it should also be noted that 2011 was also exceptional in that there were 15 canonical degree graduates as against an average of 9 graduates per annum in the pervious ten years. One needs to ask whether such figures are a one off

¹⁸ For the period 1979-1987, during which period the Faculty of Theology was an independent institution outside the University, Theology graduates are added to University graduates.

¹⁹ The Faculty of Theology is fully integrated within the University of Malta, enjoying the same rights and authority as the other Faculties, and at the same time it is also an Ecclesiastical Faculty regulated by the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana*. As an Ecclesiastical Faculty it confers academic degrees (S.Th.B, S.Th.L and S.Th.D.) that also have canonical effect. Only an Ecclesiastical Faculty “erected or approved by the Holy See may confer academic degrees having canonical value.” (*Sapientia Christiana* Article 9, n.1). On the other hand, as a Faculty of the University of Malta, it also has the authority to confer other (non canonical) degrees regulated by the Maltese Education Act.

²⁰ Source: Office of the Registrar.

circumstance or whether this may be an indication of a new trend in Faculty graduate figures. When one takes into consideration that a conservative estimate of potential graduates in 2012 is about 75, one may assume that the introduction of the new post graduate courses open to graduates from other faculties has the potential to increase the number of graduates. This positive development would be similar to the introduction of the full-time Theology course for lay persons in the early nineties that had a modest, yet noteworthy, impact on the Faculty's graduate output.

Student Numbers and the Teaching of Theology

While the 2011 and prospective 2012 graduations may be an indication of positive prospects for the immediate future, the trends in other student numbers may be telling a different story.

Between the academic years 2003-2004 and 2011-2012, there were 675 persons who registered in a course with the Faculty of Theology. Of these 596 enrolled in one course while 79 persons enrolled in two or more theological degree courses, bringing the number of registered students over these past nine academic years to 802 students (Fig.2).

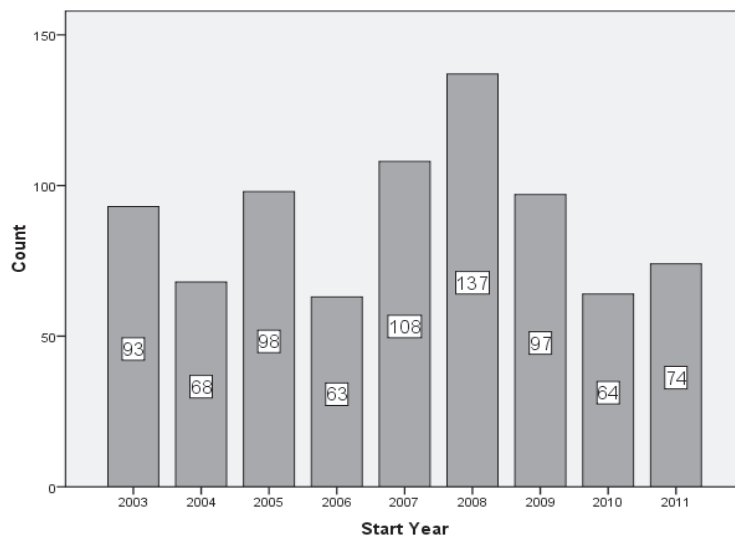


Fig. 2: Faculty of Theology: Student admittance 2003-2011

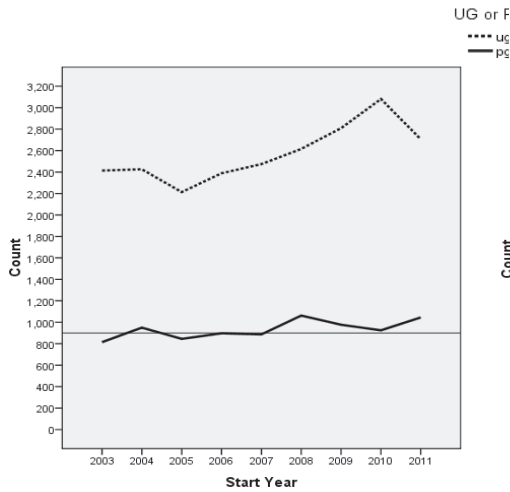


Fig. 2a: University admissions to undergraduate and postgraduate courses 2003-2011

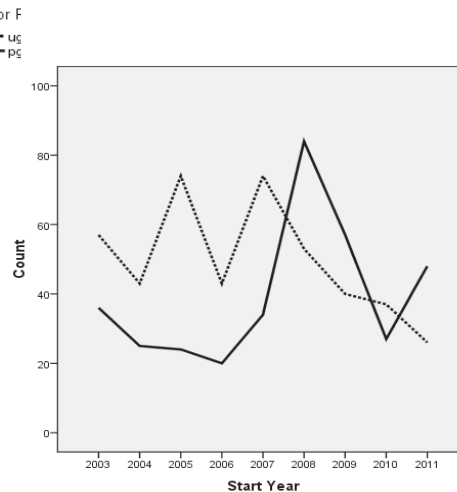


Fig. 2b: Theology admissions to undergraduate and postgraduate courses 2003-2011

In contrast with the university undergraduate admissions trend (Fig 2a), in these past five years the number of admissions to Theology undergraduate courses has been on a constant decline (Fig 2b). On the other hand, while the number of admissions to Theology post-graduate courses is still fluctuating, when one compares the 2003 to 2007 statistical data with that for the period 2007 to 2011, one notes that, except for 2010, there has been a modest upward trend.

In recent years, apart from increasing the number of courses, especially postgraduate courses, which it offers, the Faculty has also increased the number of its study-units. Thus, if one compares data collected during the academic year 2004-2005 with that of 2011-2012, one immediately notes that the Faculty has almost doubled the number of ECTS credits it offers from 398 to 776. Besides compulsory courses, the Faculty offers a considerable amount of electives and optional study-units that students following courses in other Faculties can choose from. However, it should be of some concern to note that, notwithstanding the high increase in units offered, the number of students registered for the Faculty's study-units, and consequently the number of full-time equivalent students, has decreased considerably from 3,805 to 2,180 students, i.e. from 189 to 168 full-time equivalent students (Table 3).

Department	ECTS offered		Total number of students taking study-units		Full-time Equivalent ²¹	
	04-05	11-12	04-05	11-12	04-05	11-12
Church History, Patrology and Palæochristian Archaeology	30	30	207	95	10.47	4.1
Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology	78	98	629	371	37.37	26.5
Moral Theology	60	248	867	553	47.37	43.3
Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law	113	184	813	469	43.8	40.4
Sacred Scripture, Hebrew and Greek	33	80	853	496	38.87	29.6
Inter-Departmental	84	136	436	196	11.25	24.5
TOTAL	398	776	3,805	2,180	189.13	168.4

Table 3: Number of ECTS credits offered by Department and number of registered students

The increase in the number of courses offered as well as the increase in the number of study-units has not been met with an increase in students. Hence, the number of students in the lecture-room has dwindled drastically. While, on the one hand, it is positive to note that the Faculty is offering a wider variety of areas of study, on the other hand, one has to question the practicability and sustainability of such a practice, unless there is also an accompanying increase in student numbers.

General Student Characteristics

Currently, the Faculty of Theology is offering some fifteen degree courses

²¹ To calculate the number of full-time equivalent students the following formula was used for each study-unit:

$$\frac{\text{number of students registered in a study-unit} \times \text{ECTS value of the study-unit}}{60 \text{ (number of ECTS a student has to register in one year)}}$$

and the results of the study-units were added to give the full-time equivalent number of students in each department and in the Faculty as a whole.

per year. It is pertinent to investigate the characteristics of those who enrol for a degree in Theology and to compare that data with the total university student population. The data at hand points to various instances where the two populations are significantly different. Understanding what students the Faculty is attracting and conversely, knowing what other students the Faculty could aim to attract, should be useful for deciding the Faculty's planning strategies.

Over these past nine academic years, of the 675 individual students who enrolled with the Faculty, 55.4% were males while 44.6% were female. This data is in sharp contrast with the general trends of the university where, during the same period, 58.9% of university students were females and 41.1% were males. When excluding students who at one point in their academic studies opted for a canonical degree, that as a rule attract only male students, one notes that statistical tendencies are inverted in favour of females (51.6%) over male students (48.4%). This reverse trend is as expected when one takes into consideration university admission trends. However, in the light of the various local and international social research that constantly indicate that females are more religious than males,²² the Faculty should investigate why the percentage of females following the Faculty's non-canonical degrees is appreciably lower than it is University-wide and whether therefore there is potential for recruiting more female students. In particular, one should research whether it is the type of, and the approach towards, theological content in the Faculty, or whether it is the more generalised phenomenon of the local male-dominated Church and theological tradition that is influencing negatively on female admissions.

Age

The mean age of first year students in the academic years between 2003/4 and 2011/12 (m=33.9 years) is significantly (.000) higher than the mean age of all other first year students (m=24.7 years). The same pattern and significance was noted in undergraduate and postgraduate populations. In undergraduate courses, the mean age of Theology first year students (31.9 years) is conspicuously higher than the rest of the university freshmen (22.4 years). The same trend is also present among the post-graduate population, with a mean of 36.4 years

²² See for instance EVS Foundation/Tilburg University, European Values Study 2008, 4th wave, Integrated Dataset, ZA4800 Dataset Version 1.0.0 (2010-06-30) (Cologne: GESIS, 2010); Jon Hammermeister et al., "Gender Differences in Spiritual Well-Being: Are Females more Spiritually Well than Males," *American Journal of Health Studies* 20 (2005): 80-84; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Christianity and Women in the Modern World," in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Today's Woman in World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 267-301.

among first year Theology students against 27 years in the University as a whole. It is interesting to note that in these past nine years the eldest first year student admitted to a University course was accepted by the Faculty of Theology at the age of 80. However, it should be noted that the Faculty of Theology is not the only Faculty that accepts elderly students. In these past nine academic years, the Faculties of Arts and Laws accepted students aged 79 and 75, respectively.

Entry Qualifications

The higher mean age of the Faculty of Theology students is partly explained by the higher percentage of students accepted under the maturity clause,²³ 35.6% of undergraduate students in Theology as against the 16.6% in all the other Faculties and Institutes combined.²⁴ Although the six Humanities and Social Sciences Faculties,²⁵ which include Theology, accept more students under the maturity clause (19.4%) than the seven Natural and Applied Sciences Faculties (4.5%),²⁶ the percentage of students accepted under the maturity clause in the Faculty of Theology remains considerably higher than that in the other five Humanities Faculties which stands at 19.9%.

A Chi-square confirms that there is significant (.000) difference between the entry qualifications of undergraduate students in the Faculty of Theology and those in other faculties and institutes. Fig. 3 points that not only does the Faculty of Theology attract and accept more students under the maturity clause, but that it also has the highest number of graduates (7.5%) admitted in its undergraduate programmes. This high percentage is not significantly altered, even after students in their undergraduate canonical degrees are not taken into consideration in the statistical analysis.

²³ According to the Admissions Regulations of the University of Malta "(2.2) A candidate may also be admitted as a regular student of the University if he (sic.):

(a) (iii) will have reached the age of 23 by the beginning of the course for which he applied ...

(b) has been judged eligible for admission as a regular student by the Admissions Board established in terms of regulation 5." Malta. Laws, statutes, etc., *Subsidiary Legislation. Regulations and Bye-Laws, ROI - Admission Regulations 1997 Relating to the Education Act 1988 (Laws of Malta Chapter 327)*. Last amended 2011.

²⁴ Admission under the maturity clause is not applicable to postgraduate courses.

²⁵ For the purpose of this paper the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy, the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Laws, the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences and the Faculty of Theology are being grouped together and labelled as the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculties.

²⁶ For the purpose of this paper, the Faculty of Built Environment, the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Dental Surgery, the Faculty of Health Sciences, the Faculty of Information Technology, the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, and the Faculty of Science are being referred to as the Natural and Applied Sciences Faculties.

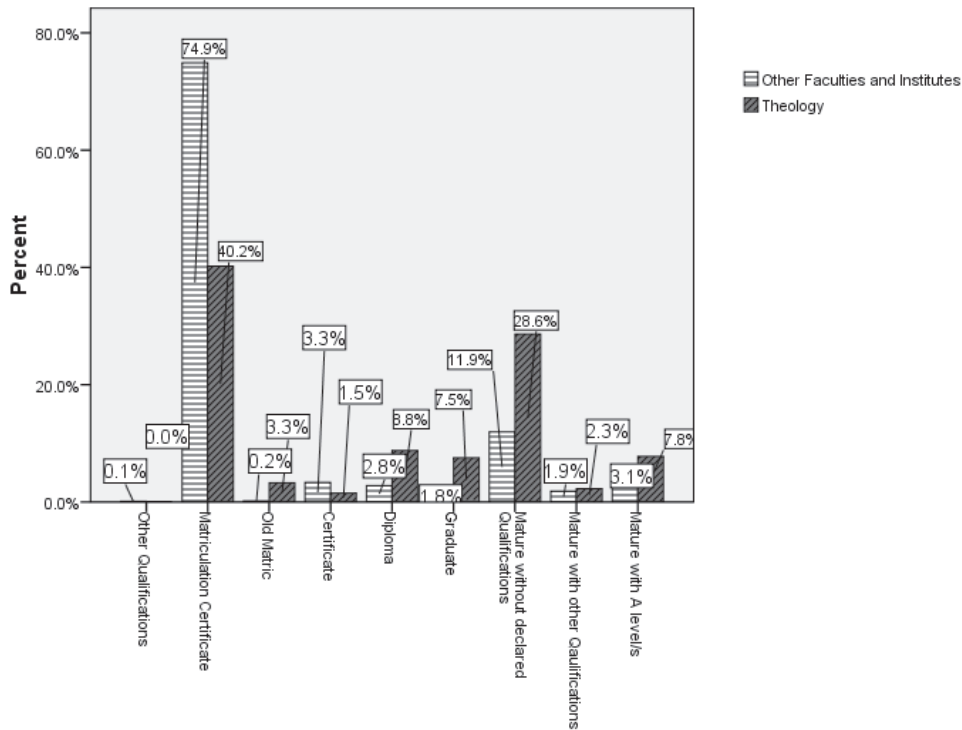


Fig 3. Entry Qualifications of undergraduate students

Moreover, there is no significant difference between the mean Overall Grade of the Matriculation Certificate of undergraduate Theology students (1.46) and that of the rest of the university students (1.56).²⁷ Further analysis shows that similarly, there is no significant difference between the mean Overall Grade of undergraduate Theology students and students in the other five Humanities and Social Sciences Faculties. However, as expected, there is a significant difference (.000) between the mean Overall Grade of Theology students and students in the seven Science Faculties (1.72).

Another significant difference (.000) in the mean Overall Matriculation Certificate Grade within the undergraduate Theology students population was found. The mean of non canonical students (1.3) was found to be significantly lower than that of canonical students (1.7). The latter mean is in fact very close to that of students in the Science Faculties.

²⁷ The Matriculation Certificate, or other qualifications deemed equivalent, is required for admission to undergraduate courses at the University of Malta. Between 2003-2007, 74.3% of applicants to undergraduate courses were accepted on the basis of their Matriculation Certification. The Certificate, consisting of seven subjects, is awarded with an overall grade of A, B or C. For statistical purposes, Grade A was converted to 3, Grade B to 2 and Grade C to 1.

The qualification background of students should be taken in serious consideration when setting the level of study-units and in the design of theological programmes. Furthermore, the entry qualification background should be taken into serious consideration when planning for differentiation in the delivery of lectures.

Secondary Education Background

Another notable student characteristic is related to students' secondary educational background. While the data examined shows that Church and Independent Secondary schools are generally more successful in equipping and encouraging students to continue tertiary education, the data at hand also points to the fact that the Faculty of Theology attracts more students who attended a Church School.

When analysing the data of the 20,505 individual students who between 2003 and 2011 were enrolled in one or more courses at the University and gave details regarding their secondary school education, one notes that 50.4% had attended state secondary schools, 41.8% had attended Church secondary schools while 7.8% had attended Independent secondary schools. The latest available statistics on education reveal that during the scholastic year 2006/7, there were 63.5% of pupils attending State secondary schools, 27.8% attending Church secondary schools and 8.7% attending Independent secondary schools. The figures for 2007/8, at 62.2%, 28.9%, and 8.9% respectively for State, Church and Independent schools, are similar.²⁸

It is noted that the percentage of University students who had attended church schools is about one and a half times as great as the percentage of secondary school pupils that attend church schools. This apparent superiority of church schools could however be attributable to the fact that many of the secondary Church schools for boys, unlike girls' schools, had competitive admission. In fact, the percentage of male University students who had attended church schools is considerably greater than the same figure for females (Table 4).

²⁸ See NSO *Education Statistics: 2006/2007; 2007/2008* (Valletta: National Statistics Office, 2011).

			Sec School Type			Total
			STATE	CHURCH	PRIVATE	
Gender	MALES	Count	2677	4711	1007	8395
		%	31.9%	56.1%	12.0%	100.0%
	FEMALES	Count	7649	3860	601	12110
		%	63.2%	31.9%	5.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	10326	8571	1608	20505
		%	50.4%	41.8%	7.8%	100.0%

Table 4: University Admittance Gender * Sec School Type

When one looks at the data for the Faculty of Theology students one finds that 48.1% had attended church schools. While this is higher than the figure for the University as a whole, one must consider that there are several other Faculties with a similar or higher percentage, notably the Faculty of Dental Surgery with 61.2%, Medicine with 55.6% and Engineering with 55.3%. Indeed, no significant difference was noted between Faculty of Theology students and all other University students. Thus, one certainly cannot conclude that Church schools are influencing their students towards Theological studies.

However, this may arguably be the case for students following canonical courses. Since the students in these courses are predominantly male, it is more correct to restrict the comparison to male students only. Of the male students admitted to the Bachelor of Sacred Theology, 68.2% had attended a church secondary school, this being only the second highest amongst all undergraduate courses after that of the Doctor of Medicine and Surgery (70.8%). It is pertinent to note that the admission requirements to the Medical degree are the highest of all courses.

Can one therefore categorically state that church schools are promoting vocations more than other schools? With the above data it may not be possible to argue with certitude that Church schools are more able than other types of schools to promote vocations. However, given that, as noted further up, canonical degree students are admitted with a Matriculation Overall grade on average higher than that of students admitted in all other Humanity Faculties and comparable with the grade obtained by students in the Science Faculties, one could possibly contend that Church Schools are somewhat successful in encouraging a specific category of the student population towards the priestly vocation. Nonetheless, further investigation on this matter is needed.

Students Who Drop Out from Theology Courses

Apart from student numbers, a major challenge for any faculty is to keep student attrition as low as possible. This seems to have been one of the Faculty's major problems during the 19th century. According to the Commissioners' report on the affairs of the islands, although Malta and Gozo had at least one clergyman for every 162 inhabitants, less than 30 priests completed the six year Theology course. According to the commissioners, this was due to the fact that, unlike the other established professions, priests were not required to obtain the final degree of their theological course.²⁹

If one takes into account the data of the 16,309 students who were enrolled in one or more courses at the University of Malta between 2003 and 2007,³⁰ one notes that 21.5% of students, (21.7% of undergraduate students and 20.9% of postgraduate students) withdrew from their course of studies. If one does not take into account other external factors, including the stipend system and the continued family support for the majority of students, the figure of undergraduate attrition compares reasonably well with the 2004 data of the OECD countries, where on average the attrition rate in first degree courses was 29%.³¹

The Faculty of Theology's attrition rate during the period 2003-2007 was 30.7%, which is significantly higher (.000) than the rest of the university. In this regard, the Faculty of Theology has the second highest attrition rate amongst the thirteen faculties. However, when one investigates separately the rates of attrition of undergraduate and postgraduate Theology students one immediately notes a striking difference in the two populations. While the two rates are still significantly higher (.000) than those of the rest of the university, the rate of attrition of postgraduate degree students is remarkably high with 39.6% of Theology students withdrawing from the course. If one excludes the Faculty of Dental Surgery, which during this period had only four postgraduate students, the Faculty of Theology had by far the highest rate of postgraduate attrition, followed by the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, formerly the Centre

²⁹ See Austin and Cornewall Lewis, *Copies or Extracts of Reports of the Commissioners*.

³⁰ The 2007 cut-off point was established after taking into consideration that most of university courses do not exceed four years duration and after noting that the vast majority of the 2.7% of the student population, still registered as current during the academic year 2011-2012, are either in their fifth year of studies or had repeated a year. Relying on past experience, one may safely assume that with some rare exceptions these students will successfully complete their course of studies.

³¹ OECD, *Education at a Glance, OECD Indicators 2007* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2007).

for Communication Studies with 36.4%. The rate of attrition of Theology undergraduate students stood at 26.6%. In this case, the Faculty of Theology placed fifth highest amongst the thirteen faculties.

A further inspection of the data shows a definitive difference between full-time day courses and part-time evening courses, with the attrition rate being higher in part-time courses. The withdrawal rate for full-time Theology undergraduate courses between 2003 and 2007 stood at 20.7%, very close to the university average of 20.1%. On the other hand, the non completion rate in Theology part-time courses stood at 30.6%, which is slightly higher than the university average of 28.1% of part-time students.

The Faculty's retention rate of mature students is much higher than the norm. Of the Theology students admitted under the maturity clause between 2003 and 2007, only 24.3% withdrew, which is significantly (.000) less than the percentage of all University students admitted under the maturity clause who withdrew during the same period (37.8%).

It is difficult to reach any firm conclusions from the data of full-time Theology post-graduate students since the numbers between 2003 and 2007 were relatively small. However, when analysing the data of postgraduate part-time evening students, one notes that the attrition rate for the Faculty of Theology was conspicuously higher than the rest of University, with 42.2%, against 29.6%.

Not only does the Faculty of Theology have one of the highest attrition rates, but students who withdraw from the Theology course do so at a much later stage during the course than students in other Faculties. Although a significant difference (.000) was noted in both undergraduate and postgraduate studies compared to other Faculties, the higher percentage of candidates who withdraw in the later years of the course is especially noted in postgraduate Theological studies. (Fig. 4)

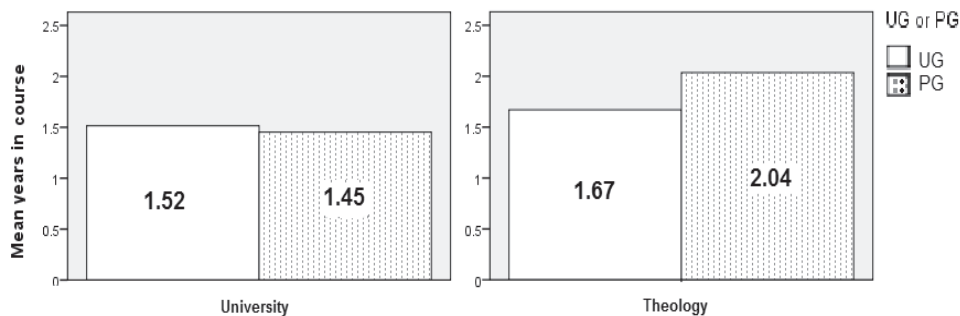


Fig. 4: Student Attrition: Years in course by Undergraduate and Postgraduate studies

While in the University, 67.6% of students who withdraw from a course do so in their first year of studies, in Theology courses the percentage is 64.8%. Moreover, it is interesting to note that trends in postgraduate studies are significantly different, with 73.9% of withdrawn university postgraduate students dropping out during the first year of studies while only 61.6% of Theology unsuccessful postgraduate students drop out during their first year. Further inspection shows that while in the rest of the University only 7.2% and 3.7% of unsuccessful students drop out in their third and fourth years respectively, in Theology, 13.4% and 12.5% of unsuccessful students drop out in their third and fourth year of studies.

A further analysis of the attrition patterns within Theology courses highlights the differences between postgraduate and undergraduate studies. In Theology undergraduate courses, attrition rates are particularly high in the first year of part-time evening courses with 79.2% of withdrawn students against the 37.5% of withdrawn students in the first year of full-time courses. Indeed in full-time undergraduate courses, the dropouts are spread over five years (21.9% in the second year, 6.2% in the third year, 18.8% in the fourth year and 15.6% in the fifth year).

On the other hand, in postgraduate courses, part-time evening taught courses have the highest rate of attrition during the first year (97.2% of dropouts). This is in sharp contrast with full-time courses and part-time courses by research, where 52.1% and 64.1% of unsuccessful students respectively, leave the course in their third, fourth, fifth and even seventh year of studies.

Given the structure of most full-time and postgraduate research courses where the last years of the course are devoted to research and the writing of a dissertation, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the Faculty of Theology needs to invest more in support systems for its students undertaking research, or else rethink the dissertation component. On the other hand, with regards to undergraduate studies, and in particular with regards to part-time evening courses, the Faculty of Theology needs to rethink the first year programme of studies and devise stronger support systems.

Concluding Reflections

During its long history as a higher education discipline on the islands, advancement in Theology was never linear. As the list compiled by Saydon demonstrates, with the exception of Ferdinando Mingarelli, a professor of Sacred Scripture between 1771-1773,³² the research and academic

³² Fr Ferdinando Mingarelli was an erudite monk of the Order of the Camaldolites. Due to

contributions of the staff at the Faculty of Theology until the first few decades of the XX century were almost non-existent.³³ For more than three and a half centuries, the teaching of Theology at the University of Malta was done more within the context of what Wissema labelled as first-generation university where, notwithstanding the development of the Sciences and the Humanities, the main objective is the training of professionals and the protection of the wisdom of the past.³⁴ The limited resources of the islands and the constant limited utilitarian educational vision of foreign and local political powers,³⁵ are to a great extent to blame for the slow pace of transition from teaching and researching Theology within the frameworks of a first-generation university to that of a second-generation higher institution.

On the other hand, the coming together of the different academic traditions of local theological institutions, the openness to new theological and ecclesiological impetuses, and the will to research and teach specialised areas of Theology have been to a large extent the main reasons behind the success stories of the Faculty of Theology in these last fifty years.

Yet, if the Faculty of Theology intends to carry on its mission, it needs to evolve either within the framework of a third-generation university as augured by the current Rector, or within any other framework that is compatible with the developments of higher education. Teaching needs to be understood and evaluated within the wider context of research and contribution to society. In particular, the Faculty needs to work within a competency based education that equips

citizens with the skills and competences which the European economy and European society need in order to remain competitive

his intellectual capabilities and love for research he was appointed as a member of the *Sacra Congregazione dell'Indice*. Before coming to Malta he was a lecturer at Ravenna, Rome and Florence. He taught Greek, Hebrew and Theology and published poetry books, as well as academic books on the Sacred Scriptures and on antiquities. In order to become a professor of Sacred Scripture in Malta he had to ask permission to be dispensed from his monastic vows. His dismissal from the University in 1773 due to lack of funds was, according to Fantuzzi, the main cause of his apoplexy and death in 1777. His last incomplete yet partly published academic work was his theory that the Gospel of Luke was actually dictated by St Paul. See Giovanni Fantuzzi, *Notizie degli scrittori Bolognesi raccolte da Giovanni Fantuzzi*, tom. 6, (Bologna: San Tomaso D'Aquino, 1788).

³³ See Pietru Pawl Saydon, *List of Publications by Members of the Teaching Staff of the University* (Malta: Malta University, 1966).

³⁴ See Wissema, *Towards the Third Generation University*.

³⁵ See Austin and Cornewall Lewis, *Copies or Extracts of Reports of the Commissioners*; Savona, *The Necessity of Educating the People*; Vella, *The University of Malta*.

and innovative, but also by helping to promote social cohesion and inclusion.³⁶

Theology, like many of the other Humanities such as Philosophy, Literature and the Performing Arts, does not easily fit in the current secular and utilitarian vision of the European Union for education since it does not contribute directly to better skilled and knowledgeable workers, nor does its knowledge contribute directly to a more competitive economy. Yet, this does not mean that the teaching of Theology is doomed to become irrelevant and ousted from among the other higher education disciplines. Amongst other, it may engage in research and formation programmes that contribute toward personal enrichment and development, social cohesion and inclusion of different members of society. Indeed, even though there are many external factors that influence the course of the teaching of Theology in Malta, the Faculty's relative autonomy allows it enough space to reorganise its activities and face the challenges.

The analysis of data on SIMS between the academic years 2003/04 and 2011/12 has highlighted the strengths of the Faculty and the challenges it needs to face. The Faculty can be proud of its contribution to the education of first degree university students and its successes in attracting and retaining the highest number of mature individuals. Some ten years ago, Mayo had already pointed to the significant contribution of the Faculty of Theology in the area of continuing adult education.³⁷ The current data confirms that the Faculty is a leader in this sector and that it concretely contributes to the education of adults who have not gone through the traditional educational routes.

On the other hand, the decline in undergraduate student numbers over the past five years and the fluctuation in postgraduate student numbers point to the Faculty's perennial difficulty of attracting students to its courses. The opening of new postgraduate programmes that allow students with non theological degrees to pursue specialised studies that are in some way related to their area of expertise and/or interest has been somewhat fruitful and encouraging. The inconsistency in the trend of student admittance indicates that recruitment is a continuous uphill struggle which will obviously require a lot of the Faculty's energy. Even though the decline in numbers may be

³⁶ European Union. Council of the European Union, "Council Conclusions on the Role of Education and Training in the Implementation of the 'Europe 2020' Strategy," *Official Journal of the European Union* C70/01 (2011): 1.

³⁷ Mayo, "University Continuing Education in Malta."

attributed to different factors, the same argument may be put forward for undergraduate programmes.

In its recruitment campaign, the Faculty needs to show the relevance of the product. While continuing to insist on the contribution of Theology to one's personal holistic education, more can be done to show the interdisciplinary potential of the subject and its relevance to different sectors of life and the economy. In particular, the Faculty may consider investing in strategic partnerships with diverse sectors of the community which may include not only such partners as the Catholic Archdiocese but also the tourist industry and also other Faculties at the University. Furthermore, it seems that there is potential to attract more female students. This obviously requires the Faculty to address specific issues that would make its teaching more relevant and attractive to the female population.

While it may be difficult for the Faculty to increase its student numbers very significantly, it can and indeed should work to increase the success rate of its students. The fact that almost a third of Theology students withdraw from courses is worrying. Specific targeted interventions may help to reduce attrition rates. For instance, the Faculty needs to invest more energy in assisting students during the first year of undergraduate and postgraduate part-time taught degrees. It probably needs to work more on presenting subjects that are relevant to the student's personal life and on supporting students in the crucial first year of their studies. On the other hand, the Faculty certainly needs to drastically rethink the dissertation component of postgraduate research degrees programmes in order to better support the student in the final stages of their research.

Furthermore, the Faculty's ability to attract students with different entry qualifications, life interests and prior knowledge needs to be matched by a greater sensitivity to students needs and better pedagogical skills by the academics. Investing in pedagogical methods that respect student diversity should improve student retention as well as improve the level and quality of theological education.

To move in this direction one needs to seriously reconsider where and how the Faculty is employing its energy. Running fifteen degree programmes, as well as offering 776 ECTS, almost double what used to be offered seven years ago, and which may possibly be above the number of ECTS credits per full-time member of staff in other Faculties, is taxing and may not produce the desired results.

As Saydon, one of the Faculty's most eminent scholars, so eloquently stated some fifty years ago, as a Faculty of the University, the mission of

the Faculty of Theology goes beyond imparting a certain degree of scientific and humanistic culture and training of professionals. It needs to contribute to the advancement of common shared knowledge through the incessant efforts of its academic community to apply and extend its research to the several branches of learning.³⁸

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³⁸ See Saydon, *List of Publications*.