

The Faculty of Education

A glance at its past, taking stock of its present and a vision for its future

Mark Borg

Preamble

It was not without some degree of trepidation and hesitation that on July 12th of this year I formally embarked on my four-year term as Dean of this Faculty. You will, I am certain, forgive my initial fears and concerns once I have shared with you the following three reasons.

First of all, it is a long-established fact that our Faculty is by far the largest faculty at our University. Its 'largeness' reaches out in more directions than one! We have, hands down, the largest number of full-time and part-time students registered on our wide-ranging programmes. In addition to this, and understandable so, we make up the largest college of permanent and temporary members of academic staff. It is often said that 'big is beautiful' - that may or may not be the case depending on how one looks at things. 'Big' brings with it more responsibilities and more, far more, problems, headaches and heartburn.

Secondly, in assuming the role of Dean I have a very, very tough act to follow, in most ways. The two-year term of my immediate predecessor, Ronald, was marked by what must have been the most intense period of planning resulting in the most radical changes to the Faculty's most central programme - the B. Ed (Hons) degree. Never before in its then 18-year history has the Faculty been faced with a challenge of this scale. In its 18th year the Faculty decided to embark on a road which lead to an overhaul of the entire philosophy of its initial teacher training programme. This is very recent and familiar history: as all of you well know, we embarked on two and a half years marked by intense research, meetings and negotiations. The result was the launching in October of the new B. Ed (Hons) programme - a programme which is moving away from producing a *generalist* teacher to one geared towards developing a *specialist* teacher. The dynamism, wisdom and commitment that have marked the deanship of Dr Ronald Sultana are not easily emulated.

Third and last reason. I strongly believe that in the next 5 years or so the Faculty will have the opportunity not only to renew itself but also to consolidate its position on the local as well as on the foreign scene. It will also have to address a series of challenges the outcome of which will determine to what extent our Faculty will remain meaningful to our educational system, and to what extent it is so. This brings to mind what a former consultant of the Education Division is reported to have said about our Faculty. This good soul of wholesome Canadian stock had said that "the Faculty of Education is insignificant to the Maltese educational system". A serious and grave indictment by any measure! Irrespective of whether you agree with this statement or not, the fact is that the Faculty is still here playing its part to the best of its ability, for better or for worse. The good soul with his acumen for value judgements is consulting the Education Division no more.

A Glance at the Past

You will, I am certain, allow me to begin this my first official statement as Dean by openly thanking all my predecessors for the hard work they have put in for the good of the Faculty.

- Professor Charles Farrugia, one of the founding fathers of the Faculty and its first and longest-serving Dean.

- Professor Kenneth Wain, also one of the Faculty's founders, who brought a tinge of philosophy to the deanship. (Also fondly referred to as the Faculty's own 'Moses' - and this has nothing to do with his white mane.)

- And, of course, Dr Ronald Sultana, my immediate predecessor and a Dean with mission if there ever was one, and for whom I had the distinct honour to deputise and with whom I worked so closely.

All of these deserve our most heartfelt thanks and gratitude. At the same time let us not forget those from amongst the first generation of academic members of staff who have either retired and are now enjoying a hard-earned rest (namely Joe Bugeja, Denis Cuschieri, Mary Rose Gatt, Joseph M. Falzon, and Anthony Schembri), as well as those who are no longer with us - Anthony Calleja and Michael Sant immediately come to mind with a sense of deep fondness and respect.

For good reason, I consider myself the oldest member of the second generation of academic members of staff. Arguably, I also have the distinct honour of having been the first former B. Ed student to join the ranks of the Faculty, way back in 1984 - come February I will turn 'sweet 16'! I am equally proud that, in its 20th year, I have been called upon to serve this Faculty as Dean. It is a distinct honour for which I am very grateful.

Like a dynamic, healthy organism, the Faculty has changed and developed over the years. In many instances this change has been for the better; in some instances, however, I have my doubts. Let us be clear about one thing though - the Faculty never had any handouts and/or privileges showered upon it. It never figured in the good books of the powers that be, either. I have always argued that the Faculty was born under an ominous star and that we had to suffer for that. The Faculty has had to win every millimetre of the widespread respect and credibility it now enjoys. With hindsight, I find it truly ironic that the very practices that our Faculty introduced to this University, and for which for many years we were the butt of jokes and ridicule showered upon us by colleagues from other Faculties, have now been institutionalised and are now practised by one and all. Study-units and the credit system, unit course outlines, academic year programmes - the list is endless.

Taking Stock of the Present

The collective professionalism, commitment and tenacity that the Faculty has manifested over the years has seen us through. We are, undoubtedly, one of the better organised, most dynamic and forward-looking Faculties. We have earned the respect of colleagues on the home front and from overseas. Slowly but surely, over these 20 years we have been

This is the text of a speech given by Dr Mark Borg at a Faculty of Education staff seminar on the 4th November, 1999

“There is much that the Faculty has done, is doing, and can do for the good of our educational system. The list of targets is long. The urgency is great. Let us get on with the job.”



MARK BORG, Ph.D. is Dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, and Head of the Department of Psychology. He is a prolific researcher in the field of Educational Psychology, and he has numerous writings published in learned journals and books.

able to build a research profile that is second to none and the envy of many. Research based in the Maltese educational settings has found its way in the very best international journals and conferences. Some of us have even established themselves as internationally-acknowledged experts in their field. And that is just the beginning! Just after 20 years.

When one looks at the constellation of established, budding and potential researchers that grace our Faculty one should truly have reason for looking at the future with great optimism

and courage. But, strangely enough, here may also lurk a veritable danger that the Faculty must face and overcome.

Allow me to explain myself better. I believe that each member of staff has the right for the space to develop his/her potential, even if this means using the Faculty as a launching pad or as a means of scaffolding. I see nothing wrong with that as long as one gives something to the Faculty in return. I for one, for instance, would not mind a bit spending all my working time reading and doing research. I derive immeasurable joy from this and I suppose I possess the required skills and intellectual properties. But then what about my contribution to the preparation of future teachers and psychologists? Or my contribution to the administrative sphere? Clearly, this is where the potential danger lies. Every member of this Faculty has the responsibility to

contribute to each of these spheres to the best of his or her abilities.

I have always believed that one of the greatest strengths of our Faculty is its collegiality. There have been, there are, and there will always be differences among us. That is perhaps inevitable. But ultimately, we get down to business and get the job done. That is the essence of persons who are truly professional. There are several examples of 'balkanised' Faculties which should serve as an eye-opener to us all. The choice is clear. We either strengthen our collegial ties and continue working hand in hand or we can all go our separate ways - that is, balkanise the Faculty. Each one of us has responsibilities in this regard and must, willingly or begrudgingly, shoulder them. The choice is ours.

Not that we do not have a shady side to our Faculty. Apart from the national pass-time - complaining about everything under the sun - I believe that this is primarily characterised by the rampant rumour-mongering that roam the dark and stuffy corridors of the Old Humanities Building. If some of this rumour-mongering were not purposely malicious it would not be worth mentioning at all. The truth of the matter is that some, for reasons which they know best, seem to thrive and derive joy from the harm that this does and the disquiet it creates. I know full well what I am saying - it is a mere handful who either never really valued the collegial spirit that the Faculty enjoys and/or who places personal gains before the common good of the Faculty. Those who have the Faculty and what it stands for at heart know better than to generate and perpetuate this malevolent trait. In my first few months as Dean I have not been spared this rumour-mongering. I could easily consider this as an occupational hazard, ignore it, and get on with the job. I would rather, however, have people come to my office and give voice to their grievances and concerns than having them spinning all sorts of rumours which do no good to anyone. I still have the habit of leaving the door to my office unlocked. I feel that in spite of a very heavy schedule, all members of staff and students should have direct, and if need be, immediate access to their Dean. Most often than not I am only a



**“You certainly
won't Go
Unnoticed”**



PIAGGIO

THE MOVERS

Your local Piaggio dealer:



M. DEMAJO & COMPANY LIMITED

A MEMBER OF THE M. DEMAJO GROUP OF COMPANIES

Valley Road, B'Kara. Tel: 496636 Fax: 448140

knock-on-the-door away! I assure you, I will always have time for you and to listen to what you have to say.

In spite of these and other weaknesses I have no doubt whatsoever that the Faculty is well prepared for the challenges ahead. I say this because when it all is said and done the Faculty has the clout, substance and commitment that this will take to address these challenges.

Some Immediate Challenges

What are the immediate challenges we have ahead of us? Clearly, we need to continue where we left off. We need to continue with our work on the new B.Ed (Hons) programme with renewed energy and commitment, to draw the various strands together. Apart from ensuring that the entire academic programme is complete, there are a number of issues which warrant our immediate attention. The final degree classification exercise and the criteria on which this should be based alone should keep us very busy for the rest of this academic year.

The many initiatives that the *Tomorrow's Teachers Project* generated must be sustained and supported by one and all. Some excellent work has already been done in the various areas such as student assessment, modes of teaching, RICTE, staff-student socialisation, and mentoring. I have already taken steps to ensure that the various committees are reconstituted so that they can continue with their work. The committees should know that they have my fullest support and I look forward to their recommendations and advice about the way forward.

One immediate challenge which the Faculty cannot afford to ignore is the introduction this October of a three-year honours degree by the Faculty of Arts. Although one may read as much as one likes in this 'move', my major concern lies with the impact that this may ultimately have on the teaching profession *per se*. Entering into the profession through the Masters route with no training whatsoever in pedagogy will become a rule rather than the exception. The implications of this loom heavier in view of the teacher glut that we will have to come to terms with as from next year. Great efforts have been made to absorb the

number of new B. Ed (Hons) and PGCE teachers these past two years. There is a limit, however, to how much more contortionist acts the Education Division is capable of in this regard. I have already taken the initiative of establishing contacts with the MUT on the matter and I was promised all the support that the union can muster. It still needs to be seen how the whole issue should be approached.

A related issue of sorts is the question of the PGCE. Should we stop offering it altogether? Should we offer it every other year? Given that the general feeling is that the PGCE is far too crammed and intense to serve its purposes properly, is it not the time to lengthen it accordingly? If so, should this be 'forward-directed' or 'backward-directed'? A report to this effect is currently being prepared by Dr Joseph Fenech, PGCE co-ordinator. Whatever decisions we take for the immediate term, we simply cannot be impervious to what is going on in the teachers' labour market. We cannot ignore market forces.

It is perhaps a truism that during the last years, in our enthusiasm to turn a new leaf in our relationship with the Education Division, we have often bent over backwards to manifest our good will to Division officials and our wish to build bridges between the two institutions. There are several of us here, including myself, who believe that our efforts have not always been met with the same measure of enthusiasm and good will. Perhaps we have not tried hard enough; or perhaps our strategy was misguided. The point is that the relationship between us falls short of the partnership in the education enterprise that most of us would like to see. There are, of course, several examples which show that things can work out well for the common good. If my memory serves me right, Education Division officials take an active part in the Assessment and Teaching Practice committees. However, I believe that much more can and needs to be done in this regard.

Some Medium-Term Challenges

So far, the Faculty has primarily been concerned with preparing teachers for the compulsory school years. The needs of the country demanded that we should concentrate on initial teacher training for the 5 to 16 age bracket. Although we have done well to concentrate on this, and we have gone all the way to evaluate and renew our efforts in this regard - the new BEd(Hons) programme attests to this - there is no doubt in my mind that we have to extend our efforts in at least three directions: the pre-school years, post-secondary & technical education, and professional development.

The pre-school years

Although there have been attempts to assume responsibility for preparing kindergarten assistants (a task which up till now has been carried out by the Education Division with input from some of us here present) - an attempt which unfortunately faltered for reasons we do not need to go into here - I believe that this should be a top priority objective. Surely, you do not need me to tell you how important the early years are for the development of the child! It is perhaps propitious that just as we now have started to prepare primary track teachers to specialise in the early years (thereby, effectively opening up the kindergarten sector to fully-trained teachers, apart from the infant years), we should also go a step further by taking responsibility for the training of kindergarten assistants as well. Not that we are not already preparing for such a step. Much is being

done in this regard. Suffice it to point out that one of this year's External Examiners is an expert in the education of in the early years education.

Post-secondary & technical education

These too are areas which demand further and solid commitment from the Faculty. We need to study carefully what direction our contribution to the area of post-secondary education should take. No less pressing is the fast-growing area of technical education - an area which to my knowledge is earmarked for special attention in the proposed new National Minimum Curriculum, as indeed are several other crucial issues which cannot but be addressed immediately.

Professional development

As a Faculty of Education, the professional development of teachers cannot be but at the very heart of the Faculty. If by professional development we mean *pre-service*, induction and *on-going* education then, strictly speaking, we are catering only for the first phase of training and academic programmes at the post-graduate level. Clearly, this position is no longer tenable for reasons which I shall expound. First, how can we continue to be credible advocates of lifelong education unless we as a Faculty ensure the continuing professional development of the teaching community? Second, if the looming glut is realised in the years to come then we may find ourselves having to direct some of our energies to new initiatives. I believe that there is a great deal we can offer in the induction phase as well as to the on-going development of teachers. I have little doubt that the demand for in-service training will increase exponentially and, sooner or later, the Faculty will be required to assume part of the responsibilities in this regard. The demand is there. The choice is ours.

Not that there are no more challenges. Suffice it to mention the need to develop:

- the area of Resources and ICT in Education (RICTE) - we need this as much as we need oxygen to keep our ticker going!
- the Faculty's relationship with the schools out there - our training ground. We cannot keep perpetuating the fallacy that we are doing them a favour by training future teachers or that they are doing us a favour for allowing our students in their schools. The truth of the matter is that we need each other's support. I strongly believe that we need to develop further the notion of a partnership with the schools involved within the framework of the Professional Development School initiative.

So on and so forth. There are, of course, many other matters which deserve mention but which it is not possible to consider here.

Conclusion

Although the challenges ahead of us are many and varied, the Faculty has the will, courage and commitment to meet all of these challenges. But 'will, courage and commitment' will not suffice; as mathematicians like to put it 'they are necessary conditions but not sufficient'. These noteworthy attributes must be matched by more academic and support staff as well as by the whole plethora of material resources (including office space) that such initiatives entail.

There is much that the Faculty has done, is doing, and can do for the good of our educational system. The list of targets is long. The urgency is great. Let us get on with the job.