

Ceremony 7
Academic Oration
Tuesday 29 November 2011 at 1630hrs
SIR TEMI ZAMMIT HALL - MSIDA

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Privileġġi u Responsabbiltajiet

Fi tmiem kull ċerimonja tal-gradwazzjoni, il-lawreat iwiegħed li jilqa' l-unuri u l-privileġġi li jingħatawlu u jwiegħed li jhaddimhom b'responsabbiltà għas-servizz tal-oħrajn skont il-Liġi u l-Kostituzzjoni ta' Malta; jistqarr ukoll li huwa membru tal-korp akkademiku tal-Università ta' Malta u jintrabat li jimxi mal-liġijiet u r-regolamenti tagħha.¹

Dan huwa kliem solenni li hafna gradwati, biċ-ċertifikat tal-lawrea f'idhom, jistqarruh meta ftit jew wisq ikunu mifxulin, hafna drabi mingħajr ma jirrealizzaw x'timplika din l-istqarrija. Dan forsi jiġri għax din l-istqarrija li turi biċ-ċar xi tffisser tkun gradwat, ikunu qed jisimġuha għall-ewwel darba. Dan huwa kliem li juri mingħajr ambigwiżità xi jffisser l-impenn li l-lawreat irid iwettaq: kliem li l-lawreat li jkun qed jistqarru flimkien ma' sħabu, irid jemmen fih bis-sħiħ. Mhux biss, imma wiehed jistenna li jgħixu fil-ħajja professjonali tiegħu. U waqt li l-lawreati l-ġodda jkun qd jagħmlu din l-istqarrija, l-istaff akkademiku kollu għandu jgedded il-wegħda li jkun għamel żmien qabel.

Jista' jkun li xi lawreat ġdid jiskanta kif f'daqqa waħda issa jiffirma parti mill-korp akkademiku. Għalhekk jixraq li nsaqsu: l-Università, propjament, x'inhu r-rwol tagħha? Tgħid tikkonsisti sempliċement f'ċerimonja mimlija b'karatteristiċi antikwati jew venerabbli, li fiha jingħataw iċ-ċertifikati u jingħad kliem bil-Latin, donnu l-Malti jew l-Ingliż mhux tajbin bizzejjed jew ma jixirqux f-okkażjoni grandjuża bħal din? Jew forsi dan kollu jsir biex jittieħdu r-ritratti li jitqiegħdu fl-arkivju tal-Università għal dawk li jiġu warajna jew f'għieħ il-membri tal-familja li s-sala ma wesgħathomx? Jista' jkun li ssir biex ikollna okkażjoni nieħdu b'idejn il-kbarat lebsin hwejjeg esageratament rikki? Nistgħu ngħidu li dan kollu huwa element importanti, basta l-wegħda ssir bis-serjetà. Inkella l-okkażjoni tkun waħda falza, sempliċi wirja grandjuża, minflok ma tffisser sinjal tal-bidu ta' fażi ġdida u importanti fil-ħajja tal-membri tal-komunità akkademika bil-privileġġi u r-responsabbiltajiet kollha tagħha.

¹ Il-kliem tal-affermazzjoni huma: "Jiena, nilqa' l-unuri u l-privileġġi mogħtija lili llum. Jiena nwiegħed li nhaddimhom b'responsabbiltà għas-servizz tas-soċjetà, u li naghmel hekk skont il-Liġi u l-Kostituzzjoni ta' Malta. U filwaqt li jien membru tal-korp akkademiku tal-Università ta' Malta, nagħti kelma shiha li nimxi dejjem skont il-liġijiet u r-regolamenti tagħha."

Jien tal-fehma li waħda mill-affarijiet l-inqas kontroversjali l-Università hija li l-istaff akkademiku u l-istudenti, ilkoll suppost qed ifittxu haġa waħda nobbli – il-verità. Ilkoll kemm aħna qed infittxu l-verità dwarna nfusna, dwar kull ma hemm madwarna u dwar kull ma jqajjem il-kurzità fina. Nistinkaw biex naslu għall-verità imqar fil-qasam zghir ta' studju li nagħzlu biex nispeċjalizzaw fih, u t-tama tagħna hi li flimkien ma' shabna u ma' dawk li mxew fit-triq qabilna, jirnexxilna nibnu mqar parti zghira imma sostanzjali ta' dik il-verità. Il-verità ma nfittxuhix b'mod newtrali. It-tfittxija għall-verità ma nistgħux ma nkunux impenjati fiha bil-forzi tagħna kollha. U biex jirnexxilna f'din it-tfittxija mhegga tal-verità, it-triq ma nistgħux nimxuha maqtugħin minn xulxin u mill-komunità li tinvesti fina. It-triq irridu nimxuha flimkien, staff u studenti magħqudin. U rridu nimmiraw fil-għoli u l-medjokrità nevitawha b'kull mod. Kif qal Carl Schurz iktar minn seklu ilu, l-ideali huma bħall-kwiekeb: qatt ma nistgħu nilhquhom imma triqitna nfasluha bis-saħħa tagħhom. Tabilhaqq għandna l-limitazzjonijiet personali tagħna u dawn irridu nirrikonoxxuhom, imma qatt m'għandna nħalluhom jaqtgħulna qalbna. Aħna m'aħniex magħmula biex naħdmu indipendentement minn xulxin imma għandna nikkumplimentaw wiehed lill-iehor. Irridu nkunu kkomunità ta' nies li qed ifittxu, ispirati mix-xewqa li niskopru l-potenzjal mhux biss fina nfusna imma fuq kollox fl-istudenti tagħna li wara kollox jikkostitwixxu l-futur ta' pajjiżna. Biex isehhilna nagħmlu hekk irridu nevitaw il-medjokrità, l-attitudni perikoluza li "b'daqshekk nirrangaw", u lill-istudenti tagħna nuruhom it-triq biex ikomplu jizviluppaw u jkomplu jithabtu biex jilhqqu ideali dejjem aktar għolja.

Ma jistax jonqos li l-Università tirrifletti s-socjeta li ngħixu fiha. L-Università għandha r-responsabbiltà li tiehu l-inizjattiva hi għas-socjeta u tassigura li dak li jirriflettu l-istaff u l-istudenti tagħha jkun dehra raffinata u pozittiva, filwaqt li tipprova tnaqqi dawk il-ħwejjeġ kollha negattivi li kultant iheddu li jitolgħu fil-wieċ. Il-komunità universitarja għandha thares lil hemm mil-limitazzjonijiet tas-socjeta kif inhi u għandha tkun il-mezz li twassalha għal gejjieni aħjar. Filwaqt li tipprova tilhaq in-numru ta' studenti kkalkulat fuq il-medja tal-EU, l-Università trid tiftakar li minn banda Malta hija kburiya li tagħmel sehem mill-Unjoni Ewropea, imma mill-banda l-oħra għandha għadd ta' karatteristici uniċi li hija kburiya hafna bihom ukoll. L-edukazzjoni għolja f'Malta rridu nħarsu lejha b'lenti varifokali mhux bifokali, biex b'hekk niżguraw li jinqdew skond kif ikun meħtieġ, il-partijiet kollha tal-komunità, anki dawk emarginati. Irridu nzommu bilanċ bejn il-fatt li aħna msieħba fl-EU u l-wirt Mediterraneju tagħna. Malta trid tibqa' tesplora kull possibiltà u trid iżzomm ruħha dejjem lesta biex isservi ta' pont bejn il-pajjiżi ġirien.

Minn fuq il-pedament ta' imghoddi sod li jmur lura lejn tmiem is-seklu sittax, l-Universita tagħna kompliet tikber, u issa tkopri oqsma varji ta' studju, mill-medicina sal-arkeologija, mil-lingwistika sal-ligi, l-antropologija u hafna u hafna iktar. Mill-isforzi li kienu saru qabel l-1987 biex imewtuha, l-Università regghet irxuxtata b'qawwa liema bhalha. L-għadd tal-istudenti mmultiplika ruħu ghax ma baqax illimitat minn konsiderazzjonijiet politici. Biex verament tirrappreżenta l-komunità għad trid tkompli

tikber biex thaddan lil kull min hu kapaci u dispost li jibbenefika minn edukazzjoni universitarja.

Illum il-ġurnata l-Università hija hafna iktar inklussiva mhux biss għax kull min hu kkwalifikat akkademikament jista' jissieheb magħha imma anki għaliex imxiet biċċa triq sewwa fl-isforz li telimina l-ostakoli li kienu jaqtgħu qalb l-istudenti b'xi diżabbiltà. Infatti nista' ngħid b'sudisfazzjon li daż-żmien, dawn l-istudenti l-Università tagħtihom merħba. Filwaqt li tibqa' tinsisti fuq livell akkademiku għoli, qed tagħmel li tista' biex tohloq aċċess ġenwin. Għad baqa' hafna xi jsir għax l-iktar ostaklu diffiċli biex jingheleb huwa dak tal-attitudni. Madankollu l-istudenti nfushom kienu minn ta' quddiem biex iwittu t-triq. B'mod ġenerali, l-istaff akkademiku wkoll herqan biex il-korsijiet u r-riċerka, l-istudenti kollha jibbenefikaw minnhom. Izda kuljum nitgħallmu iktar dwar kif l-aċċessibilità nistgħu nestenduha. Meta din il-viżjoni tal-aċċessibilità issir realtà, kulhadd jibbenefika minnha għax tisfidalna dak li konna nassumu dwar il-kapaċitajiet tal-oħrajn u b'hekk jikber ir-rispett. Bis-saħħa ta' din il-viżjoni nifhmu aħjar kif aħna lkoll membri tal-istess komunità li qed tfittex il-verità.

Hemm varjetà ta' esperjenzi li jipprezentaw sfida lill-komunità akkademika. Bis-saħħa ta' Università inklussiva, nistgħu nieqfu ftit u nirrealizzaw li aħna m'aħniex il-fus li miegħu jdur kollox. Filwaqt li jien stess inkun minn tal-ewwel biex nistqarr li mingħajr l-Università tagħna, Malta tiftaqar fuq kull livell, xorta naħseb li għad irridu nagħrfu iktar il-kontribut tal-oħrajn li bis-saħħa tiegħu l-Università tasal biex tkun dak li qed titthabat biex issir. B'dan irrid infisser is-sehem ta' kull haddiem barra mill-ambjent universitarju, lil hinn mill-komunità akkademika. Nitqarrqu jekk naħsbu li aħna l-oċean. Wahda min-nisa l-iktar eċċezzjonali, Mother Teresa, darba qalet li aħna m'aħniex hlief "il-qtar li flimkien jagħmlu l-oċean". Aħna "il-lapes f'idejn Alla" u mhux Alla nnifsu. Is-suċċess tagħna jiddependi mir-rispett li jkollna wieħed lill-ieħor u lejn kull membru tal-komunità. Meta l-attenzjoni tagħna nagħtuha biss lill-ftit, hemmhekk nonqsu.

Aħna, il-komunità akkademika, nenħtiegu viżjoni, viżjoni usa' u mġedda għall-komunità kollha, bla ebda sens ta' superjorità, anzi bl-attitudni li għandna x'nitgħallmu minnha. Bħala komunità akkademika ma jistax jonqos li qegħdin f'qagħda aktar favorevoli biex naħsbu, biex nieħdu l-inizjattiva, biex nagħxnu, biex nikkoordinaw u biex l-elementi differenti ninsgħhom fi hdan il-komunità. Għandna r-responsabbiltà li nosservaw, li nagħzlu u li niddixxernu. Għandna nkunu mexxejja. U għalhekk minn żmien għal żmien jagħmlilna tajjeb li noqogħdu fi kju jew li nieħdu l-karozza tal-linja biex ma neskludux ruħna mill-hajja lil hinn mill-kampus, u biex b'hekk is-sistemi u l-istrutturi nkunu nistgħu ntejbuhom u mhux nevitawhom.

Huwa importanti għalina li nistinkaw biex nilhqu l-ideal, kemm jekk dan ma jkunx jaqbel mad-direttivi tal-politikanti, kif ukoll jekk ikollna nhallsu prezz għoli wisq għalih. Jeħtigilna nitqabdu għal dinja lil hinn minn dik tal-lum, anki jekk jiġri li aħna stess u dawk ta' madwarna m'aħna se niggwadanjaw xejn jew ftit li xejn mill-isforzi tagħna.

Hemm firxa shiħa ta' oqsma li jridu jiġu żviluppanti biex b'hekk inleħħqu mal-ħtiġijiet tas-soċjetà u lil hinn minnha wkoll. M'għandniex nitilfu l-okkazjoni biex il-kontribut tagħna nagħtuh. L-istudju għalih innifsu għandu postu wkoll għax kultant iwitti t-triq biex haddieħor japplikah għal hwejjeġ siewja: għalhekk qatt m'għandna ninjorawh.

Hemm żewġ affarijiet importanti li hafna mill-fakultajiet u l-istituti jippruvaw jagħmlu: il-qasam tal-ispeċjalizzazzjoni tagħhom dejjem jippruvaw iġibuh 'il quddiem, u dejjem b'seba' għajnejn biex jagħmlu l-qalb lil haddieħor li jipprometti biex ikun jista' jehdilhom posthom meta jasal iż-żmien li jwarrbu. Bhal hafna mill-kollegi tagħna fil-fakultajiet, fl-istituti u fiċ-ċentri, jien u l-kollegi tiegħi fi hdan l-Istitut tal-Lingwistika ninsabu impenjati bis-shiħ f'dawn l-għanijiet. Infatti, bil-hidma tiegħu, l-Istitut mexxa l-lingwistika 'l quddiem biex tleħhaq mal-ħtiġijiet tas-seklu wiehed u għoxrin; u l-istudenti li jippromettu akkademikament ninkoraġġuhom biex ikomplu bl-istudji tagħhom. B'hekk qabel ma nwarrbu mal-ġenb jew il-lingwistika nħalluha għal kollox, il-qasam nafdawh f'idejn tajba u mħuħ sodi b'impenn professjonali. U fiduċjużi li huma wkoll, meta jasal iż-żmien, ma jibzġhux mill-istudenti li forsi javanzaw iktar milli setgħu jagħmlu huma.

Irridu niftakru li nkunu kemm inkunu ddotati, inkunu kemm inkunu serji fil-ħajja professjonali tagħna, u nistinkaw kemm nistinkaw, ikollna nirrikonoxxu li dan ma nistgħux nagħmluh mingħajr il-kontribut tal-oħrajn. Kultant dan il-kontribut fil-fatt nirrikonoxxuh, speċjalment fil-każ tal-haddiema l-oħra fuq il-kampus, sew l-istaff akkademiku, sew l-istaff amministrattiv u sew dak tekniku. Imma drabi oħra jiġri li ma nagħtux kas, lanqas fuq il-kampus stess. Mhux hekk biss, imma r-relazzjonijiet tagħna mal-komunità lil hinn mill-kampus qatt m'għandna ninsewhom. Mingħajr ebda arja ta' superjorità rridu nagħrfu li aħna mhux hliet parti żgħira mill-komunità u li waħedna ma nistgħux niġu 'l quddiem. Imqar bi tbissima li tirrifletti l-attitudni ġewwenija tagħna, inkunu nistgħu nuru dan l-apprezzament fir-relazzjonijiet tagħna mal-oħrajn, ikun xi jkun ir-rwol professjonali tagħna.

U biex nagħlaq, ippermettuli nifrah lill-gradwati l-ġodda kollha u nixtiqilhom kull hena u suċċess fil-professjoni ġdida tagħhom. J'Alla l-verità jkomplu jfittxuha bil-għan li jtejbu l-kwalità tal-ħajja tal-komunità u lil hinn minnha, filwaqt li jagħrfu is-sehem tal-komunità fis-suċċess tagħhom.²

² Nixtieq niringrazzja lil Professur Albert Borg għall-għajnuna tiegħu bil-verzjoni bil-Malti.

Privileges and Responsibilities

At the end of each graduation ceremony graduates affirm that they *accept the honours and privileges conferred upon them. They promise to exercise them in a responsible manner for the common good in accordance with the Law and Constitution of their country; they acknowledge that they are members of the academic body of the University of Malta and pledge themselves steadfastly to abide by its laws and regulations.*³

These are solemn words which many graduates, as they hold their degree certificate, proclaim awkwardly, often unaware of the full implications of their affirmation. Perhaps this is because it is the first time that they hear the words that spell out what it really means to be a graduate. These are words which declare, unambiguously, the commitments that the degree holder is bound to honour. Graduates must mean the words of affirmation that they say together and are expected to live those words professionally. And as the words are said by the graduates, the academic staff should also be renewing their own commitment taken some time before.

Some graduates will wonder how they are suddenly part of the ‘academic body’. Perhaps it is right for them to ask what, then, is the University about? Is it simply about a ceremony imbued with antiquated, archaic or venerable characteristics, during which certificates are handed over, and words are said in Latin, as though Maltese or English are not good enough, or not capable of meeting the grandiose occasion? Or is it about photographs taken to freeze the occasion for university archives, for future generations or for family who cannot be accommodated in the graduation hall? Is it about the solemn shaking of hands by dignitaries in luscious robes? Well, all of these are important ingredients provided that they are matched by the serious affirmation. Otherwise, the occasion is false, a mere pageant instead of the signaling of an important new phase of life for members of the academic community with privileges and corresponding responsibilities.

I believe that one of the least controversial issues at university is that all academic staff and students are seeking one noble thing – the truth. We are all seeking the truth about ourselves, about those around us and about all that arouses our curiosity. We try to forge our way to the truth in the tiny area of study that we choose to specialise in, and hope that, together with our contemporaries and those who came before us, we can construct at least a small but substantial part of that truth. We are not after the truth in a neutral way. We can only be committed to the active search of truth with our whole being. And in order to succeed in this active search for the truth we cannot walk the path independently of each other, or indeed of the community that is investing in us. We have to walk the path together - staff and students alike. We also need to aim high and to avoid mediocrity at all costs. As Carl Schurz said over a century ago, ideals are like the stars. We can

³ The words of the affirmation are: “I accept the honours and privileges conferred upon me today. I promise to exercise them in a responsible manner for the common good in accordance with the Law and Constitution of my country. Acknowledging that I am a member of the academic body of the University of Malta, I hereby pledge myself steadfastly to abide by its laws and regulations.”

never reach them, but we chart our course by them. True, we have and must admit our personal limitations but we should in no way be discouraged by them. We are not meant to be working independently of each other but should be complementing each other. We need to be a community of seekers inspired by the desire to discover the potential not only in ourselves but also and especially in our students who are, after all, the future of our country. To do this we need to steer well clear of mediocrity, of the dangerous attitude that “this will do”, and show students the way forward to continue growing and to continue reaching for an ever higher goal.

Our university is inevitably a reflection of the society we live in. It is the responsibility of the university to engage proactively, to ensure that the reflection of its academics and students is a refined and positive one, filtering all the negatives that sometimes threaten to surface. The university community needs to look beyond the limitations of society as it is and be instrumental in leading it to a better future. As it seeks to meet the EU related number targets, the university must remember that whilst Malta is proud to be part of the European Union, it is unique in many ways and is also very proud of this fact. Higher education in Malta may need to be considered with varifocal rather than bifocal lens in order to ensure that it serves every part of the community, however marginal, in the way that it needs to be served. Our sense of belonging to Europe and our Mediterranean heritage must be kept in balance, and Malta should always explore all possibilities, and be open to serve as a bridge between neighbouring nations.

On the basis of a solid past reaching back to the late 16th century, our university has now grown to encompass disciplines ranging from medicine to archaeology, from linguistics to law, anthropology and much more. The university rose from attempts at suffocation before 1987 to not only survive but come back to life with a vengeance. The student population shot up and was no longer limited to reflect political factors. To be truly representative of the community, it may need to grow further to include all those who are able and willing to benefit from what university education has to offer.

The university is now much more inclusive not only because everyone who is academically qualified can join it but also because it has made an appreciable start to crumbling away the barriers that deterred students with disability from accessing it. Indeed, I am happy and proud to say that nowadays, it welcomes them. Whilst adhering to its high academic standards, it is doing its utmost to enable true access. There is a long way to go yet because one of the slowest barriers to erode is the attitudinal one. Here, students have led the way. The academic staff is generally also eager to make their courses accessible to enable all students to benefit from their lecturing and research. However, we are still learning how to do this. The realisation of this vision of inclusion is benefitting everyone because it challenges our previous assumptions about the abilities of those around us and fosters respect. It emphasises that we are all members of the same truth-seeking community.

The academic community is challenged by a variety of experiences. An inclusive university allows it to stop to think beyond the misconception that everything revolves around us as individuals. Whilst I would be the first to say that Malta without our

university would soon become impoverished at all levels, I still think we do not yet sufficiently acknowledge the contribution of others that enables the university to be what it strives to be. By this I mean the contribution of every worker outside of the university circle, beyond the academic community. It would be a mistake to think that we are the ocean. The greatest of women, Mother Teresa once said, we are but “the drops that make the ocean”. We are “the pencils in God’s hands” and not God himself. Our success depends on the respect we have for each and every member of our community. We fail when we only focus on the few around us.

We, the academic community, need to have a vision, a revised and wider vision for the larger community, not patronizing it but drawing from it. As an academic community, we are, by definition, in a more favourable position to think, to initiate, to act, to coordinate, and to weave diverse elements into the community. It is our responsibility to observe, to select, to discern. We must lead. And this is why we should sometimes also join queues, travel on buses, not exclude ourselves from life off campus, so that we can pull systems and structures up rather than bypass them.

It is important that we work towards the ideal, whether or not it falls in line with the politicians’ directives, whether or not it costs a great deal. We need to consider the world beyond the now even if in doing so we ourselves and our contemporaries may benefit little or not at all.

There are many areas that need to be developed to respond to the needs of our society and beyond. We must not lose opportunities to make our contribution. Study for its own sake has its place too. It sometimes paves the way for applications by others. Hence it should not be neglected.

Two important qualities that most faculties and institutes try to achieve are to keep moving their area of expertise forward and to promote others to enable them to take over when they themselves are gone. My colleagues and I at the Institute of Linguistics are committed to these as are most of our colleagues across faculties, institutes and centres. The work of the Institute in linguistics has moved forward decidedly into the 21st century and academically promising students are encouraged to continue with their studies so that, before we ourselves move to the periphery or out of linguistics completely, we leave the area in good hands with good minds and professional dedication. We trust that they, in turn, will not be afraid of students who are likely to go beyond their own achievements.

We ought to remember that, however endowed we may be, however serious our professional conduct, however hard we may struggle, we must acknowledge the contribution of others that allows us to be all this and to do all this. We do acknowledge some contributions daily, especially where workers on campus are involved, be it other academics or administrative or technical staff. But some other contributions are often taken for granted even on campus. Moreover, our links with the community outside campus must never be forgotten. We have to acknowledge without condescension that

we are only a small part of the community and that we cannot thrive on our own. Wearing a smile – a reflection of our real presence - may be a great way to reflect such acknowledgement whatever professional hats we may don in all our interactions with others.

Finally, allow me to conclude by wishing all new graduates every happiness and success in their new professions. May they keep searching for the truth with a view to improving the quality of life of their community and beyond whilst recognising the contribution of the community to their own achievements