

# Our Country, our University, my Commitment

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*One cannot project a vision for the University of Malta out of context; the Maltese islands we are all proud to call home, in the age of globalization.*

*Our country has seen our destiny unfold principally as envisaged through foreign eyes, which throughout the ages, have projected their values and cultures on us, some leaving a hallmark on our identity, language, and personality.*

*Somewhat paradoxically, in this age in which the destinies of all nations become more closely interwoven, we have our greatest opportunity ever of playing a decisive part in moulding our collective self.*

*It should be kept in mind that while the Government has the prime responsibility of guiding the country's development and consequently also identifying educational needs, the University has also an essential role in contributing to the formation of national and even international goals, and more precisely, in foreseeing national needs in terms of fully qualified human beings.*

## Our Country

Malta's geographic location at the center of the Mediterranean has conditioned our past and, if we are smart, it should remain axiomatic in the planning of our future.

Ironically, it is precisely the exquisite blend of cultural legacies we have received throughout the ages spruced with the blessing of St. Paul, which makes us a unique embodiment of the best outcomes of the rich and varied central Mediterranean past. Today, having established our identity as an island nation, Malta has understood that it can proactively play a significant part in shaping the Mediterranean's future, but this time, by projecting back our values, hospitality, expertise, and spirit of enterprise.

As a member state at the southern frontier of the European Union, Malta can continue to play a significant role as a cross-road between the EU on the one hand, and North Africa on the other. Moreover, as we have the hallmarks and the economic infrastructure of a strategic location for interregional and intercultural trade in a global economy, our role in the Mediterranean invites us also to look beyond: to North America, the Middle East, and the Far East.

Consequently, transport and communication are vital to the development of Malta's economic profile. An island, albeit strategically located, is pathetically detached unless it proactively and cost-effectively extends the right infrastructure and technology to make itself accessible.

Malta must continue to strengthen its accessibility and connectivity, by sea, by air, and in this emerging digital age, electronically. We must seek to leverage our physical location with state-of-the-art digital technologies - a harmonious deployment of "physical" with "digital".

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Malta has been weaving its own socio-economic fabric since Independence, slowly turning the island fortress into a tourist location. On the other hand, the rapid and somewhat aggressive urbanization of the country, unless controlled and planned, continues to threaten not only our quality of life, but also, our most valuable industry.

If we want to preserve our most valuable heritage as well as sustain our tourism industry, Malta must ensure that our economic development does not jeopardize its intrinsic character and beauty. We must ensure that:

- Urban planning is done with sense and good taste;
- Agricultural land remains productive;
- The rural landscape is enhanced through afforestation;
- The marine environment and coastal area are managed sensibly;
- Our natural and architectural heritage at large is protected.

There are various manufacturing and service industries in Malta that have thrived through the years, others have ceased to be viable, or are extremely vulnerable to the threat of globalization and the availability of cheap production at the lower-end of the value-chain.

To sustain economic growth and our already high standard of living, Malta must be dynamic and brave to foresee niche opportunities or traits of dying industries in good time to act.

A consensus seems to be emerging that apart from the hospitality and transshipment industries, Malta's future relies on outward-looking service industries on the back of the appropriate legal and ICT infrastructures (insurance and financial services, shipping registration, back-office support, call-centre services etc.), and niche manufacturing industries at the upper-end

of the value chain (high-end electronics, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, quality food-products, designer goods etc.).

There is also the opportunity to promote services in certain disciplines internationally by utilizing resources principally intended to provide a service to the local market. For example, by combining the imagery of the Knights Hospitaliers with our spanking new state-of-the-art hospital, our medical school, and our world-class medical profession, we can seriously promote Malta as a centre of medical services particularly in certain specialties.

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Already within this perspective of the national economy exclusive of all other considerations of its *raison d'être*, in itself, the University of Malta, by projecting the legacy of the Collegium Melitense, its role in the Commonwealth and by further exploiting the opportunities of staff and student mobility animating from EU membership, can continue to build Malta's reputation as an international center for Educational Services in a number of disciplines.

Hitherto, Malta has shown it has the mettle to thrive and to project an image internationally that is larger by far than its physical size. Opportunities beckon, but the windows of opportunity stay open usually only for a short time and the country must act to transform vision to reality promptly and speedily.

Malta must strive to instil an ethos of excellence in all its citizens; we must address complacency and reward achievement; we must build the right incentives to inspire the aspirations of our youths; we are being called upon, especially at the University and its sister institutions in Higher Education to have the foresight now to ensure that the right expertise is in hand to address the present and future needs and opportunities of this country.

We must work together as one nation to achieve all this.

## Our University

In a period of rapid change, such as the one we live in, development must be achieved without destroying those values that give us character and drive forward our evolving identity as a nation.

Our people, and particularly our youth, must believe again! They must believe in the abilities God has blessed them with, in a sense of uprightness and a sense of fairness, in a country that will allow them to express their talents without prejudice, in a country that will help them find fulfillment, in a country which promotes and rewards excellence in all walks of life, in a country that cares for those who are unable to cope despite their best efforts.

Shouldn't the University of Malta be a driving force behind this belief? Yes, our people need a strong dose of idealism, as only this can fight off cynicism!

Of course, one cannot build the future of any country on idealism alone; idealism must be balanced by an equal dose of realism and concrete action.

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The financial management of the University calls for constant review and expert updating no less than in any collaborative enterprise involving the direct and active participation of around ten thousand people. But before developing any considerations, however basic, on this crucial topic, the special goals and functions of an essentially not-for-profit organization such as the University have to be kept foremost in mind.

For any university, sustaining an environment favourable to the pursuit of knowledge not least through interaction between all its members, is a top priority. With so many people and so much activity on campus, the University is like a small town, with the needs and obligations of a small town. It has an

evolving cultural space of its own. Such a cultural space, if given the right impulse and support, can be developed into a cradle of artistic and cultural growth for the rest of the Island. But this town is peculiar in that its territory is not contiguous. There are parts of the University like the Gozo centre, which are off campus and these need to be given specific and appropriate attention. The University also has bodies with some sort of affiliation abroad with which it is also highly desirable that the same ethos be shared.

A main concern of the University is to ensure that all the teaching programmes at undergraduate level are at least of a very good international standing. This requires that lecturers are also occupied at the cutting edge of research. Such lecturers will always be alert to identify new training and research programmes that are worth setting up: on the University's own initiative, in tandem with Government agencies, or with private industry.

The University must also come to terms with the fact that it cannot be a centre of excellence in all disciplines. However, it should not be prescriptive and should be a haven for freedom of thought and freedom of intellectual endeavour. It should assist all academics to secure internal or external funding for their personal research and scholarship, and wherever the results are outstanding, the respective discipline will automatically become an area of excellence in the University's self-image. Otherwise, areas of excellence will be established where the University of Malta has some comparative advantage for reasons indicated in this paper's opening remarks on contextualisation.

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The quality of teaching and research depends to a very large extent on the availability of the right expertise, with the right attitude, and the right commitment, but, also on the right working conditions for academic staff. On the other hand, academic staff must benefit from the right remuneration, incentives, resources, and support.

The University should seek to provide decent and competitive remuneration for those who choose to dedicate themselves full-time to academic endeavor. Nevertheless, it is well known that some academics engage in private work to augment the salary they receive from University, and conversely many programmes rely, some rather heavily, on the contribution of part-timers.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong in all of this as long as the quality of the teaching and research staff and their input and commitment to the University guarantees that the standard of its teaching and research programmes is upheld.

This proviso highlights the importance of auditing the quality of teaching and research programmes on the one hand, of determining the resource requirements of each programme on the other, and whether the two in tandem are conducive to yield the desired standards.

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The auditing exercise will also help in the streamlining of the administrative systems of the University. Here the role of non-academic staff takes centre stage. The organization of time-tables, allocation of lecture rooms, the administration of curricula and examinations, purchase and maintenance of equipment and consumables, maintenance of precincts, building of new facilities, the provision for security, the maintenance of the information technology infrastructure, the running of the library and other teaching resources, the oversight of health and safety, the provision of sport and recreational facilities, the running of the canteen etc. are amongst the numerous day-to-day functions that are often overlooked but are crucially important to sustain the right environment for scholarship.

It is evident that the success of the University depends on the harmonious interplay between academic and non-academic staff. Non-academic staff must also get their due recognition for the vital role they play.

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For the University to sustain its good name and standing in society, it is crucial that it has sufficient resources at its disposal to back its programmes of teaching, research and cultural outreach, and especially to secure its provision of expertise. There are three main sources of funding that need to be drawn upon in progressively diversifying proportions.

To date, the University has been sustained principally by public funds, and the mechanism allocating such funding on an annual basis makes it difficult for the University to plan ahead.

However, once a mechanism for long-haul fund-allocation is found, then realistically, this puts a greater onus on the University to reassure the Government of the day that the country is deriving good value for the money being invested.

There is no question that the University of Malta is and must remain autonomous, but equally there is no question that every Government must see that public funds are spent well. The University must be accountable and transparent. Government should reciprocate this openness by assisting the University, directly or indirectly, to acquire more funding wherever this is justified. Both sides must be credible and consistent in this regard.

The University must complete the project to determine the true cost-basis of its various programmes, or at least, the realistic cost-basis of the programmes if these were to be appropriately resourced. Of course, costs are also proportional to the number of students at large and on the choice of discipline

they choose to pursue. It is clear that the cost of training a world-class doctor is much higher than that of training a world-class lawyer, and this difference has no relation to intrinsic value and need for the profession but is merely tied to the resources required respectively.

So the funding allocated to the University cannot be merely a percentage markup of the previous year's allocation. If standards are to be maintained, it should reflect the number of students being catered for and particularly the mix of disciplines they choose to read. This is why it is crucially important to determine the annual cost of training a student in the respective disciplines. The same exercise can be used as a basis to determine the fees for foreign fee-paying students.

The beauty of the exercise mentioned above is that it gives everyone a clearer picture of how the resources of the University are being utilized, of whether there is any inefficiency in the current system that can be ironed out, and of whether there are serious deficiencies in resources that are jeopardizing the quality of the respective programmes.

Secondly, from a commercial point of view, the University is in the business of training, research, and professional consultancy. I feel that the University should not use public funds to enter other areas of business in direct competition with local industry but it should be at the forefront of promoting new areas of business, technology transfer, and transfer of know-how, as well as providing services sustaining private enterprise.

At the same time, it is critical that the University continues to seek alternative international sources of funding. Moreover, the University must continue to leverage its resources to attract more fee-paying foreign students to its campus, and further progress in this regard can only be registered if we do indeed monitor very closely, and develop, the specific "products" we are promoting.

One needs to keep in mind that as Malta is now an EU state, the University must continue to reach out beyond our shores proactively, whilst ensuring that the quality of its teaching and research programmes also continue to attract the best local brains to its campus.

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The Junior College also determines to a large extent the standards the University can aspire to achieve at least with its undergraduate programmes. Unless students entering University have the right foundations, it will prove much harder to take such students to the required heights. It is vital that academic staff at the University establish the right links with counterparts at the Junior College, who are training students in those subjects at A-level, which are the foundation stones for their respective disciplines. For example, amongst others, it is in the interest of the Faculties of Science and Engineering at University to liaise and ensure that Physics is in fact being taught to the desired standard at the Junior College. At the same time, dialogue must be maintained with the schools and the division of education for the real potentialities of incoming students to be taken into account. The MATSEC examinations, a review of which has been recently undertaken and which need to be reviewed regularly, provide an obvious and crucial occasion for co-operation between all the interdependent stakeholders.

The University should also continue to build bridges with the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST). Particularly in view of the fact that both these institutions run on public funds, and given the modular systems adopted by both institutions, one should study the possibility of student exchange and credit transfer between both institutions.

In general, credit transfer between the University and other accredited tertiary institutions, both locally and abroad, should be encouraged and EU funds promoting student and staff exchange should continue to be exploited.

In general, it is healthy for the University to continue building on the excellent links it has forged over the years to form partnerships and collaborations with foreign universities and centers of excellence.

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Then may success breed more success, and may excellence propagate and diffuse.

## My Commitment

If Council decides I am appropriate to take on the onerous post of rector, then I will seek to listen to the needs of all stakeholders and will strive to build consensus wherever possible.

This said, the University also needs decisive action and strong leadership to safeguard its good name, to protect its autonomy, and to augment its legacy for future generations.

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My first commitment is to the people of Malta, their representatives in Parliament, the Government, the Church, and other public institutions and civil society:

- *I will strive to sustain a spirit of scholarship and enterprise amongst students and to instil in them the hope and vision that they can indeed contribute to the future of our country.*
- *I will strive to do my part in running the University in an efficient and transparent fashion ensuring that public funds are spent well.*
- *I will promote academic freedom and freedom of expression whilst insisting that this is done within the bounds of decency and tolerance.*
- *I will seek to conduct an operations review of the University's administrative systems to ensure that staff and students are adequately supported in their academic endeavors and to streamline any inefficiency or redundancy.*

- *I will seek external peer review of international standing to reconfirm that the University's teaching and research programmes are indeed of the highest calibre.*
- *I will seek to ensure that the University is responsive to the needs of local industry and that it takes a proactive role in the socio-economic development of the country.*
- *I will strive to create an environment that rewards excellence irrespective of political creed.*
- *I will be approachable and accessible.*

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To the Chancellor, the President of Council and all the members of Council as the governing body of the University I give the following assurances:

- *I will seek your advice and assistance and involve you in all matters of substance, and I will loyally seek to present facts in a balanced and unbiased way for your consideration and judgment.*
- *I will loyally execute your decisions unless my conscience dictates that I should resign.*
- *I will seek to strengthen the financial standing of the University and will seek to ensure that its resources are used wisely and fairly.*
- *I will seek to ensure that the University enhances its stature both locally and internationally and improves the services it provides wherever possible.*

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To the members of Senate I give the following assurances:

- *I will follow your advice on academic matters and I will strive to create the right milieu for the achievement of excellence.*
- *I will strive to see the University's teaching and research programmes backed with the appropriate resources and efficient administrative systems.*
- *I will ensure that the appraisal of teaching and research programmes is done by independent external peers of international standing.*

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To the members of the Academic Staff and their representatives I give the following assurances:

- *I will strive to understand and tackle problems fairly in consultation with my peers.*
- *I will seek to secure recognition for academic excellence manifest in teaching, research, or other forms of scholarship wherever this is due.*
- *I will seek ways to improve your conditions of work and your work resources, as long as resources aren't wasted and compensation is well earned.*
- *I will work to safeguard your academic freedom and to support your scholarship.*

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To the members of the non-Academic Staff and their representatives I give the following assurances:

- *I will work closely with you to understand the systems deployed to support students and academics.*
- *I will try to enhance the synergy between academics and non-academics to ensure the time and cost efficient management of the University.*
- *I will seek to improve your conditions of work and I expect your total commitment to the provision of a cost-efficient and excellent service in return.*

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To the staff and students of the Junior College and their representatives I give the following assurances:

- *I will dedicate time to understand the specific needs of the Junior College and to address them.*
- *I will seek to build stronger links between staff at the Junior College and those on Campus.*
- *I will seek to maintain and wherever necessary upgrade the standards of MATSEC curricula and examination procedures to ensure that students at Junior College and other local sixth form colleges are getting the right foundations.*

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To the Student Body and their representatives I give the following assurances:

- *I will do my utmost to ensure that your voice is heard and your concerns addressed.*
- *I will seek to ensure that you can be proud of your Alma Mater.*
- *I will seek to improve the academic standing of your teaching and research programmes.*
- *I will seek to streamline the administrative procedures governing your programmes and the efficiency in which they are run.*
- *I will seek to improve the recreational facilities and the sport, social and cultural calendar of the University.*
- *I will seek to broaden the international dimension of the University.*
- *I will seek to shift the emphasis at the University from mechanistic certification to education and character formation.*

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