

University Meets the World of Work

Graduate Potential Seminar

29 April, 2000

In April, the University organised the Graduate Potential Seminar in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Industry and the Employment & Training Corporation. The aim of the seminar was to forge stronger links between the University and the world of work in general so as to develop a mutually beneficial dialogue with potential employers whether in business, industry, the public sector or other institutions. Whilst acquainting them with the knowledge and skills acquired by students at university, the seminar sought to assess the needs of the various facets of the labour market.

Some thought-provoking excerpts from the various speeches are reproduced below:

Welcome Address

*Professor Roger Ellul-Micallef,
Rector, University of Malta*

“ ...In an environment marked by globalisation, increased competition and growing commercialisation, a university must become increasingly more entrepreneurial. It must forge creative partnerships with business and industry, thereby working in tandem with those sectors which will benefit most from the expertise imparted to its graduates. This will ensure their relevance to the requisites of the future job market.

This is not, however, to deny the importance of the Humanities as part of our cultural heritage. In today's world,

the notion of interdisciplinarity is fast gaining currency. Higher education should be a springboard from which those graduates who have not been trained for a specific profession but who, armed with the qualitative and quantitative skills acquired in their years at university, should be able to successfully occupy positions in the labour market. ...”

Opening Address

*The Hon. Dr. Eddie Fenech Adami,
Prime Minister*

“ ...Three qualities stand out among graduates who excel in any field: their professional competence, their integrity and their leadership.

The University is not the only institution that fosters these qualities, but it certainly has a determining influence on every student's mind and spirit. Higher education amounts to rather more than the transmission of knowledge and skills. Its purposes are not limited to producing employable graduates. In every field, graduates excel when they value truth, seek it discerningly and act decisively. Instilling and cultivating these qualities is an essential part of the University's distinctive vocation...

My Government welcomes initiatives that foster talent and reward commitment throughout our community. Working together over two decades, the University, private enterprise and Government succeeded in assuring access to higher education for qualified

school-leavers. Their joint responsibility now is to guarantee the excellence and competitiveness of every service offered by the University of Malta. I therefore invite you to discuss the potential of Malta's graduates in a spirit of realism and hope.”

Making the most of our Graduates

Dr. John Harper, Chamber of Commerce

“ ... There must be ... an effort to re-educate both employers and graduates in the variety of occupational options open to those intending to capitalise on the investment. The great benefit from university experience is the freedom of thought and expression that this allows. This faculty must be transferred to the world of work and properly utilised in areas of creativity and innovation. However, for this to happen and for graduates to express their full potential, employers must be prepared to receive and fruitfully explore this. The opposite is true, I fear, and much more work must be done to convince managers on the preparation of the working ground where the seeds of intellectual potential might be sown.

‘Potential’ is about future and remains speculative until proven. ...”

Job Prospects for Graduates in Malta

*Professor Lino Briguglio,
Head, Department of Economics,
Faculty of Economics, Management &
Accountancy*

“There is some concern that the University of Malta is not producing the right type of graduates required by Maltese business. This, it is argued, is leading to graduate supply and demand

mismatches, which, in economic jargon, are termed market frictions. ...

...figures for February 2000 indicate that only 1.1% of those graduating in November 1999 [about 2000] were still registering for a job. ...

It therefore appears that, in general, job prospects for graduates are not bleak and that the economy is likely to absorb most graduates. ...

... job prospects for graduates will increase with economic growth and development. This relationship is well known, but it is important to stress that this relationship may be affected by market frictions. ...

The issue of graduate unemployment raises the question as to whether or not the University should aim to produce the right qualifications for absorption by business firms and by the government. From studies carried out among students, employers and University staff, it appears that the connection between University education and the labour market is considered to be one of the main objectives of University education...

... most students join the University with a view to enhancing their job prospects. However, most students also consider University courses as beneficial for personal development, the fostering of critical attitudes and improvement in knowledge. ...

... the purpose of the University should never be to train persons for a specific job. ... The intention is to improve the employability of graduates by reducing market frictions, notably, through improved information and reduction of mismatches. ...”

Translating University Educational Achievements into Marketable Jobs and Better Economic Prospects for Malta

*Mr. Joseph Zammit Tabona,
President, Malta Federation of Industry*

“ ... The main key to a higher level of development of a country's economy lies in the general educational achievement of a country's citizens. It is a fact proven also by statistical data that education attainment and the right preparation for the world of work does make a substantial difference. ...

Our University has consistently produced good brains which made all the difference in the tough challenges which Malta has faced throughout the years. There is now the next round of development which both the University and industry seem willing to tackle together. The theme of this seminar confirms that we are, today, discussing how to realise the full potential of our graduates. In our opinion, this can be achieved if industry and university understand better what is happening in each other's home territory, what needs to be tuned and how this can be achieved through constant consultation, monitoring and adjustment. ...”

Address by Dr. John C. Grech
Chairman, Malta Tourism Authority

“... There is no disputing the fact that human resources are fundamental to economic development and growth and there is no doubt that the more human resources and quality human resources a country has, the better are its chances to move ahead. ... We should look ahead five, ten years down the road, fifteen years down the road and try and predict what this country will look like then. What

is it that will make this country work, what requirements will this country have and what kind of graduate and quality human resource will this country require? ...

... it is very important for the University to plan for the capabilities that it will have to deliver to this country in terms of the human resource capability that it will need.

... People have careers, people have hopes and people have ambitions and these human resources we are talking about are individuals with a life of their own, with a career of their own. ... So we have to think in terms of career development possibilities, not only in terms of human resource development and it is true that here, we need to have both the employer and the institution which is providing this human resource capability to talk to each other more. ...

Let us make sure that we are oriented towards generating value. ... In the final analysis, it is a question of what kind of future we are moulding together. I must stress the importance of being relevant and creative and we must ultimately, measure our success by our ability to generate value.”

Address by Dr. Robert Tufigno
*Chairman, Employment &
Training Corporation*

“... there are certain parts of Malta where the rate of participation in tertiary education is not satisfactory. I mention this because it is easy to talk about graduate potential or graduates with potential whilst overlooking what might happen if there are certain areas of the country where participation is not high enough, that is, there is no social cohesion....

Another interesting point, [that emerges from The ETC Tracer Study] is that female attendance at University is constantly rising and has nearly reached 50%. Whether they in fact attain certain positions in the world of work is another issue. I think that this is an area where we can do more to facilitate the entry of women with degrees into the world of work ...

There is much potential that is not being sufficiently exploited. Today, there are women with degrees who can combine working with the exigencies of their family as a result of new modes of organisation of work”

Address by Mr. Karl Gouder
President-Elect,
University Students' Council

“... I think the most important question that we have to ask and seek to answer is ‘who is graduating from our university?’ The answer at face value is easy, students graduating as doctors, accountants, lawyers, etc. but is this university really managing to, I would use the harsh word ‘produce’ lawyers, accountants, doctors, etc or is it producing students who are experts at theoretical medicine, theoretical law and theoretical accounting?

University life should be the life by which a student develops himself to face the future, the world of work, with no sense of fear ... with a sense of excitement ...

Our students have immense potential. I strongly believe that we, as students, can do anything we set our mind to do. However, we need a push and an example. We need to be given the opportunity and the guidance to be

creative, show initiative and [develop] other skills ...”

Graduates in Versatility
Professor Joseph Micallef,
Head, Department of Microelectronics,
Faculty of Engineering

“ ... Granted that spending a number of years at a University should not serve only as a preparation for a job or a career, nevertheless most Faculties have had to continuously evaluate the structure and content of their courses in order to enhance the employment prospects of their graduates. ...

The employability of graduates, however, concerns not only the University but also employers, and the necessary interaction between the two must be complementary so that industry must be ready to develop what the University initiates. The challenge for the University is how to enable each student to attain his or her own individual balance between technical competence and personal skills, while the challenge for industry is its readiness to provide adequate training to optimise these qualities. ...

We are living in a time of rapid and continuous technological developments which are leading not only to changes in the type of jobs being created but also to different methods of working and living. ...

In such a situation, university undergraduate courses should be grounded in versatility, so that first degree students become graduates in versatility. Course structures should provide for guided versatility in both course content as well as in personal skills acquisition. ...

Employment of a graduate always represents an investment which is often justified mainly in the light of expected future contributions by the graduate at his or her place of employment. ...”

Address by Professor Daniel Darmanin,
*Dean, Faculty of Economics,
Management & Accountancy*

“ ... Throughout the years the main courses, such as the B.Com and the Bachelor of Accountancy evolved through a succession of different approaches in an attempt to serve the objectives of the ever-changing economic environment. ...

On the local scene, employers were more concerned with whether graduates fitted into their own work environment. The Tracer Survey conducted a few years ago pointed out that employers were alleging that too much theory and too little practice is provided. It also quoted a report confirming that graduates are in many cases over-qualified for the jobs they are required to perform.

... So far, our students have not found any undue difficulties in finding jobs after graduating. Whether or not these jobs are in line with their aspiration is another matter. This leads us to the problem of expectations. Students’ expectations may be too high, or perhaps their parents’ expectations are too high. Likewise in many cases, the private sector expectations may also be too high. Consequently, the problem seems to be a simple one but the solution is too complex. ...

I ask 'Can our camaraderie in discussion take concrete shape in co-operative

action?' We need to translate this sentiment into policy. This seminar is infused with the value of sharing. It epitomizes all that is good in long and distinctive tradition of education for life. I believe we are better people because of our University. The University has a role in influencing the outside world and the outside world has a role in influencing University. Maintaining the appropriate balance of influence in each direction is the task of all of us here.”

Graduate Potential - a Humanist Approach

*Professor Joe Friggieri,
Head, Department of Philosophy,
Faculty of Arts*

“ ... when our main concern turns on whether or not our students will find a job at the end of their three or four years at University, we might be losing sight of the educational ends we as educators are committed to - and of the aims for which universities continue to exist. ...

... I do believe that a university that lacks the intellectual excitement and stimulus provided by the Faculties of Arts and Science is not quite what its name implies. But I feel that ‘the pursuit of learning and an understanding of the manners of conversation’, the formation of people’s attitudes ‘according to enduring values and virtues’, is something which all faculties, departments and institutes should consider as their primary educational end.

...I suggest, therefore, that we stop thinking of ‘employability’ or ‘market value’ as the sole, or even the most important criterion by which to judge our graduates’ potential. Of course, it would be a great waste if employers in industry,

tourism, health, education, the bureaucracy and elsewhere failed to make full use of the knowledge and skills acquired by our undergraduates during their course. But graduate potential, the contribution our students can make to the country, cannot be measured solely in terms of the jobs they find themselves doing when they graduate. ...

The country needs graduates who are 'versed in the manners of conversation' because it needs to have good and open government, a healthy democratic environment in which a person holding political views which are different from one's own is not necessarily an enemy, an environment where people can talk and go on talking until they resolve their differences, lawyers who give their clients a fair deal, teachers who are genuinely concerned with their pupils' well-being, doctors and nurses who care, politicians who put the interest of the country before that of their party, employees in the tourist trade who are courteous to visitors, journalists and broadcasters whose main concern is to tell the truth, people who care about what happens to their environment, whether natural or cultural, and so on.

The values embedded in these ideals cannot be quantified or given a price. Provided we never lose sight of our educational ends, our students can acquire the attitudes that are necessary to bring about such changes in the way we live our ordinary lives, in the way we relate to one another, as I have described. They can leave a mark on our institutions - serving as catalysts to modify or radically alter the way they operate. This too is what we mean - or should mean - by graduate potential. It is a potential which cannot be described or defined in monetary terms, which may

or may not have a market value, but which needs to be developed and tapped for the benefit of all concerned.”

Closing Address

*The Hon. Dr. Louis Galea,
Minister of Education*

“ ... it would be neither fair nor proper to relegate the University to a training or drilling campus, crafting those workers needed by this or that industry today. Even industrialists, concerned though they might validly be about their own immediate labour power deficiencies, would begrudgingly concur that such a rendering of the University would be at best a short-term solution which would prove ultimately catastrophic.

We must make it clear that it is the business of the University to produce graduates. It does not exist to produce workers. The vocation of the University is not vocational, especially in a fast changing milieu where turbulence is the only certainty. ...

I also believe it is high time that a more effective, formal structure, a focal point for Education-Industry Partnership be established, not only at tertiary level but in parallel to the whole formal educational system and my Ministry is now working to bring all those involved together to set up such a structure. ...”