

Rector's Speech

Opening of Academic Year 2016-2017

Theme: "Reading for your degree; reading for life."

Onorevoli Ministru, Kollegi u Studenti, speċjalment il-*freshers* tal-2016,

Merħba lilkom hekk kif illum niċċelebraw formalment il-ftuħ tas-sena akkademika l-ġdida. Għalkemm ili nahdem ma' studenti għal dawn l-aħħar 45 sena, li tletin minnhom qattajthom f'Tal-Qroqq u l-oħra fil-Junior College, din l-*Opening Day* għaliha tinhass bħal ma nisthajjel li tinhass għalikom il-*freshers* għaliex hi l-ewwel waħda li qed naghmel bħala r-Rettur u mhux il-Pro-Rettur, jew id-Dekan tal-Fakulta' tax-Xjenza jew il-kap tad-dipartiment tal-Kimika, jew lekċerer. M'għandniex xi nghidu, il-karigi li servejt fihom f' din l-Universita' kienu kollha importanti, imma nahseb li l-iktar waħda li ssodisfatni kienet dik meta kont nghallem bħala lekċerer *full time* minghajr inkwiet amministrattiv għaliex hemmhekk l-attenzjoni tiegħi kienet kollha ffokata fuq il-kuntatt u s-servizz dirett lill-istudent. Tant hu hekk, li m'iniex fi hsiebni nieqaf nghallem, xi ftit, anke issa, kif jafu l-istudenti tal-B.Sc. fil-kimika li qed isegwu l-*istudy units* CHE 3470 u CHE 2070!

Naturalment bħala Rettur qieghed hawn issa biex inservi b' mod differenti lill-istudenti kollha ta' din l-Universita' u dan għaliha huwa privileġġ u unur. Irrid nara kif se jkompli fejn ħalla r-Rettur ta' qabli, l-Professor Juanito Camilleri, li minn hawn nixtieq insellimlu u niringrazzjah tal-kontribut tremend li għamel lil din l-istituzzjoni li hu mexxa għal għaxar snin shaħ. Konvint li x-xogħol li sar diġà u li se nkomplu naghmlu jservi sabiex din l-esperjenza li intom il-*freshers* se tibdew hawnhekk illum magħna sejra tibdlilkom hajjitkom b' mod irriversibbli u għall-aħjar.

Nixtieq mill-ewwel nipprezentalkom it-*team* tal-pro-Retturi li ħtart sabiex jgħinuni jmmexxu l-Universita': Prof. Joseph Cacciottolo (Academic Affairs); Dr Carmen Sammut (Student and Staff Affairs and Outreach); Prof. Saviour Zammit (Research and Knowledge Transfer); Prof. Tanya Sammut Bonnici (Strategy and Enterprise) and Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino (International Development). Flimkien mad-Dekani, kapijiet ta' istituti u ċentri, lekċerers u diretturi u staff amministrattiv (fosthom ir-Registrar u l-istaff fl-uffiċju tagħha, Library Services, IT Services, Communications, International Office u oħrajn inkluż il-faculty officers fl-uffiċji tal-fakultajiet) li jzommu x-*show* għaddej fil-bnazzi u fil-maltemp, sejrjn nipprovaw inkunu akkoljenti kemm nistgħu biex naghmlulkom hajjitkom pjaċevoli u bla

xkiel żejjed halli din il-pawsa ta' f'it snin tagħkom f'dan il-katidral ta' għerf (u għaqal) tkun produttiva kemm tista' biex tibdilkom f'irġiel u nisa maturi u mogħnija b'għerf, hiliet u kompetenzi lesti għall-isfidi tad-dinja t'għada.

Se nkompli bil-lingwa l-oħra tagħna.

Dear international students, welcome to the UM campus and may your stay with us in this centuries-old University, located on an island that sits at the cross-roads of great civilizations past and present, inspire you to reach tall intellectual heights.

Life at university is supposed to be reasonably pleasant and fulfilling but it will also have its difficult and stressful moments: do not be deterred by these. If the effort you're making to learn is great, and therefore hard and stressful, then when understanding eventually triumphs, the gain is even more meaningful and durable. Otherwise, as they say "Easy in, easy out"!

The important thing is for you to engage deeply with learning and not treat superficially and perfunctorily the processes of going to class or to the lab or the library. The periods spent in these learning spaces with colleagues (or even alone) should be quality time which serve to build you up slowly but steadily so that, at the end of each day, you may possibly feel slightly exhausted but hopefully gratified because you've grown in size, even if by just a little, as a scholar and a fuller person.

A University education is not successful if it teaches one several complicated and sophisticated skills but fails to instill in him or her the capacity of communicating effectively to others what one knows. I think effective communication is key to being 'academically educated'.

Clearly, one way of communicating our thoughts and ideas is by speaking to reveal what's on our minds: the talent of proper speaking is precious and needs to be developed as best as possible especially via interaction with fellow students on campus and inside seminar rooms and in similar fora. The campus should be a place, among other places, where intelligent and incisive articulation can be practised until it becomes habitual and part of the norm for the university-educated. I am not of course

suggesting that students should never relax, laugh and be laughed at, say inanities and tell jokes and indulge in prattle especially when in ‘gossip mode’: but, during serious dialogue, mastering the art of speaking fluently, politely, not loudly, and correctly, both in our beloved Maltese and in English, our precious second language, will really set you apart and cause people to listen. Towards this end, I shall try to promote, on campus, a culture of formal and proper debate so that as many of you as possible would have the opportunity to learn and to indulge in this practice which skill will undoubtedly serve you well in your future career and during your present and lifelong social interaction.

Good verbal or written communication requires, among other things, a reasonably-sized vocabulary. Words matter and one cannot be eloquent unless armed with a sizeable register of words and phrases in the language of interest and this brings me to my main message for this year: the need for reading.

Reflect for a moment on what we do when we read: the dictionary says that “reading is the ability to look at and comprehend the meaning of written or printed (or screened) matter by interpreting the characters and symbols of which it is composed”. The act is far from simplistic and is actually quite mechanistically profound: research reveals that the more we read, the more neuroplastic our brains become thus promoting increased cognitive processes. And here I am not referring just to that reading which is assigned by lecturers in order to extend and deepen the learning of an academic subject but any reading, including and principally that done for pleasure.

In a recent paper in *Academe* (Sullivan, P., vol. 102(3), May/June 2016), the author writes about the importance of reading as a necessary activity to turn secondary and post-secondary students into “college ready” learners. He claims that intelligence and IQ can be strengthened through effort and activity, including through reading that is time-demanding and analytical. He cites neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf as stating that reading has had a profound effect on shaping human history and the development of the human brain. Wolf reasonably asserts that the ability to record history derives from our capacity to read. Reading is possible “because of the human brain’s extraordinary ability to make new connections among its existing structures, a process made possible by the brain’s ability to be shaped by experience. This plasticity at the

heart of the brain's design forms the basis for much of who we are, and who we might become." There is research evidence to suggest that the more one reads about anything, the better one becomes, even in a subject like mathematics because, besides being an instrument of communication, reading is also a neurological exercise that trains the brain to decode and manipulate complex logical and aesthetic structures.

Unfortunately, I have to agree with Sullivan that we teachers may have helped kill the love of reading in students by delivering education as a means of passing tests and exams rather than an enriching and fulfilling undertaking intended to build a person up into an informed and empowered individual, armed with skills and competences to serve one throughout one's career. No doubt, to be successful, such an undertaking relies heavily on the learner becoming an engaged reader, indeed a lifelong reader, not just out of necessity but also because reading is part of the pursuit of pleasure.

So let me repeat the main message from me this morning: for you to function effectively at university while you read for your degree, make sure that you read extensively.

Also, be mindful of the need to adjust your reading mode to the demands of the situation in hand as defined by the purpose of the read and its context. Understanding a complex text about some complicated matter would require slow, careful and deliberate reading, possibly requiring going over parts for a second or a third time, until one is satisfied that the communication with the writer of the piece has finally clicked into place: that will be a moment of satisfaction and joy that makes the effort so worthwhile. Reading for pleasure is a totally different matter, requiring going over the words quickly and once only and concentrating instead on the pleasure and enjoyment of the message. Learning how to read is an important skill in the toolkit of the university student and indeed we academics rely on it to function properly and effectively.

Another skill needed for a complete and successful university education entails the ability to write well. Reading is conducive to good writing but we may need to help students become proficient in the universal language of scholarship, namely English.

This we shall do by providing expert additional assistance to those undergraduates who need it.

In this regard, I have announced at Senate a scheme intended to identify and assist those students who may need to hone their skills in written English: this will not only help them become better communicators using this nearly-universal language of scholarship, business and commerce but it will also help these students to improve their performance in the special subjects they are learning. We owe it to students to acquire a complete and proper academic education while at Tal-Qroqq and indeed, to leave this institution with the skills demanded by industry and the work environment. In a report titled “National Employee Skills Survey” just published by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education, it is revealed that about 56% of employers in Malta said that the main reason why job vacancies were hard to fill was the ‘low number of applicants with the required skills’. And the most often cited skill found lacking by employers in employees interested in those hard-to-fill vacancies was ‘written communication skills’ (33%). The other skill gap, namely, proper use of the English language was not far behind (27%), preceded only by insufficient technical, problem-solving and team working skills.

Incidentally, ‘oral communication’ skills were also commonly found lacking (25%) which shows the necessity for the acquisition of the ability to master clear and eloquent speech. And this is why I would like to promote proper oral communication among and between students on campus including through the use of such means as a debating society. I realize that we have tried to start a debating society a few years ago but without much success, but we should try again, harder this time, because I am convinced that the benefit to students who actively participate in such an activity is great. The experience should help to promote assertiveness and a sure-footed if soft approach to person-to-person interactions. We should all learn how to communicate softly and gently but effectively, no need to shout in order to convince, the polite way is the proper way.

Incidentally, while on the subject of polite, soft and gentle behaviour, let me tell you what I’ve been told privately by one employer, recently: she said your students are often extremely intelligent and apparently capable of doing complicated math or

convoluted philosophical argumentation or rolling out sentences in perfect Italian or French etc but they can't sit properly on a chair and face an interviewing board appropriately. Or even wear the right outfit for the occasion: where do they learn their etiquette?

Acting politely and properly is not a sign of weakness but a considerable and increasingly rare strength and it can make the difference between being selected for a post you applied for or being passed over because you're deemed to be a "rough diamond" in need of lots of polish before you can usefully be taken on board. We are introducing a class on the rules of etiquette within the Degree Plus programme for those who want to improve their communication skills by polishing the non-verbals: this can make a significant difference to how people deal with you which can be as important as that provided by the other communication skills.

No more sermonizing for this morning. May you all have a fruitful year with us and may your education help you realize your life's aspirations. So, welcome on board and thank you!