

## Servicing the regional community through research — the role of the University of Malta's Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research

*Professor Ronald G. Sultana*



The EMCER director, Professor Ronald G. Sultana, giving a keynote address in Toronto

THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH (EMCER) is one of the more recent of the University's research centres. Building on the Faculty of Education's Comparative Education Programme, which was established in 1994, EMCER sets out to further one of the University's main goals—that of becoming a pole of excellence in the interdisciplinary study of Mediterranean and European issues. In pursuing this goal and in focussing specifically on the challenges that education systems in the Euro-Mediterranean region are

facing, EMCER has made a number of contributions that highlight the way Universities can be mobilised to support development goals of the wider regional and international community.

EMCER has adopted a three-pronged approach to its activities. First is the research aspect, particularly qualitative research that involves field work in different Mediterranean and European societies in order to capture the lived realities of complex educational dynamics. So far, fieldwork has been carried out in Syria, to document the way global education has been integrated in the basic school system;<sup>1</sup> in the Occupied Territories, where an evaluation was carried out of the Education Management Information System set up by the Ministry of Education,<sup>2</sup> as well as of the Distance Education Project in the beleaguered town of Hebron;<sup>3</sup> and in Tunisia, where an in-depth study of the competency approach in the compulsory education cycle was carried out over a period of four years.<sup>4</sup>



In the field in Hebron, interviewing teachers and students unable to go to school due to the curfew restrictions imposed during the second intifada

Most recently, EMCER has been involved in looking into the educational entitlement of Palestinian refugee children in the UNRWA schools in the camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and West Bank and Gaza. In all these studies, field visits, first-hand observation, interviews and analysis of documents enabled the development of insights which feed into the policy-making process of different stakeholders. Other projects, involving desk research in the main, have looked at the lifelong career guidance policies and agendas as these are being articulated in the EU accession and candidate countries,<sup>5</sup> and across 29 European states.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, EMCER has a strong research dissemination agenda. The different studies referred to above have all been published in international academic journals and have been presented in conferences the world over. EMCER has also published several volumes addressing specific educational issues



in the region, including higher education,<sup>7</sup> innovation,<sup>8</sup> teacher education,<sup>9</sup> power,<sup>10</sup> special education,<sup>11</sup> science education,<sup>12</sup> and the link between education and economic development<sup>13</sup> In addition, the research centre is responsible for the publication of the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*—a biannual refereed international review now in its ninth year of existence and supported by the University of Malta's Publications Committee.



Selmun Castle, where the seminars on Mediterranean education are held

Thirdly, EMCER attempts to serve as a regional node for other educational researchers, as well as social scientists with an interest in Mediterranean education systems. The Centre co-ordinates a network and database that now includes over 250 scholars and has helped to bring together a number of them to seminars in order to debate challenging issues that are of common concern, such as innovation, teacher education and power. Personal ties developed at such meetings have helped consolidate long-lasting academic partnerships that have borne much fruit over the years. UNESCO has recognised the role played by EMCER in promoting a Euro-Mediterranean space for educational research by awarding it leadership of a Unitwin Network of Mediterranean education scholars.

EMCER is presently exploring the possibility of developing a fourth dimension to its activities, namely the offering of postgraduate research-oriented courses for students from across the Euro-Mediterranean region. The recent decision by the European Commission to launch the Erasmus Mundus programme should sustain such efforts and might very well provide the seed funding that is necessary to make this aspiration a reality. The fact that EMCER has been awarded the UNESCO Chair for Mediterranean Education Studies should similarly help the Centre reinforce its standing in the international research community and to attract promising students from the region.

The Centre's activities are self-funded, with research grants coming through from such organisations as UNESCO, UNICEF and the European Cultural Foundation. Commission funding has also been secured for comparative research of the lifelong guidance field and for the development of a Policy Handbook that will be used to guide European Ministries of Education and Labour in their attempts to take on the implications of lifelong learning for the development of career information and guidance systems.



The Centre operates as a loose network of associated scholars, engaging academics from across the region according to the profiles required by the different research projects it is involved in. The core detached members supporting EMCER's activities are the members of the regional board of editors of the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, whose role it is to ensure networking, within their own respective countries, on behalf of the Centre.

EMCER also services educational needs in Malta. It is presently involved in several projects, including the analysis of Vocational Education and Training,<sup>14</sup> the provision of teacher training for staff at the Institute of Tourism Studies and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology and the development of a Malta policy in the lifelong guidance field.<sup>15</sup> It has also been a key promoter for the establishment of the Commission's Training of Trainers Network (TTnet) in Malta and across the new Accession states and of the National Forum for Lifelong Guidance.



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Further information about The Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research may be found on the website at: <http://www.educ.um.edu.mt/mep/>

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