

Rector's Speech

Opening of Academic Year 2017-2018

Theme: "Question knowledge constantly; find new answers through research"

Kollegi u Studenti, speċjalment il-*freshers* tal-2017,

Merħba lilkom hekk kif illum qegħdin hawn flimkien biex niċċelebraw il-ftuħ tas-sena akkademika 2017.

L-Università ta' Malta, magħrufa b'dan l-isem, din is-sena tkun ilha teżisti eżatt 248 sena u kienet inħolqot mill-Gran Mastru Pinto wara li hu ħa f'idejh il-*Collegium Melitense* li kien ilu jopera digà għal iktar minn 200 sena f'Malta mill-Ordni tal-Ġiżwiti. San Injazju ta' Loyola, il-fundatur tal-Ġiżwiti, kien hu li ta permess lill-Ordni tiftaħ il- *Collegium Melitense* fil-Belt Valletta, fejn għadu jeżisti sal-lum bejn Triq San Pawl u Triq Merkanti, dak li llum nafuh bħala l-bini tal-Valletta Campus tal-Università. Dan il-kulleġġ, prekursor li minnu ħarġet l-Università ta' Malta, kien it-tieni wieħed minn dawn il-kulleġġi li l-Ordni tal-Ġiżwiti bdiet tiftaħ fl-Ewropa fi żmien Injazju, u li llum jgħoddu 'l fuq minn 100 mad-dinja kollha.

Iddeċidejna li din is-sena nagħtu lill-Università ta' Malta *logo* li jirrifletti aħjar il-fatt li din l-Università tagħkom għandha oriġini li jpoġġiha mal-universitajiet qodma fid-dinja. Imma sabiex jifhmuni anke l-istudenti u l-istaff internazzjonali, se naqleb għall-ilsien l-ieħor tagħna.

Dear international students, welcome to the University which henceforth will become your *alma mater*, or "generous mother" providing teaching and learning as nourishment upon which you will continue to build and consolidate your intellectual identity.

This year, at UM, we're adopting a logo (a stylized modern version of the formal crest seen at my back) which brand logo will better reflect the fact that our University is among the older in Europe and, indeed, the world. The insignia of UM is based on the coat of arms of Grand Master Pinto, who, in 1769 took over and transformed and expanded the already two centuries-old Jesuit College of Malta into the University of Malta and installed Roberto Costaguti as Rector. Costaguti's 200th anniversary of his death will be celebrated in Rome by the Roman Church next year and I hope to attend for the occasion.

My message to freshers last year was about the need to learn how to communicate well and eloquently and the importance of reading for developing that particular skill, especially in relation to English, the universal language of academe and scholarship.

This year, I intend to focus on that which makes higher education, as purveyed by universities, special and different from other institutions. To understand this, we briefly look at how universities themselves evolved in time. Medieval universities began in Christian Europe: Bologna, the oldest, was formed in 1088, and these

were originally not housed in buildings (campuses) but consisted of groups of individuals who met in churches or homes to teach their students. The corporation of teachers and students collectively formed the *universitas* and eventually, via papal bulls, universities would receive the protection of the church as a result of which, students, when they misbehaved (which was fairly frequent), could only be tried in ecclesiastical courts similarly to clerics. Papal recognition of the work of the early teachers or academics (as they came to be called, the word being borrowed from Plato's system of teaching) gave them autonomy from the state, which freedom to teach and express scholarship independently of state remains a defining hallmark of universities (in the free world) to this day. The original three subjects that comprised the curriculum were grammar, logic and rhetoric and to these were later added other subjects, mainly Aristotelean natural science and philosophy, which, in medieval times, were already centuries-old subjects and rather fossilized knowledge. In fact, universities went somewhat in decline during the Renaissance, their Scholastic tradition not remaining quite abreast of the humanist revival (although this interpretation remains somewhat contested).

The scientific revolution, beginning around the middle of the 16th century and continuing later to change the world order, was not brought about principally by the universities but by gifted individuals and voluntary societies of such individuals who could financially afford to spend time inventing the experimental method and using it to question accepted classical dogma. The current role of universities as not just professors and transmitters of established knowledge but actually primary producers of new science and other scholarship was probably not developed by a single person in any one country; but one particular person does stand out from the rest who is widely acknowledged as a main contributor to the creation of the modern university. This man was a Prussian, classically-trained, aristocrat named Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) who was asked by his king to reform the education system in his rather proud country in order to "replace in spiritual powers what we have lost in material strength". At this time, Prussia had just suffered humiliating defeat at Napoleon's hand. What Humboldt proposed to be put into practice at the University of Berlin (now named after him) was for university professors to teach and inspire their students not by citing facts and figures and established explanations but by challenging given knowledge and inviting the students, during lecture and seminar, to join in the challenge and come to their own conclusions or suggestions for further exploratory work. To Humboldt, good teaching was that based on the principle that knowledge was "something still not completely discovered and never completely discoverable." This meant that teaching and learning at universities and research were to be intertwined: a precept that changed the face of universities not just in the Germanic state but worldwide. (As an aside, let me add here that, in addition to teaching and research, universities in the 21st century are also expected to be active in outreach activities and enterprise and know-how exploitation, ingredients of the so-called "Third Generation University").

Be that as it may, researching nature in all its aspects, including mankind and her cultures, for new knowledge and novel interpretations remains a critical component and the hallmark of what we do in universities today. You must have heard sarcastic and snide remarks about university academics living in "the ivory tower", an allusion to the fact that researchers in universities do not all apply their minds to finding solutions to the immediate problems of the day and are oblivious and un-interested in what happens in their cities and industries. Naturally, this point of view compares what happens in a university with that research activity which happens in industry, where the only interest is in solving today's problems as quickly and as cheaply as possible with a good return on investment. The comparison between university-based research and industrial research, which by the way, universities (including UM) also perform in cooperation with their industrial partners, is misguided and dangerously shortsighted. It was curiosity-driven or "blue skies" research from universities (not industrial labs) that gave the world penicillin, DNA fingerprinting, the Internet and so on. This is why academics continue to embrace, to the extent that they are allowed to do so financially, research work which is not performed according to a business plan but driven only by the passion to question knowledge and understand better and provide new answers: this type of research has provided and will almost certainly continue to provide new opportunities for solving future, as yet unseen, problems and creating exciting prospects for future generations.

So, naturally, meaningful academic education requires students to learn to do research properly and for this to happen, they have to be taught and guided by persons who are active in both teaching and research.

During the last few years, the University of Malta has been investing heavily on improving its research infrastructure in terms of buildings and instrumentation in support of science, engineering and medical research: this work will continue in the years ahead, where we are hoping to build additional teaching and research infrastructure that will eventually require more than 150 million euro, approximately half of which in the next four to five years. This University is truly committed to providing its students with an educational experience that places research at its centre.

What exactly do we understand by “research”? The Oxford dictionary defines research as “the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions”.

Listen again carefully to the definition “systematic investigation – study of materials and sources which could include carbon nanotubes, regional conflicts, economic realities, political systems, function of cancer cells, etc. – to establish facts, new evidences, not previously recognized – reach new conclusions, meaning modifying or falsifying previous conclusions and replacing them by new ideas that accommodate the old and new facts more neatly and convincingly”. Often, the research action is occasioned either by casual observation or a deliberate plan to detect, analyze (break down) or synthesize (build up) some facet of nature or human artifact that requires study.

Before any original work is undertaken, however, the researcher always looks to see what, if anything, has already been established about the phenomenon she is pursuing: in the language of research, this is termed doing the “literature review”.

When freshmen are given essays to write about a subject, or, in later years, project papers on some more advanced topics, very often the work entails the searching for known knowledge and its collation and systematic organization that allows one to write what is essentially a literature review. This action is part of research, but not the whole of it. Real research happens when a properly formulated question is constructed which the research work will attempt to answer. One cannot do good and meaningful research unless one begins with a properly formulated research question. What exactly are you trying to establish by embarking on this project?

But, I will let my academic colleagues teach you about the details of how to do research properly during lecture hours dedicated to this subject.

On this occasion, I mainly want to emphasize the importance of being not only systematic in your academic work, but also and above all *truthful, honest and ethical*, including in any research you will be asked to do or writing of papers, dissertations and other essays when you must guard against the curse known by the name of plagiarism.

Plagiarism is, the lifting, word for word what others have written and passing the text as your own. Plagiarism is also the act of stealing someone else’s ideas or work and making it your own. In lectures on research methods, you will learn how to craft sentences and paragraphs which describe what others have done or written in a way that does not mask your role as reporter or collator of the information. This role must remain crystal clear and unambiguous and the skill of doing this is part of the art of research and central to another ability closely associated with research, namely that of academic communication. In today’s digital world, it has become all too easy to indulge in plagiarism if you are so inclined: just click “copy” on the words you want to steal and click again “paste” onto your text and perhaps adjust a comma

here or a word there and you're done. If one can afford it, one can even buy a ready-made essay from professional internet companies peddling such work. Obviously, we do have digital tools that make it very difficult for plagiarized work to go unnoticed. But what worries me tremendously is not so much the fact that we have to play cat and mouse to catch plagiarizing students: it is rather the stunning reality which I've personally experienced as chair of numerous disciplinary boards where culprit plagiarists don't appear to find anything wrong with plagiarizing *per se* but are only sorry because they have been caught out. I still remember the student, some years ago, who, without blinking an eye, brazenly told the board that he had found such a good write-up of the subject of his assignment that he simply couldn't improve on it and so decided to copy it verbatim and sign off on the text!

The following is an opinion expressed in *The Guardian* by Frank Furedi in an article titled "Universities blame others for plagiarism. They need to look at themselves" (February 2017):

"What I find most alarming is not that students cheat but that they don't believe they have done anything wrong. They feel they are playing the system and are acting in accordance with instrumental values internalized in their schooling and higher education. Students who have been told that they are customers regard their relationship with academics as a commercial transaction rather than an intellectual relationship. Customers look for a great bargain, not intellectual stimulation. For customers, what matters is not the buzz that comes from gaining insight into an intellectual problem but the final mark on an essay or exam. The university system conspires to encourage them to obsess about quantifiable outcomes rather than the journey of enlightenment provided by an academic education."

This is tough meat for academics and rectors because Furedi suggests that we're to blame for having commoditized academic education which is true especially when universities struggle to survive and have to rely heavily on student fees to remain afloat as happens in some countries. Now at UM, I don't think we regard students as customers but we do tend to emphasize the importance of getting those high marks in sometimes too many exams and assignments. Perhaps, we should rather help our students savour the whole experience of academic education and in particular the joy and uplifting satisfaction of learning especially by discovery.

Plagiarism is but one aspect of the problems likely being created by the commoditization of higher education. Like the making of a good wine, genuine academic learning requires both effort and time. Working for a degree is not a conveyor-belt operation that can somehow be mechanized for speed and ease of purpose: a degree that does not oblige students to engage with learning for a considerable period (3 y at least!) during which time they continue asking questions and searching for novel answers preferably in the company of fellow students following the same or a similar journey is probably just a nice attachment to your name which may prettify your CV but is otherwise quite worthless.

Dear students, may your stay at UM be fruitful and satisfying and may it involve you in some hard work and long hours of study: above all, may it serve to make you thirst for knowledge and give you the skills to patiently and carefully attempt and hopefully succeed to change knowledge.

Welcome to the University.