

A Platform in a Sea of Knowledge

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The **University Maritime Platform** is an initiative that blends all maritime-related research and teaching at the University of Malta to serve industry and society.



The conventional Western approach to research, with subjects carefully categorised and kept separate, struggles to keep pace with the increasingly interconnected modern world that we inhabit. We face global problems with synergistic and cascading effects. What happens in the natural environment affects society and our industry, prompting policy responses that, in turn, generate their own repercussions. It is becoming increasingly crucial that academics continue to move towards a more interdisciplinary approach to research.

The ocean clearly demonstrates the need for diverse disciplines to work in tandem. Even a simple act such as going out to sea requires individuals with different skills and expertise to be, quite literally, on the same boat. A project such as the recently proposed breakwater at St Elmo Point involves the technical input of engineers and oceanographers to determine how best to mitigate wave impact, but also necessitates the contributions of marine biologists, heritage experts, and marine traffic controllers. Only through effective collaboration –

where parties understand each other's concerns and limitations – can large-scale infrastructural projects strike an optimal balance between operational efficacy, longevity, cost, and impacts on the natural environment and cultural heritage.

Prof. Ing. Claire De Marco, founding chair of the University Maritime Platform (UMP) in 2017, says that the platform aims to serve as a link between the University of Malta (UM), the maritime industry, and other stakeholders. The UMP also provides a collaborative space for both UM and international academics with various specialisations connected to the maritime sector. 'The mission of the University Maritime Platform is to facilitate and promote the collaboration and networking capacity of the University of Malta with the world,' says Prof. Adriana Vella, the current chair. 'The UMP is like the trunk of a living tree with many branches growing from it, ramifying and intersecting – the platform holds all the branches together.'

Numerous issues in the Mediterranean demand attention, from large-scale projects like offshore wind farms to discussions about the [▶](#)

region's increasingly crowded coastline. The UMP provides a forum for such discussions, ensuring that focus is directed where it is most needed.

WHAT ARE THE MARITIME ISSUES?

In conversation with some of the UMP committee members, several maritime issues were foregrounded. One such issue is maritime transport – Dr Thérèse Bajada's area of expertise and a central theme of the European Ocean Pact, which is expected to be adopted by the European Commission. The maritime transportation industry is a major emitter of greenhouse gases, yet the global economy remains heavily reliant on it. The UMP actively participates in ongoing discussions aimed at reducing the industry's environmental impact, adapting to climate change, and addressing abuse in the supply chain. This is done with a continued focus on improving health and safety standards, reducing exploitation in employment, and making inclusive practices the norm. Other pressing questions related to the shipping industry include: What should be the standard for ship recycling? How can international governance be transparent? And how can we reduce bribery?



Aerial photo of Delimara Point
Photo by Prof. Adriana Vella

Another issue is that offshore wind farms require extensive planning, including how the turbines are recycled at the end of their lifetime. The impacts of noise, damage to the seabed, and the effect on the fisheries industry also need to be taken into account. Are environmental impact assessment reports sufficient to reflect the full implications of offshore wind farms? Conversations facilitated by the UMP can help answer such questions.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE UMP

With UM forming part of the SEA-EU alliance, the European University of the Seas, the UMP is the ideal contact point for anything related to the marine sector, as over 60 UMP members come

from UM departments and faculties that are active within this international alliance. UM academics with expertise in maritime-related areas can join the UMP alongside those already involved. Membership in the UMP is voluntary, as is the work done within it. The UMP committee comprises 12 members who volunteer their time in addition to their regular duties.

However, the work of the UMP goes beyond financial compensation. Apart from supporting the University and research in general, the interviewed UMP members believe that being part of the Platform also offers personal benefits. Prof. Vella states, 'The University Maritime Platform gives me the opportunity to extend and expand the capabilities that I have developed over the years.' Dr Ritienne Gauci, vice-chair and outreach contributor for the UMP action group, asserts that some of her most significant professional successes as a geographer originated from cross-sectoral collaborations with geomorphologists, geologists, and coastal heritage professionals.

THE UNIVERSITY'S MARITIME CAPABILITIES IN ONE PLACE

One of the convenient things that the committee has done is to create a comprehensive list of all marine and maritime-related study units



Aerial photo of Filfla
Photo by Prof. Adriana Vella



Front (left to right): Ing. Elisa Vella, Prof. Luciano Mule' Stagno, Prof. Adriana Vella (Chair), Dr Ritienne Gauci (Deputy Chair), Prof. Patricia Vella de Fremeaux. **Back (left to right):** Ms Ruth Zammit, Ms Elda Belja, Prof. Ing. Simon Fabri (Pro-Rector), Prof. Robert N. Farrugia, Dr Thérèse Bajada, Ms Angie Mifsud. **Other active UMP committee members include:** Prof. Michael Briguglio, Prof. Matthew Montebello, Prof. Norman Martinez (from IMLI), Ms Miriam Camilleri (from MMF).
Photo courtesy of the UMP Committee

offered at UM. Compiling this list required a lot of interdepartmental communication, but its value is now evident: browsing through it reveals the wide range of options available at UM. From law to geosciences to sociology, maritime topics are approached from a multidisciplinary perspective. This list also makes it easier to design and promote potential courses for specific needs, which would especially cater for the needs of industries looking to upskill their workforce. The committee is also in discussion with entities such as the National Skills Council, Transport Malta, and other governmental departments, to make the University's potential for skills development and consultation more visible. This, in turn, would encourage a two-way system whereby academia provides advisory support to industry and government, while also drawing on their input to shape educational strategies.

ACADEMIA AS A BRIDGE

Academia could play a key role in cross-disciplinary bridge-building. In its societal position as a provider of

objective – or as close to objective as possible – information, academia not only has the capability but also the responsibility to share knowledge. For marine and maritime issues, this is the reason why the UMP was founded. Prof. Michael Briguglio, who introduced a new study unit called Maritime Sociology, maintains that the University – through the UMP – has a key role to play in advising both government and industry. Prof. Briguglio argues that social impact assessments should become mainstream. Such assessments indicate the intended and unintended social outcomes of projects, policies, or plans. This is done to limit unintended adverse outcomes and to help create a more equitable and sustainable society. While academics are sometimes perceived as isolated within an 'ivory tower', producing research that may feel insular or niche, the UMP offers a way to start breaking down this barrier. Dr Ritienne Gauci says, 'Outreach is a very important component of the UMP's work because it is helping to build bridges between the Platform and the University as well as with society, especially our stakeholders.' Reaching

out to stakeholders helps ensure that the research produced is needed, fulfilling, and ultimately usable by the stakeholders involved.

Between 7 and 9 May, the UMP held its Maritime Platform Conference to discuss themes such as the necessity of sustainability in the maritime field, adaptation to environmental changes and a new climate regime, and recent developments in technology, governance, and society, among others. The conference was structured in a way that enabled professionals working in different fields to participate in any discussion, without being limited to sessions within their own sectors. It stands as an example of interdisciplinary collaboration and a result of interdisciplinary conversations following consultations with different ministries and stakeholders. Bringing about change takes both time and dedication. Whilst time is a limited resource, dedication is something that academics have in abundance. While cross-sectoral collaboration may be time-consuming, its rewards are well worth the investment, opening the doors to new frontiers. **T**