

Troubling Maltese Minds: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

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Living in an internationally connected world makes it easier to search for opportunities abroad. This feels necessary at times when living, studying, and working in a small country – a small island state, like Malta. In the past, many youths had to leave Malta to pursue or enrich their careers by following academic programmes abroad. The move allowed them to specialise in their fields with some ultimately becoming professors.

At the age of 18, students finishing their Advanced and Intermediate Matriculation exams apply for their courses at the University of Malta, praying they have enough points to get accepted into the only public university in the country. Then, after three or four years of studying at the undergraduate level, many freshly graduated students face a conflict: stay in Malta or leave the country? Some experience guilt for wanting more and having to leave Malta and their families. With the migration of Maltese youths, the question one must ask is: 'Can Malta become a global academic hub without its brightest minds having to leave?'

THE DESIRE TO STUDY ABROAD

The exodus of bright young minds leaving Malta isn't a trend that started recently, as half-Maltese, half-Irish Prof. Eleanor Scerri remarks on her academic journey. 'In the 90s, I had to leave Malta because I didn't have a choice,' Scerri says. 'I left Malta because no one researched or taught the areas I wanted to

study.' Although Scerri is an affiliate associate professor and research specialist with UM's Department of Classics and Archaeology, her main work is conducted at the Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology in Jena, Germany, as a research scientist and research group head.

Scerri has worked at several universities, including Oxford and Bordeaux, focusing her studies on planetary change, human evolution, archaeological science, and climate modelling. She comments on how universities like Oxford attract high-profile researchers, including Nobel prize winners with multi-billion euro grants. And although exciting things happen where big grants are involved, elite universities take a lot for granted.

Being an academic or researcher in Malta is exciting because there's a lot to build in Malta – it's great to be in a position to make a difference. Now, Scerri feels that she is in a unique position to teach in Malta and give those curious about the areas she researches the space to explore further. Yet, even with innovative programmes ▶



Prof. Eleanor Scerri

starting up in Malta and academics broadening their research, Maltese youths still feel inclined to leave. 'It's not that people want to leave Malta, they just want a chance to further their studies,' Scerri notes. 'But, we need people to either stay or come back to Malta because we need smart people to build a knowledge economy.'

Prof. Michael Galea from UM's Department of Electrical Engineering echoes this sentiment through his own lived experience. After completing his Ph.D. in Nottingham, England, he remained a professor there for 11 more years and also worked at the university's institute in Ningbo, China. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, he and his wife decided to return to Malta – they missed their country. Galea emphasised how relieved they felt to finally be back home after so many years abroad. Additionally, he is excited to be



Prof. Michael Galea

working at UM, where he can make a big difference for Malta's young minds.

SHOULD YOU LEAVE MALTA?

It sometimes feels that UM must tackle so many areas of study since it is the only public university in the country. Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino, a professor of sociology with an interest in island tourism and small state studies, believes that UM has a responsibility to generate critical thinkers and a highly educated workforce for the country's economy. At the same time, he agrees that branching out by studying abroad is important too. 'As we specialise, we find it hard to develop our specialisation



Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino

in Malta,' Baldacchino states, 'which means moving abroad. It is a rite of passage. It means getting exposed to international culture too.' Baldacchino himself earned his master's degree at The Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands, and a Ph.D. from the University of Warwick, England. He worked full-time in Canada for a decade, and nowadays, he splits his time between UM's Department of Sociology and the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada.

Baldacchino points towards a balance that needs to be found between the desire to specialise and the need for general knowledge and interest. He believes that professors need to be

flexible specialists, rather than teaching solely within their specialised field.

'We cannot dedicate too much time to a narrow, specialised area.' Although Ph.D. and postdoctoral studies train academics to be specialised, being a generalist is a positive thing. Being multi-disciplinary helps to engage with students of different interests, ensuring that subjects remain grounded within contemporary contexts and experiences.

A clear trend started to develop amongst local academics. Not only do academics worldwide tend to move from city to city, or country to country, to attend different institutions, but especially Maltese academics have to leave Malta to pursue their career further. Funnily enough, it's the opposite for Greek researcher Dr Panagiotis Alexiou, who finds himself in Malta after moving around a lot for his career. He earned his bachelor's degree in Scotland, followed by a master's degree in the Netherlands, and doctoral studies in Greece, followed by postdoctoral research in the USA. He now finds himself in Malta as a researcher and ERA Chair with the Department of Applied Biomedical Science, and he's excited to be at UM. He believes that the university has a lot of potential since academics are exploring new research ideas, yet much like Baldacchino, he also commented on the difficulty of developing a specialisation at UM.

Alexiou notes that there are young people at UM who want to do cutting-edge research, but if, for whatever reason, a relevant academic does not endorse your work, then you're stuck. This is why some Maltese students might want to go abroad to pursue further studies, like master's and doctoral degrees. Echoing Baldacchino, Alexiou remarks that 'pretty much everyone has done a few years. The perception is that you were productive abroad and are coming back to teach the younger



Dr Panagiotis Alexiou

generation.’ In this sense, Alexiou implies that there is some pressure for local scholars to travel abroad and return with a fresh perspective in their field, adding to the knowledge at UM. His take is that the Maltese should not feel the need to venture beyond their shores as they already have the potential to be leaders in academia, especially in certain scientific areas.

Like Alexiou, Prof. John Ardila is a foreigner to Malta, teaching Spanish and Latin American Studies at UM. Ardila echoes Alexiou’s thoughts that ‘UM is getting things right. All universities have been undergoing change over the past 20 years. Our strengths are: research and innovation, coupled with quality teaching and a robust administration.’ Ardila notes that he was impressed with Malta and the University when he first had the opportunity to be an



Prof. John Ardila
Photo by James Moffett

external examiner, and felt he had to apply for the resident academic position. Over the years, he has taught at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland), Lund University (Sweden), the University of Extremadura (Spain), Kalamazoo College (Michigan, USA), and Marquette University and Milwaukee Area Technical College (Wisconsin, USA). Now, he is extremely happy to be in Malta, teaching brilliant students. He also feels that there are many world-leading researchers in all departments in his faculty, which speaks volumes about the quality of UM’s teaching, thus making UM a fascinating place to work.

Ardila notes: ‘We are a top university of international repute, one of the oldest universities of Europe. Staff and students are driven by a genuine love for knowledge and a commitment to intellectual excellence. What I feel is different is the sense of community, which is much stronger here than in other universities.’

WHAT UM HAS TO OFFER

Whether students who wish to pursue an academic career ought to stay or leave Malta feels like a double-edged sword – both sides have their strengths and weaknesses. Yet, interest in academia is strong in Malta. Galea is elated to see young people taking an interest in research and STEM subjects at such a young age. He was pleased to note that when Form 5 students, those about to sit for their SEC Matriculation exams, visit UM, they are excited to see the labs. He’s even had a handful of students reach out to him out of interest in the engineering programmes. Because, yes, UM *does* have a lot to offer young people in Malta.

Case in point, the recent discovery at Latnija Cave pushed back the history of Malta by at least a thousand years, reframing how we understand the lives

of hunter-gatherer communities (see Issue 47, pp 38–43). This research is monumental not just for UM and Malta as the home of this discovery, but for the entire world. Scerri remarks that the finding resulted in nationwide excitement: ‘It’s excitement that I’ve never seen before. People received the information positively and were talking about it everywhere in Malta.’ There is power in communicating science properly, which attracts students to pursue research too. ‘A new generation is now emerging, saying – I want to be part of this.’ Scerri has noticed that, within the academic world, research is becoming more digestible, allowing the public to understand and share in the excitement of research conducted at UM and across the globe.

Yet, more research means ‘we need more access to funding’, Scerri states. With the support of the Maltese government, which funds research through agencies like Xjenza Malta, and European Community funding schemes like HORIZON Europe, the research output at UM has boomed in recent years. For example, in December 2024, the TerraForm project, led by Dr Huw Groucutt (UM’s Department of Classics and Archaeology), was awarded a European Research Council (ERC) grant of €2 million. Still, more can be done, and is being done – it’s all a matter of being aware of it. ➔



Dr Huw Groucutt

That's precisely the logic behind Prof. David Magri's approach to foreign universities. When presenting at conferences abroad, Magri, who researches in the field of molecular logic-based computation, starts his presentations by talking about Malta. He gets his audience hyped up by showing pictures of fireworks, beaches, town festas, and Hollywood blockbuster movies filmed here. His aim? Magri wants to capture his audience's attention. He wants to spotlight Malta as an up-and-coming, innovative nation for science and research with plenty of culture and character to complement our successes. For Magri, being a professor means inspiring a crowd – people are keen to know more.

Being Canadian-Maltese, Magri was at home in Canada, where he completed his Ph.D.; however, today he is a professor at UM's Department of Chemistry, where he has been lecturing on analytical chemistry since 2010. On his way to our islands, Magri completed his postdoctoral studies in Belfast, Northern Ireland, became an assistant professor at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and held lecturing positions at Ontario Tech University in Ontario and Acadia University in Nova Scotia, both in



Prof. David Magri

Canada. Now in Malta, he has cultivated a fascination with the birth country of his parents and grandparents. He extends this sentiment to those willing to listen to him speak at conferences abroad, by inviting them for a holiday to a nation blessed by history and with so much richness bubbling away on this Mediterranean archipelago.

REPRESENTATION & DIVERSITY IN MINDSETS

The University of Malta is an institution that creates critical thinkers who take Malta with them when they travel for their studies or conferences. As an American-Gozitan, I (the writer Corrine Zahra) found myself relating to these professors in my own way.

I did my B.A. in English at UM and pursued an M.A. in the Humanities at the University of Chicago. As someone from a small town in Gozo, I had to break free from that very small-town mindset to achieve more abroad. Once that dissipated, I began to see myself as someone who could move to Chicago and pursue an academic career that has international standing and allows me to add value to the local education system too. Being from Malta, more specifically, Gozo, is something to share with international peers – and certainly something that I am proud of.

Fundamentally, universities are hubs for knowledge and thought. And so, a singular approach to one's education cannot be consolidated, as every academic, researcher, and student has their own vision for their future. In turn, respecting and encouraging the varied academic voices that represent UM is a must. By being a space open to all mindsets, thoughts, and opinions, UM becomes a place of discourse that cultivates an academic culture worthy of international recognition. This inclusiveness and freedom to think are essential for the growth of academics whose research often goes unnoticed but leaves a profound impact on our society. 