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Oration

(Pro-) Chancellor, Rector, Pro-Rectors, Members of Council and Senate, Members of the Academic Body, Academic Registrar, Administrative and technical members of staff, distinguished guests, graduands

Trusted Truth

When I started planning for this oration, I thought I should write about trust. Will you be shocked if I say I don't know why that was? Then I asked my teenage son, "Imagine you are at a graduation in some years' time, what would you like to hear from an academic delivering a speech?" Promptly he answered, 'The truth.'

The younger generation, our primary audience, and those not so young, expect truth, in some form, to feature and be upheld in all teaching and research. And in fact, is that not why we have spent months and years on our research, not least every graduate whose work we celebrate today? Why else would we speak of the following? Proof. Verification. Validation. Corroboration. Testability. Peer Review. Examining Boards – and vivas. We are all in our way, and our disciplines likewise, in search of ... the truth, whatever that means for each one of us, all looking for insights and conclusions that can be trusted. But does that suffice for the truth? What *is* the truth? I shall not try to answer a centuries-old question here today. I note only that there are traditions in philosophy that consider truth as a key value of human existence, absolute and irreducible; others that consider truth as relative to human needs and desires. Irrespective, both consider truth as a value and it is to this, and its implications for research and your next steps, that I would rather shift focus.

We can agree that truth, even within scholarship, goes beyond the protocols and procedures of academic research and oversight. Here is another point on which we can all agree, at least in principle: the University of Malta must continue creating and supporting the right environment for truth (whether absolute or relative) to be sought, to emerge, and to be communicated.

We have academic freedom to be able to provide elements of that truth. Our academics and students are not constrained in their choice of research areas, or the communication of their work. That freedom is no small thing. It extends to speaking publicly, with responsibility and authority, about issues.

So, what characterizes knowledge sharing and pronouncements in a way that builds truth – and trust? Competence. Transparency. Reliability. Responsiveness. Consistency. Openness. Fairness. Integrity. Good judgement. No pressure, then! We are all too aware of how challenging each of those qualities is, let alone their collectivity. But we, on the academic side, must hope that we have imparted the associated values to you: they can only become more crucial in the complex and not always implicitly trustworthy contexts of AI outputs. Those values are the very same ones, that scholarly literature in Public Policy, which is my field of

teaching and research, has identified as shaping trust in institutions (e.g. Seyd, 2016; Uslaner, ed, 2018). On further reflection, this is why trust, possibly, came to mind as a theme for this oration.

You are graduating in Public Policy Leadership, in Knowledge-based Entrepreneurship, in Economics, in Business Administration, Management, Insurance and Risk Management, in Mediterranean Studies – areas that explore and affect the day-to-day life of citizens, in contexts that are intercultural or directed by socioeconomic and sociopolitical dynamics.

You are, thereby, not simply more qualified employees, but, more importantly, more informed, inquisitive and discerning citizens. You are now better equipped to consider evidence and the larger truth. You no longer merely absorb content, waiting for the prompt to reproduce what has been imparted. On the contrary, at your best you question what you hear and read, you make connections, you critique, you carefully draw insights and conclusions, you understand that there may be plural and contentious *truths*.

As you continue your life's journey, some of you will proceed to doctoral research, some will seek employment or continue working, some will be raising the younger generation or influencing different elements of society. Some of you will be doing all of that concurrently; some of you, no doubt, already are. You will be in situations where you need to take decisions, advise or dissuade, where you have to say, "That can't be true," or "Actually, the truth is that ...". You will be in positions where it is essential to say the truth, as opposed to what some want to hear or what will protect you or simply put you in a good light. Otherwise, how can you be trusted? You will thereby be building trust in our institutions, and in our firms, not through soulless perception building. Build trust through competence and integrity, through treating people with dignity and nature with respect. Elinor Ostrom's work on governing the commons guides us in that direction.

In this ceremony, we are celebrating your achievements but also conferring on you, as graduates, the duty to search deeper and contribute further to society. It also implies that our society trusts you to analyse and address real issues based on well-sifted knowledge, to stand up for the truth. It is a privilege and an honour our University of Malta confers on you today, with pride and trust.

I hope and wish that today you feel yourself fulfilled, more knowledgeable and insightful, a person ready and eager to respond to trust. Take that feeling with you throughout your future days and years, remembering Albert Einstein's (1954) words:

"The right to search for the truth ... also implies a duty: one must not conceal any part of what one has recognised to be the truth."

Thank you and congratulations.

References:

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