

A Maze of Progress: Inside Malta's First Patent Library Centre

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A friendlier approach to navigating the complexities of patent applications.

Lightbulb moments are what dreams are made of. The reality, however, is that a wide gulf exists between a great idea and a finished product or service. Bringing projects to life requires one to travel a long and – quite often, confusing – road.

For many years, the University of Malta's (UM) Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO) has been the companion service behind academic breakthroughs, assisting UM inventors, researchers, and project leaders in navigating the complex world of Intellectual Property (IP). Now, that expertise has gone public. With the launch of PATLIB, Malta's first-ever Patent Library Centre, KTO is opening its doors to the wider community of Maltese innovators, startups, and aspiring creators.

THINK met with some of its key individuals: Ing. Michelle Cortis (Director of KTO), Nicola Camilleri (Manager at KTO), and Matthew Pisani (Director of Industrial Property Registrations at the Commerce Department). Together, they discussed how PATLIB is set to reshape the local innovation landscape.

FROM ACADEMIA TO THE PUBLIC

For Cortis and Camilleri, the transition to serving the general public feels like a natural progression. Camilleri, who has been with the KTO since 2014, has spent years supporting UM researchers. 'Through this role, I have been able to work with many teams, bringing their innovations closer to creating an impact beyond the University walls.' Meanwhile, Cortis, a mechanical

engineer by profession, returned to local work in 2024 to lead the KTO after a stint at Imperial College London.

The spark for PATLIB came from a strategic partnership with the Commerce Department within the Ministry for the Economy, Enterprise and Strategic Projects. Pisani explains that the journey began following the 2019 PATLIB Summit, which called for modern, high-impact patent libraries. 'A key milestone was identifying the University of Malta's Knowledge Transfer Office as the ideal host, given its strong research base and experience in technology transfer,' he notes. Following a positive assessment by the European Patent Office (EPO) in 2025, the project moved from concept to reality.

Despite its early days, the demand for the services on offer is already clear. 'While we have not been "open" for long, we have already received a number of requests for support,' confirm Cortis and Camilleri. Interestingly, the public's needs differ from the typical concerns of academics. 'We have noticed a lot of queries related to trademarks, an area we do not generally deal with too often within the UM teams,' they observe; an exciting prospect that will find assured guidance through the PATLIB initiative.

DEMYSTIFYING THE PATENT PROCESS

For many, any connotation associated with the word 'patent' is fraught with legal complications and insuperable obstacles. At its core, Cortis and Camilleri define it as a legal right that prevents others from 'making, using, or



Ing. Michelle Cortis (left) and Nicola Camilleri (right)
Photo by Kristov Scicluna



Matthew Pisani

selling the invention without permission'. Naturally, ideas cannot simply be claimed to be one's own. Instead, a rigorous process ensures that rights to a particular idea or invention are legally binding. This involves several steps:

1. The 'Prior Art Search': before a single word is drafted, it must be verified that the idea is truly novel and unique.
2. The Priority Filing: A patent attorney drafts a detailed application.
3. Substantive Examination: Experts evaluate the application to establish the invention's novelty, inventive step, and industrial applicability.
4. Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT): This gives applicants the opportunity to protect their invention in multiple countries.
5. Publication: After 18 months from submission, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) publishes the application, making it 'visible to the world'.
6. The National Phase: Approximately 30 months after submission, applicants select which countries they want protection in, having used the intervening time to secure investors or refine prototypes.

PATLIB isn't just about how to go about protecting one's intellectual property – it provides clear guidelines on the 'why'. Cortis and Camilleri emphasise their role in assisting individuals decide whether an invention is actually worth protecting in the first place. While they do not conduct full market feasibility studies, they urge inventors to research the competitive landscape and identify potential customers to validate the technology. 'One big element is, of course, funding; since IP protection is a costly matter,' they admit. To assist, PATLIB connects innovators with schemes like those offered by Xjenza Malta, Malta Enterprise, and the TAKEOFF Seed Fund Award as well as tools and training which are readily available, such as those on the EPO website. A particularly timely resource is the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) Fund – an

initiative of the European Commission, managed locally by the Malta Commerce Department – launched in February 2026 to provide IP support for small and medium-sized enterprises.

EXPERT TIPS FOR THE MALTESE INVENTOR

When asked for one piece of advice for private inventors, the experts were unanimous – organisation and timing are everything. For Camilleri and Cortis, the more organised you are, the easier it is to commercialise. 'Maintaining an organised data repository with all the intellectual property you've built, be it know-how, data and results, code and registered Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs),' they ascertain. Meanwhile, Pisani points to the importance of not treating intellectual property as an afterthought, but rather considering it at the earliest stage alongside the creative and technical development of ideas. He also believes PATLIB will become a 'cornerstone of support for Malta's startup ecosystem'. By offering reliable information and guidance, the centre helps startups 'innovate smarter, not just faster'.

LOOKING AHEAD

As 2026 progresses, PATLIB is currently tracking the incoming types of queries, ranging from patent structures to trademark classifications. The team hopes to organise training sessions later this year to help tackle some of those needs or queries. The message is clear: if you have an invention, do not wait until it is executed. Think about protecting it. The KTO doors are open, and the expertise available is ready to assist the next generation of Maltese entrepreneurs. **T**

Reach out to learn more and seek support at:

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