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Oration

Practice, Knowledge and Collaboration

Chancellor, Rector, Pro-Rectors, Members of Council and Senate, Members of the Academic Body, Academic Registrar, Administrative Staff, distinguished guests and graduands,

It is an honour for me to deliver this oration, and to stand before you today to offer my personal congratulations to our new graduands. This is a celebration of your hard work, your perseverance, and your success. A postgraduate degree signifies commitment and a sustained dedication to pursuing knowledge. You have every reason to be proud of yourselves and what you have accomplished.

The arts have historically resisted linear development and stable definition, a condition that constitutes their distinctive character. The conditions and contexts under which art and design unfold have shifted decisively. Certainly, the evolution of art and design practice has been shaped by multiple factors, including digital aspects. Digital systems now shape not only how images are produced, but how attention is allocated, how value is assigned, and how authorship is understood. Art and design practice is defined by its flexibility. The artistic process presents a space where concepts and materials intertwine and translate into forms of signification. Practice as research (PaR) acknowledges the practice as a key contributor to the production of knowledge and it is crucial to consolidate its role and to recognise its potential for creativity and innovation.

For those of you trained in art and design practice, you know that materials have always carried histories, possibilities, constraints, and politics. You have learned that form is never neutral. Creative activity requires contextual, material, and cultural knowledge, and this knowledge cannot be formed in isolation. It is vital to continue consolidating practice-based research, while clearly articulating how it differs from other research paradigms. Without this differentiation, there is a risk of defaulting to one-size-fits-all frameworks that may streamline organisational processes but ultimately constrain the development, rigor, and diversity of practice-based research. Practice-based research is distinctive because it does not rely solely on propositional knowledge or textual argument; it also generates understanding through making, experimentation, and reflection. In this context, the studio, the place, the digital interface, and the creative space where we work become laboratories of inquiry. Each creative intervention carries the potential to reveal insights that could not be articulated beforehand.

As educators, we provide the resources, we offer mentorship and evaluation, and design assessments that encourage rhizomatic development. Practice as research acknowledges that knowledge can emerge from doing, from creative experimentation, and from responding to materials, audiences, and contexts in various ways. As educators, we strive to create environments where thinking, making, and questioning occur together. We invite students to

embrace uncertainty, to inquire, and reimagine familiar territories as if encountering them anew, and to creatively venture beyond the known. The creative process includes collaboration and empathy, as much as individual vision.

The art and design process encourages diverse approaches and ways of making. It is a reminder that rigorous inquiry need not be confined to words or metrics; it can, and often must, be lived, made, and performed. It is in this iterative, reflective practice that artists and designers will continue to expand what it means to know. The value of creative practice resides in the capacity to hold complexity, to make visible what has been overseen, and to insist that not everything meaningful can be quantified or automated. In the creative process, failure is not evidence of inadequacy; it is the structural companion of experimentation. What matters is not avoiding failure, but learning how to fail without abandoning your practice or your principles.

The bridging of disciplines enriches practice-based research. It allows us to connect the improbable, to place ideas in dialogue across disciplines, and to generate new forms of knowledge that could not emerge in isolation. Innovation often occurs when different methods, materials, and divergent perspectives intersect, collide and intertwine. Practice-based research thrives on interdisciplinarity: science informing art and aesthetics, history shaping form, environment suggesting spatial dynamics, technology redefining perception. The weaving together of diverse fields cultivates the ability to recombine knowledge, recontextualise ideas, and engage in critical reflection, opening the door to new ways of understanding. The outcomes of creative partnerships contribute significantly to the development of the knowledge economy. Novel connections disrupt ingrained habits, provoke unfamiliar questions, and give rise to new languages of expression, cultivating the speculative inquiry and invention necessary to navigate a complex world.

It is essential to continue encouraging and promoting collaboration between different departments and faculties, and to facilitate cross-collaboration between various programmes of study. Originality entails forging connections that go beyond the usual; creative collaborations that might not seem obvious at first glance. We must continue to invest in multidisciplinary aspects and support the movement and exchange of ideas across disciplines.

I commend the University of Malta for promoting the importance of practice as research at the postgraduate levels; for fostering safe yet challenging environments where students can explore unfamiliar terrain, embrace creative thinking, and find the support they need to navigate flexible inquiry. In doing so, the university is empowering students to discover their own voice and to use that voice to articulate concerns, question assumptions, and imagine change. The university must continue to consolidate its position in practice-based research by further embracing its flexible, reflexive, and qualitative nature, which often resists structurally defined criteria.

It is vital that we continue to invest in resources that nurture innovative projects. Different disciplines adopt specific methodologies. Creativity thrives on hybridity. It borrows from across fields, appropriating research methods, disrupting patterns, and recontextualising ideas as they move from one site to another. Creative exploration invites us to see differently, from multiple angles, to deconstruct and reassemble structures of knowledge so that

something new may emerge. The ability to move with relative ease from familiar ground into unexplored terrain, and to create points of access to allow innovation to flourish, cannot be overstated.

To all new graduands, you should be immensely proud of your achievement and eager to make a difference. May you thrive in your professional endeavours, and may we, together, continue to contribute to society in responsible and meaningful ways.