

What's Next? Prof. Frank Bezzina's Vision for the University of Malta

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Newly appointed Rector **Prof. Frank Bezzina** outlines his vision for the University of Malta as an agile, evidence-driven institution which adapts to changing circumstances while maintaining its autonomy. He discusses reform, innovation, academic freedom, and the challenge of leading a historic institution through technological and societal change.

Recently appointed Rector of the University of Malta (UM), Prof. Frank Bezzina, describes the institution as occupying an unusual position in national life, simultaneously a centuries-old university, a public institution, a research hub, and one of the country's most important long-term investments. It must preserve academic standards while adapting to technological disruption, serve students while contributing to the national interest, and remain independent while competing for international relevance and funding.

Bezzina enters the role with an unusually broad institutional perspective, having served as Pro-

Rector for International Development and Quality Assurance, Dean of the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy (FEMA), member of boards of national institutions including the Central Bank of Malta, and even having served as Acting President of the Republic. When asked how this range of experience has affected his perspective going into the role, Bezzina answered:

'Serving at a national level broadens one's perspective considerably. It highlights how interconnected institutions are and how decisions in one domain – such as education and finance – ripple across the entire system. The University's role ranges from addressing immediate concerns to contributing to long-

term national priorities. This does not mean aligning the University narrowly with short-term policy agendas, but rather ensuring that its teaching, research, and engagement contribute meaningfully to national capability.'

COURAGEOUS IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Bezzina's vision for the University is shaped particularly by systems thinking, clearer priorities, and evidence-based governance. For over two decades, Bezzina has worked within UM's Department of Business and Enterprise Management, specialising in Management Science and evidence-based management. The field ➔

focuses on improving organisational decision-making by integrating research evidence, institutional data, professional expertise, and stakeholder perspectives. In outlining his vision for his Rectorship, that philosophy appears central to how he intends to lead.

'Universities do not lend themselves to simple performance metrics. However, the absence of perfect measures does not justify the abandonment of disciplined and systematic decision-making. In practice, this means being explicit about the assumptions behind decisions, testing those assumptions where possible, and learning systematically from outcomes.'

Bezzina's approach reflects his academic background, though the implications are practical. Large universities often accumulate layers of procedure over the course of decades. Processes become slow. Innovation becomes difficult. Internal caution gradually hardens into institutional culture. Bezzina sees this tendency as one of the major barriers preventing the University of Malta from becoming more proactive. The problem, as he frames it, is not necessarily a lack of ideas, 'but a lack of mechanisms to act on them efficiently'.

His proposed response to these issues centres on reducing unnecessary administrative friction, clarifying institutional priorities, and creating structures that reward



Prof. Frank Bezzina
Photo by James Moffett

initiative rather than delay it. Stability remains important within academia, particularly in a small country where institutional continuity matters deeply. Bezzina repeatedly emphasises evolution over disruption. One flagship proposal is the establishment of pro-rectorates with clear mandates, measurable objectives, and greater operational autonomy within a tighter leadership structure.

PEOPLE, CULTURE AND DIGITALISATION

Bezzina says he wants to nurture a culture that is both rigorous and open. The University must maintain

its standards but be open to change, collaboration, and critical reflection. He describes the University as needing to become what organisational theorists call an 'ambidextrous organisation', capable of simultaneously managing present responsibilities while experimenting for the future.

On technology, Bezzina argues that AI presents significant opportunities. Administrative burdens across universities have expanded significantly over the past decade. AI systems could streamline workflows, improve service delivery, and free academic staff from repetitive tasks. Yet Bezzina is cautious about



allowing technological efficiency to become an end in itself.

'Universities are fundamentally human institutions. They are centred on learning, critical thinking, and mentorship. The challenge is to integrate AI in a way that enhances, rather than diminishes, these human elements. That requires careful governance, clear ethical frameworks, and a deliberate focus on where human judgement remains essential. AI should be seen as an enabler, not a substitute.'

He believes emerging technologies will continue reshaping how students learn and how educators engage with them. More personalised and flexible learning models may emerge. Data-driven systems could improve responsiveness and student support. Still, technological adoption for its own sake carries risks.

Bezzina says that the key is purposeful integration. Technology should solve real problems and improve the experience of both students and staff. He also

stresses that the transition must remain inclusive, with training and support for staff as they adapt to rapid digital change.

RESPONSIBILITY TO THE NATION AND ACADEMIC INDEPENDENCE

Bezzina argues that he sees the University of Malta not simply as an academic institution, but as a strategic national asset. The University shapes future professionals, contributes research expertise, informs public policy, and acts as one of the country's few enduring intellectual institutions. Bezzina believes its teaching, research, and public engagement must contribute directly to national capability while still preserving academic independence. The University must inform and challenge policy through rigorous scholarship, not simply respond to it. That balance between public contribution and institutional autonomy also shapes his approach to funding.

The University's strategic plan

increasingly emphasises diversified funding streams, including partnerships with industry, government bodies, and international institutions. Across Europe, public universities face growing financial pressure alongside rising operational expectations. For some critics, expanded partnerships raise concerns about commercialisation or political influence. Bezzina rejects the idea that diversification necessarily compromises academic independence. If properly managed, diversified funding could strengthen institutional autonomy by reducing dependence on any single source of support.

'Autonomy is non-negotiable. It is the foundation of academic credibility. Partnerships must be structured in a way that protects academic independence.'

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Asked about the relationship between fundamental research and applied innovation, Bezzina resists framing them as opposing categories. ➤

He states that they should be seen as a continuum rather than as different types of endeavours. Fundamental research, often criticised for lacking immediate commercial value, frequently underpins future technological and scientific breakthroughs. The University, therefore, must protect space for curiosity-driven scholarship while simultaneously strengthening mechanisms that connect research with practical application. Collaborative platforms, interdisciplinary incentives, and stronger knowledge-transfer structures all form part of that process.

At present, he believes one of the University's greatest unrealised strengths lies in its potential for integration. This fragmentation is familiar to many large institutions. Departments often operate in relative isolation despite overlapping interests and complementary expertise. Achieving that integration, however, requires cultural as well as procedural change.

'There is considerable expertise across faculties, institutes, centres,

and schools, but it is not always sufficiently connected. Greater integration across disciplines, between teaching and research, and between UM and external stakeholders could significantly amplify impact.'

QUALITY, WELLBEING, AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

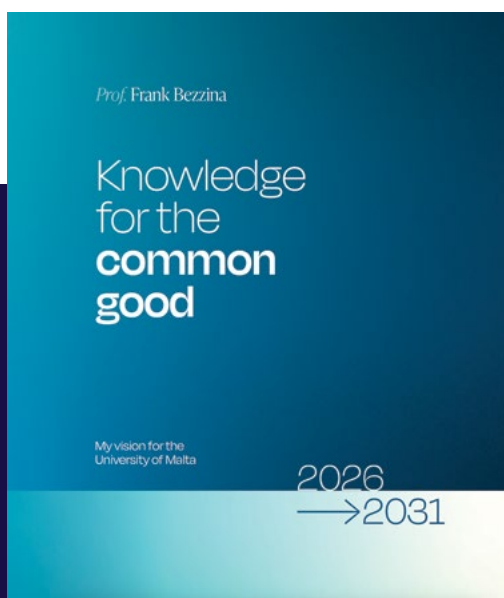
Concluding his vision, Bezzina returns to two areas he considers foundational, namely quality assurance and student wellbeing. Quality assurance, in his formulation, is frequently misunderstood.

'A strong quality culture is not about compliance for its own sake,' he says. 'It is about ensuring that academic standards, programme relevance, and institutional processes are continuously reviewed and strengthened.'

At some universities, quality systems are often experienced as bureaucratic obligations imposed externally. Bezzina instead describes quality assurance as something that should become embedded within institutional culture itself.

Student wellbeing is of equal importance for Bezzina, who places students at the heart of the University's mission. Their wellbeing extends beyond counselling services or administrative support. It includes curriculum design, learning environments, and institutional responsiveness. This sentiment matches his manifesto, which calls for a people-centred culture as its first of five core values.

As the University of Malta approaches its fifth century, it faces mounting pressure to remain academically independent while simultaneously functioning as an engine of innovation, technological adaptation, and national development. Bezzina's response to that challenge consistently returns to systems, evidence, institutional culture, and long-term coherence, reflecting a belief that Malta's university cannot compete through scale alone, but through agility, integration, intellectual density, and its uniquely close relationship with national life. **T**



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