

The Makings of a Rector:

Inside the Decade Prof. Alfred J. Vella Redefined the University of Malta

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*What has the greatest effect on a higher education institution: the transformation of its physical landscape or the impact of a rectorate on staff and students? Outgoing Rector **Prof. Alfred J. Vella** reflects on his legacy within the historic timeline of the University of Malta. In conversation with **THINK** Editor **Rebekah Zammit**, he reveals the mindset behind his decade-long mission to elevate UM's research footprint and its teaching quality.*

In a late December letter (1943) to his friend Eberhard Bethge, Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: 'But faithless vacillation, endless deliberation without action, refusal to take any risks – that's a real danger.' He increasingly felt that the horizons of being had darkened because human freedom and action were under attack by the perpetrators of his time. And yet worse still, those who had the power to act were sitting on their hands. He feared that if evil was allowed to continue, there would be no future. And so, from his prison cell, Bonhoeffer felt anxious, not for his fate but for the uncertainty for humanity that lay ahead.

Today, political conflict and uncertainty in the face of accelerating climate issues and technological advances still afflict our societies, no matter how far removed it all may seem. Resolve and a sense of responsibility for action are what distinguish a doer from a thinker. This truth highlights the paradox of leadership in higher

education: while a university's purpose is to cultivate deep thinkers, its relevance and contemporaneity depend on a rector who has the courage to be a doer. For a university to thrive and serve, action cannot be secondary. It is the rector's responsibility to steer the academic community towards a future that benefits the staff, students, and society who depend on the university.

GUARDING THE RIGHT TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In November 2025, Rector Prof. Alfred J. Vella reaffirmed this resolve alongside more than 1,000 other universities by signing the Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU) 2020. In doing so, Vella aligned the University of Malta's mission with the declaration, committing UM to act in ways that preserve the planet and promote health, prosperity, and enlightenment. 'It was an honour to reaffirm our commitment to the core values that define a true university,' Vella remarks.

'In an age marked by uncertainty and fragmentation, these values are not simply ideals. They are our compass.'

The MCU 2020 declaration defines the essential qualities of a university as the freedom to educate and express ideas without external pressure, governance rooted in institutional autonomy, and a responsibility to support societal development through the pursuit of knowledge. Academic freedom, which by its nature extends beyond freedom of expression, allows universities, independent of state influence, to decide what to teach and research, how to assess students, and how to recruit staff.

For Vella, 'signing it allows us to say things that, maybe were we not signatories, we would feel a bit afraid to utter.' The time we are living in is probably among the worst times universities have experienced in terms of academic freedom and freedom of expression. He notes that this animosity from global political leaders towards



Prof. Alfred J. Vella
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

universities only further emphasises the value of 'the freedom to think and to do without fear or favour.'

A SOULFUL UNIVERSITY

Vella is a firm believer in Christopher Brink's notion that a university should have a soul – one that allows it to reflect on its own strengths in order to uplift its immediate community, and, in turn, the wider world. 'Some problems need global thinking, but don't be overwhelmed to say "Well, what can we do on this tiny island with this small university?" We can do so much, and the effects of our actions will be felt mostly in the immediate environment of the University,' Vella says.

This was most evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which marked the midpoint of Vella's rectorship. At the time, UM students and staff were involved in facilitating contact tracing, preparing vaccine doses, and administering the vaccine to the general public. The University of Malta transformed into a major hub of care, truly becoming a university for Malta.

To date, hundreds of memoranda of understanding have been signed with various local ministries that recognise the University as a powerhouse of research, critical thinking, and the interrogation of facts. Vella notes, 'They

trust us to give them the solutions, so we implore them to use our findings to improve their policies. We do not have a bottom line in the way that private universities do; we help our community because we have a soul.'

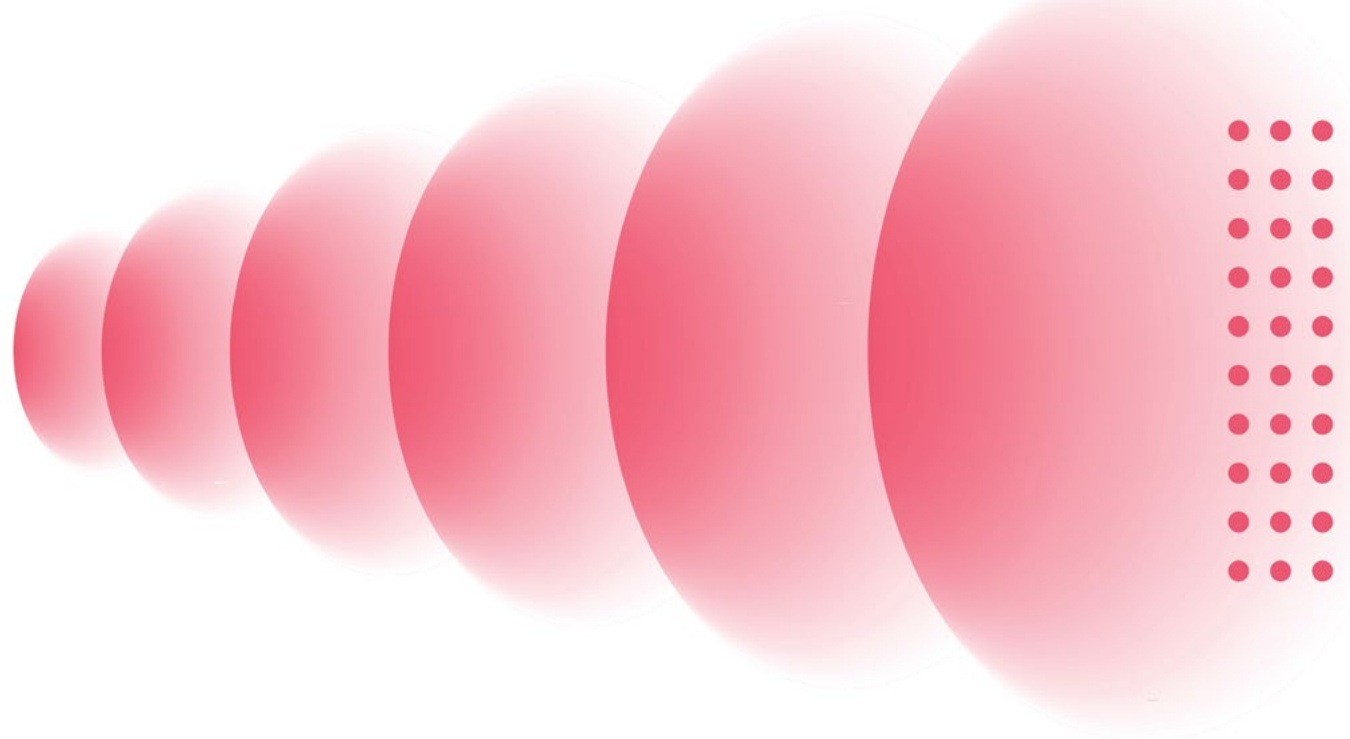
But why begin with the local context? Would it not be more valuable to work on larger global issues? 'See it from this perspective,' Vella explains, 'Why do countries have universities? Not a single one, but multiple universities. The reality is that a university in Cork can't possibly be expected to help the people in Dublin, so there are universities in Dublin. When you have multiple universities, you hope they are promoting the well-being of their immediate constituencies. In doing so, they lift society as a whole across the nation.'

THE TWIN MISSIONS OF THE LAST DECADE

Under Vella's leadership, the University has spent the last decade pursuing two key goals: bringing research activities onto equal footing with its teaching mission, and better preparing staff to educate students. For this purpose, the University directs its resources to best benefit the society it serves by investing in excellent educators and researchers.

Alongside competitive EU funding, almost €120 million in investment from the central government and other sources supports the maintenance and continued employment of staff and enables the development of new infrastructure. A recent addition to the campus is the Engineering Research and Innovation Laboratories (ERIL) Building, inaugurated in February 2024, which houses laboratories exclusively. While the building was originally planned as a postdoctoral centre where researchers could congregate and discuss, the immediate need for laboratory space ultimately took precedence in support of UM's research aspirations. Vella notes that the commitment to establish 'a postdoctoral centre will soon be fulfilled through the Sustainable Living Complex (SLC), which will also house several institutes and faculties, including the Faculty for the Built Environment.'

With an academic staff that is almost entirely doctoral-qualified, Vella is firm in the knowledge that funding invested in research always yields a greater return. 'The Government of Malta recognises that there are things happening at the University of Malta that only it can do,' he says. To this end, the State granted Vella's



request for an additional €1.2 million per annum in supplementary funding for academic research. 'So while this supplement is still a sapling, it will one day become a bigger tree.'

In collaboration with the Rector-Elect, Prof. Frank Bezzina, Vella has also begun consolidating funding streams through the Research Innovation and Development Trust (RIDT) – a joint initiative between the State and the University designed to attract investment in research with direct societal benefits. Efforts are now focused on establishing endowment funds capable of supporting the University's initiatives for many years to come.

These funding streams will help bring to life what Vella considers his 'unfinished symphonies', namely the Sports and Performing Arts Complex, currently under discussion now that funding has been secured, and a new building for the Faculty of Dental Surgery which, apart from teaching and research, is intended to service disabled and vulnerable people.

Still, Vella acknowledges that 'while some plans are derailed by the way things pan out, others that should have taken years to mature find the right conditions for much faster development.' And so, even

though the University was already on the path towards digitalisation, 'the pandemic zoomed us forward', and from a position of very limited practical knowledge by way of remote teaching, 'young professors and staff were quick to take on the challenge and support their older peers.'

The effect resulted in a stronger sense of camaraderie among academic staff, providing tangible evidence of the value of shifting towards an internal mentorship programme. For many years, Vella observed prospective academics go from bachelor's to master's to doctoral degrees and then transition straight into teaching without adequate preparation for students' needs and the dynamics of lecture-room teaching. With this in mind, he regularly invited a team of tutors from Canada to impart advanced pedagogical strategies to UM's academic staff. This team also helped him identify individuals with a particular talent for teaching who became foundational for 'a model that was based on us teaching us'.

This effort culminated in what is now the Office for Professional Academic Development (OPAD), which provides UM's academic community with access to a wide range of professional development opportunities at all stages

of their careers. Vella also established the tenure programme, whereby newly employed academics, following a probationary period, undergo a four-year programme during which an appointed board reviews their quality of service. 'Many have gone through this track successfully, but not all. A small minority has failed, which shows the system is working,' Vella remarks.

Together with OPAD, the tenure programme ensures that the mission of supporting staff in educating students is concretely addressed, granting teaching the same parity of esteem as research. These initiatives are reinforced by rigorous quality assurance, which, in Vella's words, 'keeps the academics on the straight and narrow' and cements the University's status as an evolving institution. Each faculty is required to prepare an Annual Programme Review in which they outline areas for improvement and actions required to enhance course content, ensuring that 'our staff are taking their teaching as seriously as their research.'

One way of measuring the successful implementation of these processes, particularly in light of the teaching and research missions, is through the world rankings system. Vella recalls that in 2016, the University ranked 

around 1,600th worldwide. Today, just 10 years later, it ranks in the 740s overall, higher in subject areas such as education and business, reaching the 300s, and is placed 291st among European higher education institutions. Remarkably, UM is listed 40th in the world for Employment Outcomes, and 7th in Europe for this indicator.

HONING A BORDERLESS CLASSROOM

Beyond our stomping grounds in Msida, Valletta, and Gozo, UM forms part of a European Universities alliance. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the concept of 'European Universities' – a framework for transnational cooperation between continental higher education institutions. Then, two years later, the European Commission approved 17 alliances to pilot the idea, including the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) Alliance, of which UM is a member.

'I'm convinced that in the decade or two, the alliances will have matured significantly,' Vella says. Now in its seventh year, the Alliance continues to evolve, and Vella has proposed that the faculty Deans hold sectoral meetings where their expertise aligns. This will allow discussions to be directed towards benefiting the entire SEA-EU ecosystem and beyond.

Well-established in Europe, the University has been involved in numerous EU-funded projects. As a signatory of the Bologna Accords and member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), UM's degrees align with the European Bachelor-Master-Doctorate system 'thanks to which a student can go away to another place of study to

increase the value of their experience and seamlessly integrate.'

Vella's rectorship was also momentous by way of internationalisation, opening UM's doors more widely to the rest of the world. 'Whereas most of my colleagues did their PhDs in the UK, Europe, or the US, those that came after us did their PhDs here, and today we see an influx of international students originating from foreign universities who take up their doctoral studies with UM.'

To accommodate these new admissions of doctoral candidates and provide a more holistic experience, the Doctoral School was inaugurated at the end of 2017. Since then, it has contributed to the widespread dissemination and visibility of doctoral research. On this note, the University of Malta 2026–2030 Strategic Plan records increases of 180% in international student enrolment and 109% in doctoral candidates over the past five years.

PASSING THE MANTLE

In a university setting, rectorship does not mean undoing what has come before. Rather, it carries a sense of continuity and of working towards goals that have existed since the university's inception: education and research. At UM, this commitment is all the more important, as the national university must provide comprehensive teaching across all fields of study.

It is with this at the forefront that Vella remarks on the 2026–2030 Strategic Plan: 'As the earlier plan expired in 2025, it would have been a disservice to leave the University adrift until the new administration stepped in – even if this strategy will

essentially serve as its manifesto. Universities are not governments – we do not have parties.'

He explains that, whereas the previous plan felt overly prescriptive, the new strategy provides a clear vision of UM's core resolutions while allowing space for action plans to be developed at the coalface. This ensures that funding streams from Europe and the State remain unaffected during the transition of the rectorate – Vella's parting gift to UM.

Welcoming incoming Rector Bezzina, Vella confides that 'Frank is a go-getter – *ma joqgħodx f'gildu* (trans. he can't stay still in his skin) – so I have no doubt that he will do his utmost and continue to lead this university from strength to strength, directing his energy into the right path to achieve the best outcomes.'

There is a bittersweet solace in these final days. While Vella expresses confidence in his successor's strengths – a colleague who worked alongside him for many years as Pro-Rector for International Development and Quality Assurance – a quieter anxiety lingers. How much of the ephemeral transformation of this institution, namely the advances in research and teaching quality, will be remembered?

All of it.

Because what touches people lasts longer than stone. 

Further Reading

Brink, C. (2018). *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is Not Enough*. Bristol University Press.