

THINKing Out Loud for 15 Years

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It all started with a man called Wilfred Kenely, who eventually went on to head the Research, Innovation, and Development Trust (RIDT). He created *Research Matters* in December 2011, laying the foundation for **THINK** Magazine. He asked Prof. Edward Duca, then a young editor and Ph.D. graduate, to edit the *Research Matters* publication. 'Kenely asked me to edit the whole thing. It wasn't a magazine at that time, but a series of research articles back to back,' Duca explains.

The publication was well received, and the Rector at the time, Prof. Juanito Camilleri, issued an open call for a Publications Developer and Editor position, which Duca won. His task now was to deliver two issues per year.

'We wanted to put research on the map in Malta. Research was

increasing tremendously fast, and Juanito had some visionary ideas that were also very expensive, so we needed to enhance the visibility profile of both the University and Malta,' explains Duca.

But what were these plans, and how does a magazine feature in them?

FIRST STEPS

'I wanted to communicate better, against a backdrop of scepticism,' explains Rector Emeritus Camilleri. 'The idea at the time was that the University was just a teaching institution. People in positions of authority, such as senior civil servants, industry leaders, and politicians on all sides, would say sarcastically "u mela, ghax l-Universita taghmlu r-ricerka hux!" (roughly translated to "right, because the University *actually* does research, doesn't it!"),' he adds.

You've seen **THINK** during Fresher's Week, in the waiting room outside the office, at the canteen, or just lying on a table.

THINK has been a part of the University long enough to earn at least three PhDs – 15 years, in fact. Unfortunately, magazines can't earn PhDs, so what has **THINK** been doing over the years instead?

The new magazine needed to showcase the research being carried out at UM and demonstrate that the University was research-active and capable of generating its own intellectual property that could contribute to the national economy. The magazine was meant to be a vehicle to support RIDT's mission of attracting funding. By highlighting UM's research, the goal was to encourage philanthropists, businesses, and public agencies to sponsor and donate to the University.

To make this happen, Duca was given a small team and tasked with producing two editions a year. 'I had a designer on board, Jean Claude Vancell, and we worked together in a small cubby. That was the entire team,' explains Duca. 'Back then, researchers would write their own articles, I would edit, and Jean Claude



Wilfred Kenely
Photo by James Moffett

and I would take photos. A big worry was whether I would have enough articles to fill the magazine.'

To make the publication appealing, Duca drew on his own love of science and design magazines. 'When I was a Ph.D. student in Edinburgh, I'd been editing and laying them out. I really loved this journalistic approach to science. Having a critical lens, showing the problems it might face, where the money goes, that sort of thing. We decided on the name for the magazine over a few bottles of wine with Kenely and Albert Delia. The idea is to get people to **THINK** about stories, Malta, and what research can do for Malta,' he says.

Since then, that journalistic approach has remained one of **THINK**'s core values (as well as a love for wine).

Not everyone, however, was as enthusiastic as Duca. The Pro-Rector at the time and the Director of Communications both advised him to exercise caution, as such stylistic changes could have 'dangerous' consequences.

'Essentially, if the Rector did not like the new magazine, then I could be out of a job!' joked Duca. 'So, going into the meeting, I had this warning on my head. Juanito's first reaction was, "Brilliant! Now you're going to publish four editions a year, right?"'

For Camilleri, the bottom line was simple: 'It was written in a fresh, journalistic fashion. It was accessible, light reading that people beyond University could read without needing a Ph.D. to understand. That's what science engagement is about. What is the problem you are



Prof. Edward Duca
Photo by Kristov Scicluna



Prof. Juanito Camilleri

investigating, the approach of your solution, and the benefits? It was all done in a visually appealing way.'

That visual appeal has helped **THINK** to leave its mark.

INTERNATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

While **THINK** has evolved over the years, adapting its style and finding its own voice, its core philosophy has remained unchanged: showing the humanity behind the research.

Whether featuring maritime pollution, prosthetics, or plastic made from seaweed, **THINK** – and by extension the University – have gained fans from around the world.

'I remember I had shown one of the first editions of **THINK** to the Qatar Foundation. A few months later, they came up with their own **THINK** magazine, called **THINK**. ➔

Just because
we're small
doesn't mean we
can't aim big.



Always questioning, always reading. An attendee at **THINK** Soapbox pauses to enjoy an article in Issue 46.
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

with a full stop. Imitation is the best form of flattery,' Duca laughs.

While the research articles are the beating heart of the magazine, many readers also point out its vibrant designs and striking covers (kudos to our designers).

'We had done a feature about Saint Paul's Shipwreck back in Issue 11. The cover was designed in the style of the HOPE posters, but with the famous statue of Saint Paul in Valletta instead of Obama. Our cover was picked up by a PechaKucha in Valletta, an event for artists, so that was incredibly cool for me to see,' Duca adds.

Moving towards the digital frontier, **THINK** has also managed to make some waves. Issue 7 featured the Giordan Lighthouse in Gozo, which functions as a weather pollution monitoring station. Researchers had calculated the vast pollution emitted by large ships passing by Malta.

'Issuu, a digital publishing platform, picked up that edition and featured it on their homepage, where it received around a million views. I started to realise the potential impact we could have. Just because we're small doesn't mean we can't aim big,' Duca points out.

In 2021, **THINK** released an April Fools' online article titled 'New Research Proves the Earth is Flat' claiming that groundbreaking research had uncovered that the Earth was indeed flat. Owing to its provocative headline and circulation within flat-earth and scepticism-related online communities, the article blew up, with almost 33k views to date. We followed that up with another article offering practical advice on how to avoid misinformation, developed in collaboration with Crowdfight, an international organisation that connects researchers requiring specific expertise with researchers around the world.

THINKING AHEAD

In 2022, Duca stepped away from **THINK** as Editor-in-Chief, and Prof. Ing. Simon G. Fabri, Pro-Rector of Knowledge and Research Transfer, took over.

'**THINK** is a complex system. It is a network of readers, audiences, and writers. We wanted **THINK**'s style and objectives to remain consistent, to keep the momentum going. But we also wanted to increase take-up and distribution, not only locally, but also internationally,' Fabri says. ➔





Prof. Ing. Simon G. Fabri
Photo by James Moffett

Fabri believes that UM could do much more to promote its wide spectrum of exciting research projects and achievements, both internally and in the community outside campus. To that end, he launched the University of Malta Research Expo in 2023.

'We wanted to get all of the academics involved in research at UM to present a pitch of their work to the rest of the research community. The audience was relatively wide and included a range of academics, doctoral students, and RSOs. As a part of this, **THINK** issued an annual special edition linked to the Expo for external dissemination, and we've managed to do that every year since then,' Fabri adds.

THINK Editor Rebekah Zammit also coordinated UM's first (of many) attendance at the Malta Book Festival in 2024, helping the publication connect with thousands of people outside the usual sphere of **THINK** readers. Through this initiative, **THINK** brings together the Malta University Press and UM Library as co-hosts to spotlight the research activities and services provided at our alma mater.



The latest UMRE Special Edition

Beyond this, **THINK** hosts an informal gathering – **THINK** Soapbox – wherein researchers featured in the latest edition present their work. The event is open to the public, allowing the audience the unique opportunity to share ideas, ask questions, and network.

Beyond Malta's shores, the research magazine makes appearances at

SEA-EU initiatives and international conferences, frequently shared by UM academics and staff as a showcase of the University's research.

Fifty editions later, and here we are.

But, in 15 years, has **THINK** actually succeeded in its mission? Has it managed to put UM research on the map?

'We're breaking that mould of scepticism bit by bit. Captains of industry, leaders of civil society, as well as the political class are starting to understand that research conducted at our Alma Mater is leaving a crucial positive impact on our economy and society. This said, we continue working against the grain,' says Camilleri.

Duca shares this sentiment.

'My dream is for **THINK** to become more well-known. It still has this puzzle to crack. Research results are fantastic, but how did we get to these results? That's what makes research interesting. That shows the humanity behind research. After all, research is done by humans, and these humans are doing amazing things.' 



In the hands of young minds, **THINK is more than a magazine – it is a catalyst for the future.**
Photo by Kristov Scicluna