

Editorial:

The Advantages of Distance Learning

The University of Malta is not vast by international standards. It hardly compares with campuses which may have forty or fifty thousand students – not an unusual situation in many universities overseas. What is fairly unique about Malta University is the rapid increase in student numbers which has gone up from about one thousand only a generation ago to ten thousand students today.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the result has been little short of chaotic. There has not been adequate planning for this relatively massive intake. Nor has there been a sufficient budget set aside for what has to be described as one of the most significant investments in the future of the country. Moreover, a considerable moiety of what money was available was spent in a relatively unproductive way in providing student stipends. This has encouraged spending money on cars and electronic gadgets, but starved the university of funds for maintenance, management, books and other essentials. Lecturer posts have been left vacant, and those meriting promotion have been left lingering in their old posts with resulting deterioration of morale.

As a consequence, standards of teaching are bound to suffer. One cannot keep stretching resources forever. One solution to this problem is the provision of distance learning. There is no doubt that this method of reaching the student is cost-effective, and can replace most of the classical forms of teaching, particularly the lecture theatre, which in any case has been shown to be archaic and largely

dispensable. Distance learning makes the best use of lecturers and lecture facilities. It reduces the need for endless travel to the university campus. It might even obviate the need for every student to have his/her own car and consequent need for a stipend to support it!

In the case of Gozo this is particularly relevant. Attending a single lecture may mean day-long tiring journey, even when one ignores the vagaries of weather. Distance learning can overcome most of these problems, and reduce the needs to cross the Channel to a very minimum. It is therefore with satisfaction that one notes that the Gozo Centre has been at the forefront in the introduction of this mode of communication. We can only hope that it will succeed and its use will increase in the future.

This is not to say that distance learning can completely replace all other forms of communication. There will always be the need for keeping in touch personally with a tutor. Practical and clinical tuition requires the physical presence in a laboratory, class or hospital setting. It is also a fact that degrees obtained wholly through distance learning have somehow a reduced status in the eyes of many. However, any reduction in the required attendance on campus will definitely be a boom to student teaching in general and Gozitan students in particular.