

The University Gozo Centre Story - From Vision to Reality*

LINO BRIGUGLIO

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, in August 1992, Revd Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, then Rector of the University, asked me whether I was interested in coordinating university courses in Gozo.

I had the reputation of being a Gozo lover, and I think that was the reason why I was asked to undertake this task. Coordinating part-time courses is not an easy task in the best of circumstances – but the Gozo assignment was even more difficult, since it required finding Maltese lecturers to teach in Gozo. I presume that Revd Professor Peter Serracino Inglott (or Fr Peter, as he is more familiarly known) thought that the prospect of frequent visits to the Island, involved in this assignment, was enough of an attraction for me.

At first I was inclined to refuse the offer. I was sure that very few lecturers – if any – would want to offer their services in Gozo, given the time and discomfort involved in travelling to and from the Island. Relying on Gozitan lecturers was not an option, since there were very few of them and in any case, most of them worked in Malta. Finding a solution to this problem was a major challenge for me. After giving some more thought to the matter, I decided to accept the offer. Looking back, I am very glad I did so.

The Establishment of the Centre

I was of the opinion that the operation should be organised in the form of a University Institute, with a specific statute, and a Director appointed by Senate and Council. Rector agreed, and he asked me to draft the statute, which I did. The Centre started to operate in late summer 1992, although the statute was formally approved about six months after.

Fr Peter, who, as I learned later on, was being prodded by Mr Anton Tabone, then Minister for

* This is the text of a keynote speech delivered by Professor Briguglio at the inauguration of the Photo Exhibition marking the 15th Anniversary of the establishment of the University Gozo Centre.

Gozo, to open a University branch in Gozo, was himself very enthusiastic about the idea, and he asked me to start the operation by coordinating a BA course. Unfortunately, such enthusiasm was not shared by many members of the Faculty of Arts – they did not relish the prospect of commuting to Gozo after normal office hours. So it was obvious that some sort of incentive had to be devised to attract University lecturers to teach in Gozo.

The solution – like most good solutions – was a very simple one.

We decided to hold the lecture sessions on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. This arrangement worked, because it did not unduly disrupt the work schedules of the lecturers involved. Additionally, this permitted them to combine work with leisure. Crossing over to Gozo every weekend or every other weekend still involved discomfort for the lecturers, especially due to the fact that a two-hour lecture required about four hours travelling and, as often as not, a long wait at the Cirkewwa Quay on Friday afternoons. This, not to mention the frequent inclement weather during the winter months.

The response of the lecturers was however satisfactory, and the Gozo Centre took off, with the first BA course commencing in February 1993.



The Hon. Anton Tabone, inaugurating the first BA course in Gozo. His vision led to the setting up of the Centre and to the transformation of the former isolation hospital into a University premises.

The Protagonists of the Story

The Gozo Centre story would not even have been conceived had it not been for the initiative taken by the Hon. Anton Tabone and Revd Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, who shared a vision which they wanted to put into practice. Obviously, the Centre would not have been established without their seminal role and their encouragement during the initial years of the existence of the Centre. When Professor Roger Ellul Micallef became Rector, he continued to extend excellent support to the Gozo Centre.

The lecturers who accepted the Gozo assignment also played a major role in this regard. It goes without saying that without them, classes would not have been held, and the whole project would have floundered. It is not possible to name the lecturers who have given a contribution to the Centre one by one – because in the course of these fifteen years, the Centre utilised the services of more than 200 different lecturers. As stated, travelling to Gozo from Malta on a regular basis involves discomfort and requires dedication, and I take the opportunity to thank the lecturers concerned for their ongoing commitment.

The first administrator of the Centre, Mr George Aquilina, was my assistant on the ground during the initial years. I could only visit during the weekends, so the day-to-day administration was in his hands. The Centre owes a lot to George's dedication and enthusiasm. Before taking over the Gozo University Office, he was a guidance teacher and he used his skills to help students who followed courses at the Gozo Centre to adjust to the rigours of University courses. I must say I also made use of his guidance skills, especially when I needed to understand the Gozitan psychology. George was also an accomplished carpenter – his contribution to the Centre extended beyond office administration and guidance, and included free furniture repair and maintenance.

However, the star protagonists of the initial years of the Gozo Centre story were the students. The first students that were accepted to join the BA course had made it possible for the Centre to come to life. It is true that these students were the main beneficiaries of the service offered by the University, but it was

thanks to them that an idea was transformed into an institution.

I will accept the compliment that mine was an important role in the success of the Centre. I wanted the project to succeed and I really felt I had a mission to fulfil, namely that of promoting university education in Gozo. But the crucial driving force was that I loved (and of course still love) Gozo.



Revd Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, former University Rector, addressing guests during the inauguration of the Xewkija premises, May 1996.

The Xewkija Premises

As is well known, the Centre moved into its current Xewkija premises in 1996 – four years after it was established. Again the University Authorities and the Ministry for Gozo backed the move and provided the necessary support towards this end.

The Ministry for Gozo was particularly generous in this regard, and made available materials and labour, which, within a few months, led to the transformation of a dreary mental hospital into a beautiful cloister-like building, bright and airy and brimful with good feeling.

Prior to moving into the Xewkija premises, lectures used to be held at the Post-Secondary School at Victoria. We were offered different options as to which buildings to move in. One was a convent, partly inhabited by friars, which I considered to be unsuitable as University premises, for many reasons, not least among which was the incompatibility between short-skirted female students and the

inhabitants of the hallowed convent cells and corridors. I thought that a more mundane building would be more appropriate.

As soon as I saw the Xewkija building, I immediately felt that it was the right place. There were some who were not so keen about the idea of moving into a former mental hospital. The rooms seemed too narrow, the windows were barred with metal mesh for security reasons, the central courtyard was mostly used for dumping old mattresses and broken beds; the floors had an acrid smell. The place was obviously not very inviting. But I, together with other members of the Board of the Centre, saw the potential of the place. We were of course aware of the predictable joke that the place was going to change from one mental institution into another – but this was a very small price to pay for acquiring such a beautiful building. Admittedly, it requires ongoing maintenance, and the shapes of the rooms are not ideal, but we are very happy with this place and are very grateful to the Ministry for Gozo for making it available to the University.



Professor Joe Friggieri lecturing during the early years of the BA course offered in Gozo. Before moving to the Xewkija premises the Gozo Centre was housed at the Sir Michelangelo Refalo Post-secondary School, Victoria.

Life at the Centre

The University Gozo Centre is not an ordinary University Institute. We organise a variety of courses on different disciplines, prepare timetables, organise lecture rooms, approve payments of lecturers, act as the University Office when it comes to applications for admissions, organise logistical support for courses, including travel and accommodation arrangements for lecturers, keep records of students' progress, administer tests and

examinations, run the library and liaise with the Ministry for Gozo.

Over and above, we have to undertake the maintenance and upkeep of the building and of the grounds surrounding it. We also look after the welfare of the students and act as a guidance office. As if this were not enough, we also carry out research on Gozitan affairs, publish books on same, and cooperate with Gozitan organisations on matters of mutual interest. And, in addition to all this, we organise social activities, which I am glad to say, are considered as part of the cultural calendar of Gozo.

Of course, life at the Gozo Centre, of course, goes beyond lecturing, administration and maintenance. We have seen many things happening here. Students have got married during their studies, others have had babies (one student had two). Many found their partners in marriage at the Centre.

The Centre has experienced sad and joyous events, especially when students graduated. We have seen students on the verge of desperation on learning that they failed a study unit and others in a state of jubilation after getting an A, especially when they expected a lower grade.

I presume this is normal for an Institution of higher education – but in the case of Gozo, it became normal because somebody had a vision and found it possible to turn it into reality.

Expression of Gratitude

There are many people, apart from the ones I have already mentioned, who merit appreciation and gratitude for their contribution to the Centre.

The Centre finds excellent support from the University authorities, including the Rector, Professor Juanito Camilleri and the Registrar, Mr Anthony Gellel. We also receive assistance from various University personnel and I take this occasion to thank all those who service the Gozo Centre.

The current Minister for Gozo, Hon. Giovanna Debono, never fails to support the Gozo Centre whenever her assistance is needed. We are also serviced by the staff of the Gozo Ministry. I also



The Hon. Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi “virtually” talking to Professor Lino Briguglio during a video lecture session. Also present are the Hon. Giovanna Debono, Minister for Gozo, and Mr Joseph Calleja, administrator of the University Gozo Centre.

wish to thank all those who provide the services we require.

The Centre is being very efficiently run – and I often get the credit for this. In reality, the credit should mostly go to Mr Joseph Calleja and Mr Marvin Grech, who administer the place in a very professional manner. They are diligent and well-organised, and have made the success of the Centre their own success. They are very respected by the students, lecturers and the staff of the Centre. They know the meaning of flexibility – in terms of tasks and working hours. They have to work on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings and afternoons, and sometimes even on Sundays. I am very grateful to them for their contribution to the Centre.

The staff members of the Centre also include a cleaner, Antoinette Farrugia, and two handymen, Philip Zerafa and Paul Hili. They double (triple, quadruple) up as gardeners, janitors, coffee and sandwich makers, waiters, photocopier operators, errand boys, flag raisers, and drivers.

Thanks are also due to the persons who served on the Board of the Centre and to the secretary of the Board, Mrs Maryrose Vella.

Epilogue

The Gozo Centre is fifteen years old. It has helped hundreds of Gozitan students to graduate from a tertiary institution. The vision has turned to reality and we are now living this reality.

I feel confident that, for many years to come, the University Gozo Centre will continue to offer its much needed services for the promotion of higher education in Gozo.

Professor Briguglio is the director of the University Gozo Centre. He also directs the Islands and Small States Institute and heads the Economics Department of the University of Malta.