

A Multicultural Annual Conference in Gozo

NANCY MATHES

Introduction

For the last couple of years, the Malta University Gozo Campus has played host to an annual multidisciplinary conference staged by the American-based International Journal of Arts and Sciences (IJAS). The conference is held during Carnival week, allowing the delegates to relax in a jovial atmosphere at the end of each conference day.

Over one hundred delegates attend each time. Last February they hailed from over 25 countries ranging from Asia to the Middle East.

The next conference will be held from 6-10 March 2011. This will be one of several IJAS conferences that are offered annually in cities across Europe and North America. The series has three primary aims.

The first aim is to provide opportunities for academics from a range of disciplines and countries to share their research both through the conference podium and IJAS' double-blind refereed publications. All IJAS conferences are inter- and multi-disciplinary.

The second aim is to provide opportunities for academics to receive informal in-depth feedback through discussions and to enable them to establish contact with professionals in other countries and institutions. Complimentary bus tours running in parallel with the conference provide an informal setting for discussing different points of view. In an increasingly networked world of internet and satellite conferences, there is no substitute for personal interaction—what Edward R. Murrow calls “the last three feet of communication.” It is individuals, not data streams, who must ultimately build the connections that in turn create lasting international research partnerships.



The Gozo Campus courtyard unites all delegates between simultaneous conference sessions.



Professor Tracy Heavner (University of South Alabama) charms the 2009 Gozo delegates with his flute in the campus' courtyard.

The third aim of the series is to introduce academics to locations that are suitable for study abroad programs and which may meet their students' educational needs. IJAS draws its inspiration from the Fulbright Program, an integral part of the United States' foreign educational relations, where face-to-face exchanges have proven to be the single most effective means of engaging international publics while broadening dialogue between academics and institutions.

Origins

The IJAS concept originated a few years ago in the tiny town of Gottenheim, in Southwest Germany, that played host to American students who would visit each May as part of their study abroad programme in international marketing. Setting up base in Gottenheim, the students would set out on daily programmes to major international tourist attractions spanning from Basel to Heidelberg. And yet, each night, they would return to the comforts of the old tavern and guesthouses in Gottenheim.

Following a meeting between the town's mayor, Volker Kieber, and IJAS representatives, it was decided to use the town and its pristine

surroundings for an academic conference. This would promote Gottenheim's potential for course abroad programs among international faculty.

This was a win-win situation. IJAS and its international faculty would be welcomed in Gottenheim for their exchange of academic research while Gottenheim would get the opportunity to showcase its potential as a base for international universities who want a safe and lovely location for their traveling students. IJAS' professors would serve as ambassadors by first experiencing what this location could offer.

Eventually, this concept extended to other international locations including Gozo at the invitation of the University of Malta's Dr. Joseph Azzopardi who in return accepted IJAS' request that he coordinates the Gozo conference. He saw in it an opportunity to promote the University's good name and Gozo's potential as a conference destination. The Gozo campus Director, Professor Lino Briguglio, was extremely supportive while the campus representatives Administrative Officer Joseph Calleja and Executive Officer Marvin Grech left no stone unturned, portraying the campus as a hallmark of academic excellence and Gozitan hospitality.

Such team effort and organizational spirit leave a positive impression on the delegates as can be seen from their unequivocal comments about the Gozo experience.

Everything was well planned, the company was congenial, and last but not least the tours were very interesting. I enjoyed every single moment of it.

*Dr. L. Filiz Ozbas
Cyprus International University*

The Malta conference was lovely and I would especially like to note the outstanding contribution of Joe [Azzopardi] from the University of Malta for his patience and personal care taken with each participant.

*Dr. Marilyn Steinbach
Université de Sherbrooke, Canada*

[We] would like to thank you for the highly organised and very interesting conference in



It's all smiles at the best paper awards session.

Gozo. For us it was a wonderful experience and a good opportunity to meet with other colleagues in several academic fields. Thank you and we hope we will meet again.

*Dr. George Girlesteanu,
University of Craiova, Romania*

Gozo's people were very kind and friendly. I had very pleasant and peaceful time in Gozo, and hope to visit Gozo again with my family.

*Dr. Seong-Min Yoon
Pusan National University, S. Korea*

Congratulations on brilliant planning and organising. We had a great time.

*Ms. Etain Casey
London Metropolitan University, UK*

I would like to thank the Augustinian Convent [for letting] me stay in this wonderful place. The atmosphere was simple and sincere. I enjoyed it a lot.

*Dr. Siuhing Ling
HKCCCU Logos Academy, Hong Kong*

Everybody was so friendly and gave me a lot of academic advice, and the conference and its educational tours provided a pleasant experience for me. I would like to attend an IJAS conference again in the future.

*Dr. Yuko Kato
Jin-ai University, Japan*

It was a fantastic conference! Very well organised, supervised with dedication by Joseph [Azzopardi], interesting papers over a wide range of topics, friendly participants, and a gorgeous setting.

*Dr. Elizabeth Christopher
Macquarie University, Australia*

The conference includes a parallel cultural programme with free bus tours around Gozo and Malta during conference week. The conference starts with an informal group walk from Victoria to Xlendi Bay on a Sunday afternoon, following which the conference officially opens the following day with the research presentations. The Sunday walk breaks the ice and allows the delegates to get to know each other while surrounded by the lush valley that joins Gozo's centre to Xlendi. Once in Xlendi, the beer flows and trust takes over.

Organisational Philosophy

IJAS believes that it would defy logic to treat conference venues as isolated academic silos when they may also double up as potential venues for study abroad programmes. As a result, IJAS promotes each conference as inseparable from its geographical location, history and culture. The organisation strives to find sponsors in each conference's geographical area that offer generous hospitality and tourism packages in parallel with the conference. IJAS promotes its delegates' potential to the sponsors. Many graduate students

and professors who attend academic conferences have a lifelong career in academia in front of them. As a result, each delegate has the potential to multiply the number of future visitors to a conference's wider geographical area. "We have memories so that we might have roses in December," wrote Scottish novelist James Barrie.

In an era of globalisation and multicultural sensitivity, study abroad programmes are mushrooming all over the academic world. They would grow even further if academics had more time and resources to visit worldwide destinations to prepare future study abroad programmes for their students. Academic conferences offer the perfect opportunity to blend in presentations with organised visits to locations that would make excellent venues for study abroad programmes. Andy Warhol's traditional fifteen minutes of fame, on the podium, stretch into days of academic interaction and discovery.

Besides, it is unrealistic to expect most professors to congregate within the four walls of a conference hall for three or four consecutive days. This is why conferences in non-tourist venues draw very few academics. Academics want an excellent conference plus something more and non-tourist venues lack this "something more." IJAS provides the "something more" through sponsored bus tours which bring academics together as the motorcoaches expose them to the majestic scenery outside. Within the confined bus space the academics talk. They have to since they can't



The short Dwejra tour on a choppy sea was an exhilarating experience for most delegates.



Dr Joe Azzopardi, coordinator of the conference.

stare forever. They talk about their teaching, their research, and what concerns them in academia. These tours are more conducive to the sharing of professional research than the on-site conferences themselves. The more delegates get to know each other in the informal setting of the bus tours, the more they seek to listen to each other's thoughts and ideas on and off the conference premises. The more they realize they are birds of a feather, thanks to informal communication in relaxed settings, the more they flock together and share what binds them together, including their thirst for collaborative research. Social psychologists tell us that when strangers congregate they seek to talk about some common thread. The common thread at IJAS' conferences is academia.

Without the opportunity to interact and share one's research and ideas, what is the point of attending an academic conference? There is no shortage of academic papers on the internet and at the libraries within our universities. One doesn't need a conference to access academic research. Printed academic papers allow the reader to digest carefully instead of chasing a speaker racing against the clock.

At the same time, not every faculty member is interested in an educational tour and this is why IJAS offers its delegates a free choice about what to do, whether to stay on the conference premises or join a bus tour at some point. It even gives a choice to delegates to attend and register for one day only. Several University of Malta professors

cross over from the main campus to present their research in Xewkija each year and a number of them take advantage of the one-day registration. Academia consists of various segments. IJAS seeks to offer different packages for different segments.

For conference delegates, location matters. Nonetheless, there is no best location for a conference. Different academics prefer different geographical locations. Instead of pursuing economies of scale and hosting an annual mega-conference in a mega-city, IJAS hosts smaller conferences in different geographical locations. The academic from a small, sleepy town may yearn for a visit to 24-hour Las Vegas; the one from a landlocked state or country may aspire for coastal Gozo; and the one from a major city may wonder what life is like in a tiny German village. Life is a thousand journeys sustained by curiosity. As an educational institution that promotes study abroad programs, IJAS' global vision is not about reducing the world into one geographical location but about offering a richly arrayed menu of far-flung neighborhoods, cultures and customs to sophisticated academics.

Future

Following the outpouring appreciation by the delegates who attended the Gozo conference, IJAS asked Dr. Azzopardi whether the Gozo Campus could provide organizational support for other IJAS' conferences within the European Union. Seeking to replicate the islands' hospitality and identity for another conference elsewhere in Europe, Dr. Azzopardi recommended the Knights of Malta's facilities in Prague. Like Malta, Prague overflows with historical monuments and ancient buildings. And the Knights of Malta's imprint is indelible.

After an exchange of communications with Prague, and on-site visits, another "Malta" conference will be hosted in Prague from 21-24 June 2011. This refereed four-day conference will be staged inside a palace steeped in history, amidst the baroque architecture of the historical Mala Strana quarter, meters away from Charles Bridge. The conference will again seek to replicate the Gozo experience, bringing together international academics, including professors and graduate students, to present research in



The lecturing never stops. An Egyptian professor gets her point across during a group photo outside Calypso's cave.



Xwejni's hewn rocks got a winter chill during the afternoon tour.

their respective fields. It will also introduce them to the Czech Republic as an affordable and unique location for study abroad programmes. The official programme for the event states that "The International Journal of Arts & Sciences in collaboration with the University of Malta's Gozo Campus is hosting its first conference in Prague, at the joint premises of the Knights of Malta and the Anglo-American University."

The active participation of the Gozo Campus in IJAS' European operations has allowed IJAS to broaden its conference circuit. For the 2010/2011 academic year, IJAS' conferences will span from North America's Las Vegas, Orlando, Toronto and Harvard, to Europe's Freiburg, Rome, Provence and Bad Hofgastein. And Gozo and Prague.

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