

Two Former UGC Students obtain their Ph.D.

CAROLINE CAMILLERI ROLLS

Introduction

Since its inception, the University of Malta Gozo Centre has allowed around 400 people to graduate in various diplomas and degrees. The courses held are attended by mature students most of which are employed full time and many who are also supporting a family. During the almost twenty years since courses started to be held in Gozo, around 275 people have graduated with a diploma, including the Diploma in Commerce and the Diploma in Facilitating Inclusive Education; around 88 people are now in possession of a degree, including Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Commerce and about 44 people are holders of a masters degree including Master of Arts in Islands and Small States and Master of Arts in History.

However the Gozo Campus has not only been a place from where people can come to further their education without the constant travelling back and forth from the main University Campus in Malta, for some it has been the stepping stone to go even further and obtain a doctorate. Two such individuals are Dr Michael Refalo and Dr Gillian Martin. Their stories are as follows.

Dr Michael Refalo

Reading history has always been my pastime. However, pastimes and hobbies, of their very nature, are secondary things one does in life. When the Gozo Centre of the University of Malta advertised a B.A. Course on Gozo on a part-time basis, it seemed an ideal opportunity. Despite some initial reluctance, deep down I felt that this was a way out of a rut which my professional work had led me into; it had the potential of being a spark which would wake my mind from the mental lethargy induced by dealing with routine legal matters.

The five long years which it took to obtain the B.A., doing history and philosophy on alternate weekends, have been a fruitful experience. It was not only interest in the discipline studies; it was the company, it was the environment, it was the feeling that despite being on the threshold of middle age, it was still possible to feel mentally young and challenged.

Once the course came to an end, a void opened up. It became an urgent matter to find something which could replace the weekend meetings and lectures at the Centre. At the same time, however, it proved to be a fruitful and enriching experience, one which taught me that besides reading history as a pastime, and perceiving philosophy as useless, there was another reading. History and Philosophy became, for me, not only a passion but also goalposts which illuminate both the mental faculties as well as the practices of life. The natural consequence was to continue my studies.

On the strength of my previous law degree and the passion for history, and to pursue the study of the latter, I applied for, and was accepted, as part time M.Phil. student at the University of Malta. My main interest had always been matters connected with social history. And it was in that direction that my research went. After a year or two, under the tutorship of Dr. John Chircop, I was advised to narrow down my research. Writing on social classes in Malta during the 19th century, threatened to become a multi-volume affair rather than a thesis. Now, I had a specific subject to research, the commercial class, about whom there was substantial information. My application to upgrade the M.Phil. to Ph.D., supported of course by my tutor, was accepted. Although it took, in all, close on to 6 years to finish my thesis, and despite the problems one inevitably encounters, it was a very enjoyable experience. This culminated in my graduation in October 2009 with my thesis entitled 'The Maltese Commercial Class. Business, Family, Networks.'



Dr Michael Refalo at his graduation.

Dr Gillian Martin



My decision to apply for a BA course at the Gozo Centre was certainly not because I needed something to occupy my time; I was working fulltime in a primary school (PE teacher and administrator) and also had a part time sales job (Good Earth Sales Rep) besides helping out in our small family business.

My boys were 7 and 5 years old ...and I had no family at all on the island to help out. So, really I must have been quite mad to even consider it for a moment. The thing is that I had always had this romantic idea of going to university as a mature student. I had trained in London as a nurse in the 80's, specialising in Intensive Therapy Nursing, but had always thought that I would enjoy a more academic course if the occasion arose.

When the Gozo Centre advertised the BA course I knew that this was something I would love to do. I was (am) very fortunate to have a hugely supportive husband. There is absolutely no way I could have coped with the work without his help.

When I selected Philosophy and Sociology as my two study areas, I must admit that I knew very little about both subjects. It turned out to be a perfect choice for me. I found the broad variety of topics in both areas to be stimulating and challenging. I loved the lectures – meeting up with my fellow students every Friday evening and Saturday morning – focusing on taking notes during the lectures and chatting during breaks in the courtyard – it was like a break for me – for 4 hours I totally forgot about all the ‘real’ work waiting for me at home. (I was inscribed on the Dean’s List for excellence in HMC in 2002).

The five years chugged along, slowly at first, but the last year seemed too short. We had final synoptic exams – preparation for those were tough and the exams terrifying, but the results were good and I graduated in 2003 *summa cum laude*. I decided to take a year off after this – mainly to spend some more relaxed time with my husband and sons.

By this time, however, I was well and truly hooked. I knew that a Masters in sociology was my next step. After searching the net, I came across an MSc

in Sociology run jointly by the Victoria University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University and Salford University. It was a very varied and interesting taught masters course and the fact that it was an online course made it a perfect choice for me. In fact, there were big changes in the University set up while I was doing the course (Victoria Manchester merged with UMIST) and my MSc was awarded by the newly named University of Manchester. I graduated with Distinction in 2007. My dissertation was on the sociology of the body, “Dying to be seen? Power and body shape in late modern society”, supervised by Prof Nick Crossley.

Just as I was coming up to the end of my dissertation, the government announced the first set of MGSS scholarships for PhD students. I thought that this might be my chance to study full time, something that I had always wanted to do. I presented my research proposal focusing on childhood obesity in Malta and successfully competed for a grant which covered my university fees and included a modest stipend. (Unfortunately my dream of studying ‘full time’ never materialised; my part-time sales job remained an important life-line).

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to continue working with Prof Nick Crossley at the University of Manchester who was now head of Department there. I spent the following three and a half years travelling up to Manchester for short spells every four months or so for supervision meetings and to make the most of the excellent training in academic skills offered by the University.

My research was carried out in primary schools in Gozo between 2007- 2009. I defended my thesis “Childhood Obesity in Malta : a sociological perspective“, before Prof Gillian Bendelow (University of Sussex) and Dr Vanessa May (University of Manchester) in January 2011.

Since then I have been lecturing part time at the University of Malta and at the Gozo Campus (module in Sociology of Health and Illness). I have been appointed as a marker for Matsec examiner for sociology (intermediate) and am currently supervising an MA(sociology) student.

Caroline Camilleri Rolls possesses a Master of Arts Degree in Islands and Small States Studies and currently assists in the administration as Academic Coordinator at the University Gozo Campus.