

# **From Potential Graduates to Graduates with Potential: Dramatic Changes at the University of Malta and Reactions from Graduates and their Employers**

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Professional competence, integrity and leadership: these are the three key qualities expected from graduates in contemporary society, as identified by the Hon. Dr Edward Fenech Adami, Malta's Prime Minister, while addressing a seminar on Malta's Graduate Potential in April 2000. The onus for their inculcation falls heavily on the University

of Malta, still enjoying a practical monopoly on tertiary education in this country. The Education Act of 1988 which re-established the University of Malta heralded a qualitative and quantitative change in the local tertiary education institution. Nothing short of the dramatic has taken place since. The statistics speak for themselves:

**Table 1 - A Comparison of Student Numbers**

	October 1984	October 1994	February 2000
Faculty of Architecture	293 <sup>1</sup>	141	187
Faculty of Engineering		295	271
Faculty of Arts	-	872	704
Faculty of Dental Surgery	25	36	36
Faculty of Laws	94	305	634
Faculty of Medicine & Surgery	364	354	437
Faculty of Management Studies <sup>2</sup>	313	804	1474
Faculty of Education	290	982	1599
Faculty of Science	-	216	205
Faculty of Theology	-	203	184
Institutes/Centres <sup>3</sup>	-	862	1518
Other Courses <sup>4</sup>	300	345	73
Student Total:	1679	5415	7322 <sup>5</sup>
of which females:	43%	50%	53%

<sup>1</sup> This figure is for students within the Faculty of Engineering & Architecture, before it was split into two separate faculties.

<sup>2</sup> Later changed to Faculty of Economics, Management & Accountancy (FEMA).

<sup>3</sup> Excludes all courses run by Malta University Services Ltd., which are not geared towards the provision of diplomas or degrees.

<sup>4</sup> Includes Foundation Course in 1994 and Foundation Course for Foreign Students in 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Does not include Junior College students.

The University of Malta has indeed come of age. The Rector - the Chief Executive Officer - is in effect the mayor of a small community where almost 10,000 students - including some 500 foreigners from 78 different countries - follow a bewildering range of post-secondary and tertiary education programmes, delivered and supported by some 1,000 members of staff. Never throughout its long and chequered history - its foundations go back to 1592 - has the University of Malta exercised such an influence on the economic, social, political and cultural life of our young nation - even if this influence is measured exclusively by the high proportion of young people - almost 20% - who spend part of their lives on campus.

It is rare to come across one single institution with such an influence, and such a heavy responsibility. The expectations from various stakeholders as to the quality and direction of the output of this singular institution can only be captured in one word: immense.

### **University Initiatives**

It is within this context that the University of Malta has, over the last decade, been undertaking various initiatives in line with its key role as an internationally respected seat of scholarship and as the national intellectual powerhouse:

- Many new courses were introduced in existing Faculties, many of the latter undergoing their own version of restructuring. New diploma programmes have been introduced in management studies, commerce, adult education, adult training & development, political studies, public administration, library & information studies, educational

administration & management, social work, planning studies and school counselling. New degrees have been introduced in legal and humanistic studies, public health, business & computing, tourism, psychology, theology & human studies, commerce, youth & community studies. And postgraduate degrees and diplomas have also come on track, including the Magister Juris, the Masters in Business Administration, in Psychology, in Financial Services, in Theology & Human Studies, as well as Masters, M.Phil. and Ph.D. programmes in each of the ten faculties and in some of the institutes.

- New departments and areas of study have been set up in recognition of a specific realm of knowledge or research which was deemed deserving of institutional recognition. The Faculty of Engineering, traditionally organised in terms of Electrical and Mechanical Engineering, has now four other departments: Micro-Electronics, Communications & Computers, Metallurgy and Materials & Manufacturing. The Department of Computer Science & Artificial Intelligence as well as the Department of Information Systems are now operating under the aegis of the Faculty of Science. A Department of Marketing as well as a Social Work & Social Administration Unit have been set up within the Faculty of Economics, Management & Accountancy; while Youth Studies and Child Development programmes function within the Faculty of Education. Exciting new courses and research projects in the wings include avionics, naval architecture, coastal engineering, bio-technology, hydrology and alternative energy.



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- Various brand new, specialised centres and institutes have been set up. Most of these exist thanks to ongoing links with bodies and organisations outside the University, some of whom provide generous co-funding: a clear indication of an appreciated service from the wider community. The prototype institute has been the Workers' Participation Development Centre, set up in 1981. The Gozo Centre was set up in 1992, co-ordinating all University programmes running at the smaller sister island. Several other institutes operate since 1993, these being set up in the areas of: agriculture, forensic studies, masonry & construction, baroque studies, communications technology, European studies and public administration & management. The largest institute of all is the Institute of Health Care operating from its own separate campus located next to the country's main general hospital. The IHC alone had 770 students in February 2000. Interdisciplinary in orientation and more applied in their focus, institutes and centres are particularly, though not exclusively, geared towards the provision of diploma-level programmes - such as industrial relations, gender studies, occupational health & safety, desalination studies, environmental and agricultural sciences, information technology and probation studies. The IHC runs a panoply of programmes for would-be care professionals and technicians, including certificate to masters courses in such areas as: Health Service Management, Environmental Health, Nursing Studies, Physiotherapy, Radiography, Medical Laboratory Science, Communication Therapy, Midwifery, Occupational Therapy, Podology and Psychiatric Nursing.
  - Specific educational, training, consultancy and research provision exist with external clients, both local and international. The flagship here has probably been Malta University Services (MUS) Ltd., which has become the commercial arm of the University responsible for a large number of training and consultancy services. The Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, the International Ocean Institute and the International Maritime Law Institute are now firmly established at the Tal-Qroqq campus, drawing in a steady stream of foreign lecturers and students.

Under the aegis of the Foundation for International Studies, other institutes and programmes (such as those for Future Generations, Environmental Studies and Islands & Small States) involve themselves in education and research endeavours locally and internationally.

#### **Feedback from Graduates & Employers**

In all fairness, however, the effects of such and similar changes in the range and depth of tertiary education can be judged best by identifying and appraising the opinions and experiences of those beyond the University of Malta's gates. With some 2,000 graduates now being released annually, the graduate stock of the country has increased appreciably from the lean years of the past. A large stratum of graduate workers, many in responsible positions in industry, business, politics and administration, are now well placed to evaluate their University experience, the quality and content of their course programmes, the extent to which the University of Malta has, or has not, provided them with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed in their later, adult lives. Furthermore, the

employers of these graduates (some of whom may themselves be University of Malta graduates) are certain to have something to say as to whether their graduate subordinates make the grade and whether the tertiary education institution is delivering a good graduate product. To what extent, echoing the Prime Minister's words, are our graduates professionally competent, integral and capable of leadership? As redefined by University Rector, Professor Roger Ellul-Micallef: is the University of Malta translating its potential graduates into graduates with - and with the right - potential?

To answer these crucial questions, a series of graduate tracer studies has been undertaken in recent years. These are research initiatives which seek to locate yesterday's graduates in today's labour market and then to interview them and their employers as to their judgement of their University education, seasoned as it then becomes by experience and the privilege of hindsight.

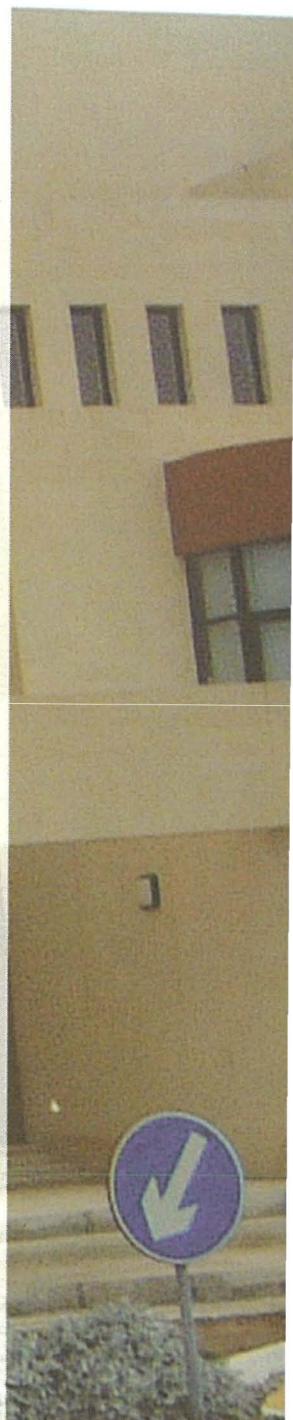
Graduates and their employers strongly agree that a University education fosters personal development, enhances flexibility, encourages independent thinking and facilitates problem ownership. The University has given its former students a broader, more rounded perspective to life; a deeper understanding of the world around them; stronger self-discipline; enhanced confidence and self-expression; an ability to adapt to different demands and situations; learning how to learn and think; providing a wide variety of skills - analytic, social, critical, organisational.

Fostering a 'self-learning' is also given a high priority. To the extent that one's

own independent work at University - including assignments, dissertations, research projects, seminar presentations, as well as participation in student organisations - are considered by the University graduates to have been the most formative and educational experiences while on campus. This confirms the value of 'learning by doing' and the need to invest more aggressively in such forms of pedagogy.

Graduates are also increasingly adopting a 'lifelong learning' disposition. A large majority of graduates are now undertaking further training after their graduation. Post-graduate education scores highly here, but short and specialised training courses are also popular. These orientations reflect a wise response to the increasing vagaries of the economy and the labour market: a generalist, flexible, undergraduate programme, followed by rigorous specialisation and technical mastery at a post-graduate level. It also underscores the University's vocation to become more attractive to mature students, adult men and women who return to their *Alma Mater* to re-tool, or refresh their knowledge and skills, ensuring their employability.

A review of the career pathing of most University graduates quickly reveals their often fast rise to managerial positions. Many graduates are venturing into managerial positions by default or by design in the course of their working lives, as well as in their other involvements in society and community affairs. No wonder that they affirm the need for a stronger emphasis on management-related, operational and interpersonal skills within tertiary education.





There is, nevertheless, a gender dimension to this observation. In spite of the increasing proportion of female graduates in recent years, many of these still complain of gender-based, subtle discrimination. Female graduates find it difficult to break through the 'glass ceiling' and as a result, their presence in positions of political, social or economic responsibility is undermined.

Graduates continue to enjoy overall net advantages in the local job market. In spite of increasing unemployment, graduates are more capable at seeking and clinching employment than non-graduates. Graduate unemployment has been non-existent and the very low numbers registered to date relate to frictional, rather than structural, unemployment. The main difficulty which is arising here is that graduates must be increasingly prepared to accept work which is not necessarily that for which they have been trained or groomed to expect. A related concern is the need to render graduates more disposed to consider self-employment as a viable option: so far, University of Malta graduates are less likely to create jobs for themselves than non-graduates.

Employers complain that graduates' expectations of conditions of work and career prospects are not always realistic. Quick returns on long years of educational investment may cultivate resentment and frustration, leading to reduced job satisfaction. On the other hand, graduates complain that they are undervalued by their employers, their creativity stunted rather than cultivated and their induction training conspicuous in its absence - as if they are meant to fit into the world of work like a 'plug and play' console. No doubt, the worlds of industry and higher education would do

well to build bridges to fathom the gulf which so far exists between them, giving rise to such and similarly debilitating misconceptions.

These observations are cast in a local setting where the demand for undergraduate, postgraduate and continuing education is increasing. The setting up of a new Vocational College and Malta's *rapprochement* with the European Union will also help to erode the monopoly position of the University of Malta and introduce an element of healthy competition in the sphere of tertiary education. All this will encourage measures for greater accountability and responsiveness to market needs amongst educational establishments. In this light, regular graduate tracer studies can be of great service in providing a tab on the critical opinions of University graduates.

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