

ADULT EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF R.U.M.

by E.L. ZAMMIT

UNIVERSITIES have become notorious in several countries for developing into specialized centres of learning which are unrelated to the most pressing needs of the societies which support them. It is perhaps ironic that contemporary affluent societies, characterized by so many luxuries which earlier societies could not afford, are reluctant to subsidize the existence of 'ivory towers'. Contemporary criticisms are aimed at the quality of much research carried out in universities in terms of its relevance to society. Universities are also criticized especially by radicals for failing to promote what they regard as 'necessary' changes in the social structure.¹ Instead, like many other traditional institutions, universities tend to reflect the existing power distribution of their society and to promote its continuity. As a result universities are said to be largely manned by elites – especially those constituting the traditional professions and the middle class 'intellectuals'.

Undoubtedly, the pressure being exercised on universities to adapt themselves to the demands of Governments and other 'stakeholders' reflects the newly emerging power centres within societies as well as changing values at large.² Universities lack the power and often the inclination to resist their new masters. They resemble the intellectuals and artists of the past who depended upon their patrons for their existence and who consequently were under their influence in their works of art.

As far as R.U.M. is concerned, much of the criticism levelled by Government is particularly directed at its social role. Because of the small scale of Malta's University, it cannot be expected to

¹Such criticisms are directed at universities as institutions. The parts played by certain university groups (e.g. students) and individuals in promoting radical social reforms are obvious.

²Universities – like organizations generally – may be conceived as coalitions of several 'stakeholders'. These include all those individuals and groups who depend on the organization for the attainment of their goals and on whom the organization depends for its survival. 'Stakeholders' make certain conditions for continuing their support.

undertake large scale research projects – especially in the sciences. Such projects would undoubtedly be far beyond its resources. Of course, this does not exclude research in certain limited, well defined areas. However, the bulk of R.U.M. activity is bound to remain in its teaching functions. To be fair, R.U.M. was never quite an 'ivory tower'. For example, its staff has been very active – perhaps too active – on an individual level in its professional activities outside the University. Teaching at the University has traditionally been conceived by many staff members as only a part-time activity – mainly for prestige and other peripheral benefits.³

Nonetheless the University was for many years monopolized by local intellectual elites. Even when, as a result of changes in the social structure it expanded and became available to the 'new' middle social strata, it continued to respond to traditional demands and aspirations. There was hardly any change in its value orientations. Its students were mainly attracted by the traditional image of the graduate status – accompanied by its economic and power privileges. Hence the disappointment when, due to various factors, many 'new' graduates remained unemployed. There is still a lamentable lack of appreciation of the special qualities which a graduate is supposed to have particularly among local businessmen and industrialists. They would rather rely on a combination of experience and common sense which have served them well enough in the past. And as every market researcher knows, it is difficult to sell to a businessman. This itself is another indication of the distance which separates university education and the problems of the 'real' world outside.

It was partly in response to such problems that the Dahrendorf Commission,⁴ recently appointed by the Government in order to examine the role of the University has strongly recommended that the University should participate 'more closely in the life of the

³Even today part-time employees on the teaching staff by far outnumber the full-time employees.

⁴The Royal University of Malta Commission (The XVth Report, Part II page 4). Prominent among the *Academic Reforms* necessary, the Commission recommends that the University should 'move into the social sciences'. And subsequently 'The enlargement of the present limited range of part-time and extra-mural studies is an essential condition for involving the University more closely in the life of the Community'. (d) '... In particular, industry, commerce and banking should be encouraged to contribute to courses in business management...' (e)

community.' It should make its educational facilities available to a wider cross section of the Maltese Society. This can be done through adult educational activities organized by the University itself and not simply through the initiative of its individual staff members.

On the part of the Maltese public there is an urgent need for adult educational programmes. There is also an encouraging awareness of this need. As the rate of social and technological change gathers momentum the adult generation increasingly finds itself at a loss in its ability to cope with these changes. Education offers them the means with which to re-equip themselves with the necessary intellectual apparatus. Adult education is made possible by shorter working hours and the higher standards of living generally.

In recent years, the Department of Economics – as well as other University departments – have conducted a number of open forums aimed at making the general public aware of the outcome of their socio-economic investigations on various contemporary issues. While attracting a sizeable audience, the result was often disappointing in that the response came mainly from the same persons or others drawn from the same social background. Typically, the workers shied away.

During the past academic year a new venture was started by the Economics Department. With the cooperation of the trade-unions and various employers a series of extension courses was inaugurated with the aim of providing adult education in the social sciences for special categories of people. One course was specifically planned for trade unionists, another for personnel managers and a third for supervisors.⁵ The programmes consisted of a number of sessions each devoted to the theoretical and practical aspects of issues relating to the work situation. Most sessions included lecturing and group periods. Instructors made it a point to encourage active participation by giving everyone the opportunity to voice his opinion on the topics under discussion. The series was concluded by a symposium on wage determination in Malta.

⁵ Professor E.C. Koziara, Associate Professor of Economics, Drexel University and Fulbright Lecturer in Economics, R.U.M. was mainly responsible for the coordination of these programmes. They were held with the full support of the Malta Employers' Association and the General Workers' Union. There were also participants from other Maltese trade unions. Each programme consisted of about ten sessions of four hours each.

The participants were also presented with certificates of attendance.

When these programmes were being planned it was assumed that the Maltese adults – like Maltese students – were inhibited from asking questions. Boissevain has suggested that this was due to certain traditional structural factors like the centralized colonial administration, the religious fear of doctrinal heresy, the Island's small scale and the language barrier in educational institutions.⁶ It can, however be argued that these constraints apply mainly to formal questioning. As every foreign teacher knows, Maltese students – like Maltese workers – often react to what their superior says indirectly, among themselves in the Maltese language, confident that he cannot understand them. This way the language barrier has been manipulated into a protective device from foreign, superior 'intrusions'. It is well-known how workers develop their own 'language', often through the use of special signs and gestures, as a defensive mechanism against their bosses. It was therefore anticipated that these obstacles would emerge during the educational programmes. The Maltese have become socialized into enduring endless sermons and speeches but not to participate calmly in an intellectual discussion. And it would be an oversimplification to claim that these elements were totally absent during these sessions. However, the fact that open discussion did emerge in the group sessions reflects the new atmosphere which is beginning to prevail everywhere in Malta. In the work place, the school, the Church, the family, the political party, the club and the town or village the old hierarchical structure is breaking down. There is at the grass roots a clear demand for autonomous expression and ultimately for participation in decisions. A new Malta is evidently in the making.

In a survey on workers' participation in Malta conducted during 1972,⁷ one of the results which emerged was that the Maltese workers overwhelmingly desire to participate at both the top and the shop floor levels. Such a tendency was clearly evident in the educational programmes held at R.U.M. recently. The experience

⁶ J. Boissevain: 'Why the Maltese ask so few questions?' *Ferment* (R.U.M. Jan. 1969).

⁷ G. Kester: *Workers' Participation in Malta – Issues and Opinions*. Department of Economics, R.U.M. and Institute of Social Studies, The Hague 1974.

of participation in one's own education was indeed one of the benefits which could be derived from them. In addition, the technical knowledge which they became acquainted with could serve them as the basis for further study and self-improvement. As Mr G. Agius, the General Secretary of the G.W.U., stated in the opening session, effective workers' participation in industry requires them to possess certain techniques as well as to broaden their horizons. Moreover, by raising their general educational levels, individual workers would secure for themselves better opportunities for upward mobility.

The educational process is ultimately one of communication of ideas and experience among a group of people. This process offers an ideal opportunity for progress towards social consensus about social goals and means among the participants. These held constant re-definition as a result of new ideas and experience. Unfortunately, as a result of over-population, economic scarcity, political impotence and other factors, the Maltese people have to suffer profound divisions and competitive elements in their social structure. The economic, political and social goals set out by successive Governments require a much greater level of national consensus for their realization than has been achieved so far. As a united people the Maltese need to strive towards common objectives through commonly accepted measures in the face of stiff competition from abroad. The educational process establishes communication channels through which acceptable solutions to common problems can be worked out in a tolerant, democratic atmosphere. Internal rivalries between classes, age groups and other social divisions can tear apart bigger and wealthier nations. The current popularity of adult education programmes in Malta and the enthusiasm manifested at the R.U.M. sessions indicates an intellectual vacuum exists which can be profitably exploited for our common well-being. There is a demand for knowledge among a cross section of the Maltese population – youths and adults.⁸ The University can serve as an ideal forum for all social categories where common solutions for common problems could be sought at

⁸ There are several voluntary organizations conducting adult education courses in Malta at present. Yet their facilities are very limited. Meanwhile, the Department of Education also offers instruction in specific subjects during its evening courses. Yet there are vital areas, particularly in the social studies at the higher levels which remain neglected.

the grass roots level. To this end the University can contribute through the services of its trained personnel and the use of its facilities.

On its own part the University can also reap many benefits from such an involvement in national issues. It acquires a new identity and a more direct sense of usefulness. For while it continues to provide society with its needs for professional manpower it extends its educational activities even further – to those who as adults, have already 'graduated'. In this way it is enabled to perform its traditional teaching and research roles from a new perspective. For there is no better laboratory for the testing of hypotheses and the development of adequate theory than the actual world itself. Teaching and learning has always been a two-way process.

It appears that the involvement of universities in adult education programmes is being recognized as one of their important roles in other countries as well. The role of universities in workers' education programmes was the subject of a symposium convened by the I.L.O. in Geneva in November 1973. A number of experts from universities, trade unions and related areas attended. Their recommendations have been endorsed by the I.L.O. Governing Body.

'The experts suggested that the I.L.O. should establish "a central clearing house of teaching materials used in union-University workers' education programmes, possibly on the model of the International Institute for Labour Studies or in association with it."⁹

Adaptation to changing situations is a guarantee of the survival of any organization. The new role which universities are adopting ensures that rather than isolated centres of conservatism they are becoming catalysts of democratic change in their social environment.

⁹ I.I.L.S. Bulletin (12) Page 78. The conclusions of this symposium have been published in a volume entitled: *The Role of Universities in Workers' Education* (I.L.O. Geneva 1974).