

ECONOMIC RELATIVITIES AND A UNIVERSITY IN MALTA

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THE rise of a new ethos of political self-reliance and the continuing quest among Maltese leaders and nationals to bring about a full measure of independence within the shortest period of time, has made it mandatory that the Maltese, despite the smallness of their size and the meagre resources available on the island, should establish institutions that could carry this national ethos through the wake of international bureaucracy and structures. Although Maltese culture is in many ways not atypical of its Mediterranean counterparts, Maltese life in general is significantly different from that of other, even larger, islands in the Mediterranean such as Cyprus, Crete or nearby Sicily. Malta is not only an island; it is a nation, and, despite its smallness and a long history of colonization, it has finally come to be accepted as such. As a result, some structural features of the Maltese community, though they could easily be considered a luxury by superficial observers of the local scene, play an essential role in Malta's existence. As such, Malta has to be served by a national airline, it sustains fully fledged banking and financial institutions, it maintains a quite intricate network of foreign representations and diplomatic corps, it issues its own currency, and, not least from the cultural point of view, it nurtures an indigenous language.

For Malta, the existence of a University, is an equally essential requisite for the maintenance of an indigenous cultural and political identity. Historically, the local University, which developed from a theological college established by the Church for the training of academically qualified clergymen, served as an agency for the consolidation of the at times spurious demands for a measure of self-reliance through the provision of trained leadership. Its courses made it possible for the locals to by-pass the restrictions of power and wealth that characterised their successive rulers, and through the traditional professions especially, to act as a career-route for capable Maltese to attain a standing that enabled

¹I.L. Evans, *Report on Higher Education in Malta* (Malta, Govt. Printing Press, 1946), par. 17.

them to deal with their colonizers from a non-inferior position.

The viability of a University within such a limited context was frequently and forcefully discussed during the University's history and its rapporteurs repeatedly recognized the limitations imposed on the University by its limited size, and also by the scale of the community which it served. In 1947, for example, Ivor L. Evans, heavily criticized the 'very meagre financial provision made to an institution which is undertaking instruction in six faculties',¹ and said that provision for the University should be expanded and that it should be

something more than a training ground for the chosen professionally-minded few: its ultimate raison d'être is the enlightenment of the many ...²

Similarly in 1957, the Commissioners affirmed the need that a place like Malta should have a university of its own:

That Malta has some need of the service of a University is certain. Like every other community, it must have competently staffed professions: and professional education is part of the function of a University ...³

They subsequently rejected idea that such a demand could best be met by the use of the services of a foreign University. The Dahrendorf Commission assumed that Malta needs a University of its own, and its report discussed primarily the role of the University in Maltese society.⁴

Like most of the other structures necessary for the maintenance of a nation-state, the University has always been a liability, and a non-revenue earner for the Maltese community. From its earliest origins financial independence was excluded: on January 25, 1576 the first set of benefices were set aside for the provision of theological training;⁵ on November 12, 1592 the foundation deed for a proper College of Theology made further provisions for financial endowments;⁶ on May 29, 1773 Grand Master Pinto realised that the moneys accruing from the Jesuit properties (30416 scudi, 10

²*Ibid.*, par. 45.

³H. Heatherington et al., *The Royal University of Malta – Report of the Commission* (Malta, Dep. of Infor., 1957), par. 1.

⁴R. Dahrendorf et al., *Proposals with Legislative Implications: The XV Report – Part I* (cyclostyled, 1973), par. 5-7.

⁵See V. Borg, *The Seminary of Malta and the ecclesiastical Benefices of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 1965), pp. 2-4.

⁶Royal Malta Library, *Università* (Notabile), Vol. XV, ff. 267r-269v., and A.P. Vella, *The University of Malta* (Malta, 1969), p. 9, footnote 1.

tari and 15 grani), though considerable by contemporary standards, were not enough to bear the cost of educational provision at the tertiary level, and made arrangements for that money to be further increased by any financial deficiencies to be supplied from the *Venerabile Tesoro* out of the rent of the warehouses which he had built at the Marina, which left a net capital of 19,000 scudi.⁷

With the enactment of the Royal University of Malta Ordinance (No. XXXII) in 1947, the burden of financial provision was passed directly to Government, thus 'freeing' the University from the burden of itself administering its endowments.⁸ Table I gives an indication of the extent of the finances provided by the Government to the University over the past twenty-five years.

Table 1

YEAR	NO. OF STUDENTS	GOVT. PROVIDED FINANCES £	TOTAL EXPENDITURE £	COST PER STUDENT £	V.I.*
1952	311	25,000	39,106	125.74,2	25.9
1955	339	29,900	42,944	126.67,8	23.7
1958	208	74,450	67,509	324.56,3	57.4
1960	234	86,000	106,224	453.94,8	69.7
1963	433	112,000	141,473	326.72,7	50.2
1965	574	167,000	203,414	354.38,0	50.5
1968	989	384,000	383,275	387.53,7	50.9
1970	1,103	608,218	632,458	573.39,6	65.6
1973	831	628,600	647,900	779.66,3	74.3
1976	904	806,391	831,379	919.66,7	52.7

*V.I. = λ/σ where λ = the relative figure in column five, *mean cost per student*, irrespective of faculty, and σ = the mean (X) of the weekly wage range payable to skilled labourers in Government employment. V.I. standardizes the figures in column five by relating them to a basic wage trend.

The figures in Table 1 indicate that the *relative* cost per student for the community has gone up considerably, although this might not be true of every *type* of student pursuing University training. Table 2 gives details of cost (in absolute figures) per

⁷ Archives of the Order of St. John 575, ff. 550r-550v.

See also Appendix 'F' in A.P. Vella, *The University of Malta* (Malta 1969), pp. 127-148 where details of the Jesuit possessions are given.

⁸ Better known as *The Royal University of Malta (Constitution) Ordinance 1947*.

student during the academic years 1952-53 and 1976-77 in the various Faculties. It can be noticed from the figures that the real cost (expressed in terms of V.I.) for Theology, Laws, Engineering & Architecture has *gone down* considerably. The real cost per student in other faculties has doubled (except Dentistry), but some courses cost much more than others (in 1976-77 a course in Science, e.g., costs more than eight times more than a course in Laws).

Table 2

NUMBER OF STUDENTS BY FACULTY AND COST PER STUDENT
1952-53, 1976-77*

FACULTY	1952-53			1976-77		
	NO. OF STUDENTS	COST PER STUDENT	V.I.	NO. OF STUDENTS	COST PER STUDENT	V.I.
		£			£	
Theology	19	88	18.1	77	252.18,1	14.5
Laws	16	144	29.7	146	108.01,4	6.2
Medicine & Surgery	40	87	17.9	214	578.52,3	33.2
Engineering & Architecture	19	73	15.1	111	120.27,0	6.9
Dental Surgery	5	118	24.3	11	1295.81,8	74.3
Arts	77	25	5.2	602	180.66,8	10.4
Science	145	13	29.9	97	905.25,8	51.8

*Costs given cover only expenses for teaching. If the costs for maintaining the library, University premises, student facilities, miscellaneous expenditure and the general administration of the University, were to be averaged, an additional £82 and £382 per student have to be added for 1952-53 and 1976-77 respectively. It can be very easily established that *de facto* such costs are not equally shared by all the faculties.

The foregoing data clearly indicates that the University would be betraying itself if it were to consider itself immune from the pressures and the problems of the society that nurtures it. As one of the essential structures maintaining the indigeneous culture of a developing nation-state, a University in Malta has, on the one hand, to be a clear response to the dire needs for highly qualified skills needed by the professions and the semi-professions, and, on the other hand, it should itself be pointing the way for the eventual

development of the nation in its economic, social and political sphere. This dual role is in fact the only basis for any successful University in Malta.

In practice, this dual role, to be played in a situation of continuing flux, is bound to offer a number of intricate problems to any organisation, the more so to a University where traditionally the power bases take so long to shift. But the most difficult aspects of such a fusion is the fact that it has to be based on a system of detailed planning. Planning as such bases itself on specific knowledge of problems, on the clear delineation of objectives, goals and targets, and on the adoption of one (or a mixture) of the various planning techniques so that known problems could be solved; and the objectives, goals and targets could be achieved. Planning therefore is based on the rationalistic ethic *par excellence*, and is best suited to an organisation that allows itself to be tailored to meet the needs of a particular situation such that the ends, the resources, and the means could be co-ordinated. Clearly, the University, considered primarily as an institution concerned with the transmission of knowledge and skills with very little dependency on a programmed technology that would allow the application of time-and-motion studies, cannot be fully planned. Both the people 'managing' the University and its 'products' (the teaching staff and its graduates, that is) cannot be processed like materials, nor can their activity be stimulated by incentive schemes and productivity bonuses. Nor is there a clearly measurable 'output' to be controlled. All that can be relied upon is the effectiveness of 'national socialisation' of the teaching staff, a state of mind that should be assessed on the selection of candidates, and a process that should result in an urge to produce the best graduates in the shortest possible period of time, and in accordance with present needs and estimated future demands. If, on the other hand, the activity of academics is too closely scrutinized, and much time and manpower is wasted in attempts to wade through unnecessary administrative and bureaucratic labyrinth, in a University, especially one operating on a scale as small as any University in Malta will ever have to, neither the product nor the approach could ever be satisfactory. For University life, in contrast to that in polytechnics and trade schools, where standard skills can be produced on a large scale to the tune of a set of consumers, necessarily has to be allowed at least the possibility for discovery and progress. In other Universities, even doctoral students are expected, through their work, to make 'a substantial contribution to knowledge' in their particular field. If this is not allowed to, and indeed expect-

ted of, the teachers in our University, clearly no University in Malta could keep claiming for itself the right to citizenship in the international community. It is only on the basis of a clear appreciation of these facts that an understanding of 'academic freedom' on the one hand, and on the other, the development of 'a University of the community' offering 'functional degrees', can best be reached.

What, in conclusion, are the essential features that should characterise a University in Malta? Basically, I should like to name four characteristics that clearly have to be interwoven with the specificity of each discipline, programme or degree structure:

(a) *a University in Malta must be a 'political' University*: as one of the institutions catering for change in a small society, the University must have a significant personality of its own. Academics and bureaucrats should constantly seek to engage in dialogue for the interest of the community they both serve. This dialogue should not be a conflict-prone dialogue, but one that clearly transcends the interests of partisan politics, and one that is based on a minute dissection of concrete data and not on mere impressionism. Conformity for fear of possible reprisals should be anathema at any University. As the Heatherington Commission put in 1957 when it reported on the University of Malta, the University's objective should be the pursuance of

fundamental knowledge and fundamental criticism in a fashion which sets it somehow apart from and may even at times set it, or some of its members, in opposition to the prevailing disposition of the community to which it belongs.⁹

(b) *University structure should be fully participative*: power bases are an anachronism in a change-procuring institution such as the University should be. The flexibility and efficiency of the decision-making and decision-taking process should be the hallmark of University life; everybody should be given an equal chance of expressing his opinion; the University should offer the widest fora for discussion and debate. Under no circumstances should decisions affecting one's life or work be taken on unclear data, and behind one's back. The University should set the pace for the proper exercise of full democracy on the island.

(c) *The University must seek to be asset earning itself* through the publication of journals and books of an outstanding calibre,

⁹H. Heatherington et al., *The Royal University of Malta - Report of the Commission* (Malta, Dep. of Infor., 1957), par. 6c.

and especially through the holding of conferences and courses in its various, clearly defined, areas of excellence, the University could with relative ease transform itself into a revenue earner. With the increased demand for extension courses, the University's precincts have been opened to more members of the wider community, and the University has slowly and painfully started to attract money from Industry (through Management Development Seminars, for example). The gradual transformation of the University into 'an important intellectual centre of the Southern Mediterranean' as had been suggested by the Heatherington Commission itself,¹⁰ has already started, but it could easily be expanded with a relatively little increase in the present teaching burden.

(d) *A University in Malta must be a typically Maltese University*, not only as a result of its sincere search for qualified Maltese staff in preference for foreign, possibly less qualified, staff. Its whole structure has to be organised around the needs of the local community, and it has to produce men capable to transform national dreams into concrete realities. Most important of all, through clearly delineated areas of excellence a University in Malta should lead and not simply be led.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, par. 6b.