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THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

THE University of Malta, with about 23 years' tradition as an academically autonomous institution (financially it is entirely dependent on Government funds), and after more than 200 years' tradition as a State University, is still trying to establish itself as a social force in independent Malta.

After Britain's decision to hand over the patrolling of the Mediterranean to another Nation, the inevitable run-down of the Services at first created such an alarming social problem, the distress of unemployment, that the Maltese Government had no choice but to concentrate its efforts on the exploitation of alternative economic resources. It was inevitable that the almost nervous obsession with economic survival would overshadow the importance of those national and cultural values which are pondered upon and attended to when the government and society are free from the worries of a still unplanned and uncertain future. Malta was never independent before. Since independence the country has not lacked economic prosperity and we are all much better off than we were under the colonial regime, which for 150 years stamped the country with a characteristically barracks mentality (Colonel Blimps and swashbucklers' mentality, Governors' last restful lap before retirement) which kept us apart while we were living together. Indeed, the Maltese and the English have come closer since Independence Day than they were ever before, thanks largely to the influence of civilian residents and the good work of the British Council.

The new University of Malta stands on top of a hill from where one can see the Grand Harbour and enjoy the panoramic view of the surrounding landscape. The site is symbolic. It induces us to cry *Sursum Corda!*

The time has come for the Government to take a more intelligent interest in our University. The Government can be both efficient and intelligent. Just voting the upkeep funds every three years on the recommendation of the R.U.M. Commission is not enough (the triennial vote is about £2,000,000, not a negligible sum for Malta). We expect the local press and the rep-

representatives of the people (our Parliament) to be better informed about what is being done at *Tal-Qroqq* for Maltese society by our University.

What indeed is the distinctive role of our University in the structure of Maltese higher education? This is still a question without an answer in Malta not because there is no such answer, but because, unfortunately, nobody has bothered to think about it. Occasionally, one reads very vague criticism of the institution in the local press, but one can only be grateful to those who have constructive advice to offer to our University to enable it to play a more significantly distinctive role in our Society.

Lord Annan, the Provost of University College, London, at the 21st session of the Standing Conference of Rectors and Vice-Chancellors of European Universities held in Baden-bei-Wien, indicated a few distinctive roles some of which one could describe as traditional and others as updated re-orientations within the context of a dynamic changing society. He said amongst other things: 'The prime duty of the University is to teach how to discuss problems so that students can distinguish between on the one hand charlatans and crooks and on the other serious and often difficult minds whose views, whether or not we agree with them we must respect.'

At a meeting of the House of Representatives held on January 13, during a debate on the R.U.M. Commission which advises the government on the general needs of the University, one of the members insisted on better relations between the University and the Polytechnic. The following concluding paragraph from Lord Annan's paper can help to throw light on our local problem of adjustment, and provide at least part of an answer to a complex situation, saving and preserving those standards which give a respectable status to a name. He said: 'If their distinctive role is the fact that their dons both teach and research, how does a university differ from a polytechnic which also does both? I have given two answers. The teaching and the research at a university should cost more because it is more complicated. Their teaching and research should be different from those of other institutions - I do not say better - because both should be inspired by a commitment to the life of the mind, to the intellect, to follow the argument wherever it leads, even if it leads into the realms of abstraction which can barely be related to the world of events and decisions, or into a conflict with those notions held by the State or the *bien-pensants* both inside as well as outside the university, or with the fashionable modes of protest and dissent which can be as deadening to the life of the mind as slavish conformity to received ideas.'