

7 2020 Vision or Optical Illusion?

Juanito Camilleri

Rector, University of Malta

*To Prof. David J. Attard: a son of light, a scholar, a gentleman, a mentor,
my good friend.*

Malta's geographic location at the centre of the Mediterranean has conditioned our past and if we are smart, it should remain axiomatic to our future.

Our country has seen its destiny unfold principally through foreign eyes, which throughout the ages, have projected their values and cultures on us, some leaving a hallmark on our identity, language, and personality.

Ironically, it is precisely this exquisite blend of cultural legacy spruced with the blessing of St. Paul which makes us a unique embodiment of central Mediterranean past. Today, having established our identity as an island nation, Malta has understood that it can proactively influence the Mediterranean's future, but this time, by projecting back our values, hospitality, expertise, and spirit of enterprise.

As a Member State at the Southern frontier of the EU, Malta can continue to play a significant role as a cross-road between the EU on the one hand, and North Africa on the other. This said, as we have the hallmarks and the economic infrastructure of a strategic location for interregional and intercultural trade in a global economy, our role in the Mediterranean invites us also to look beyond: to North America, the Middle East, and the Far East.

Malta is undergoing rapid and radical socio-economic change, catalyzed, and at the same time cushioned, by EU membership. The EU, and indeed the adoption of the Euro, not only expose us and provide us with access to a seamless European market-space, they are the backbone of the operational and reference framework that will condition, and to a large extent enhance, Malta's socio-economic development going forward.

This said, having established its credentials as a mainstream European State, it is now crucial, perhaps more so than ever, that we project a clear medium-term vision for the country, as it is precisely this vision that should brand Malta:

first and foremost, in the eyes of the Maltese people: it is crucial that our citizens derive their identity from our country's aspirations for the future, as well as from the legacy of the past;

second, in the eyes of our European partners: it is crucial that Malta projects its

aspirations clearly in the evolving European debate, thus establishing its identity and influence on European policy formulation whilst safeguarding national interest; and

third, in the eyes of the world at large: as mentioned earlier, our vantage at the southern-most flank of the EU, and our uniquely blended Mediterranean identity, provide us with the opportunity to project our island-State as an 'intelligent' interregional as well as intraregional broker.

Projecting a vision is not projecting a dream. One must set some broad goals and targets but one must also project them at the right time and from a solid and convincing vantage, with clearly charted 'next steps'. Failure to do so transforms vision and aspiration into illusion and frustration.

By way of example, recall that in 1992, the Government of the time commissioned the Malta Council for Science and Technology to compile its first national vision document entitled *Vision 2000*.¹ This projected Malta as a regional hub and identified Information Technology as a key economic driver; as a revenue-generating sector in its own right, but more important, as an indispensable revenue-support sector enhancing all other sectors of the economy.

Having already started the process of civil-service reform based on the introduction of Information Technology and modern-day Management Systems,² in 1993 the Government commissioned a broader study to formulate a National Strategy for Information Technology. This was published in 1994:³ it laid the foundation for subsequent periodic strategies to the present day.

This said, although much groundwork was done on certain aspects in the interim period, it was the establishment in the late nineties of a Ministry dedicated to the formulation and implementation of the evolving national ICT strategy⁴ that cut through the rhetoric, placed Malta on the international ICT map, and concretely attracted significant foreign direct investment into the country.

Today, some ten years later, we witness vision unfolding into reality in this regard; ICT manifest in Smart City⁵ has become an inextricable part of brand Malta. The construction of Smart City is underway, but, to date, information about which companies have committed to build or transfer their operations to this modern-day township is not publically available. Malta has a unique opportunity in hand, but, in the wake of the devastating economic recession that is setting in across the globe, it is important that we tackle the challenges ahead holistically and work together to mitigate any threats that may be looming.

Malta's sound track record of achievement must not be derailed: the attraction of significant foreign direct investment; the opening of the new hospital *Mater Dei*; the construction of an extensive road network; the opening of the cruise-liner terminal; the refurbishment and construction of new schools; the range of conservation projects; the significant prettification of the urban and rural environment; are amongst the achievements that are noteworthy.

This said, it is crucial that the momentum of past success stories is not lost, and that Malta projects a credible vision for the country for the next decade and beyond.

Vision 2015

The following vision statement made by Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi⁶ in 2007 is timeless and can apply to Malta now as well as for many decades to come. Given that few would fault its ideals let's coin it Malta's 2020 Vision; Malta's perfect vision.

Our vision is of an of an intelligent European, Mediterranean island nation, promoting peace, security, justice and well-being, a smart hub generating wealth and prosperity and an incubator fostering expertise, innovation and entrepreneurship.

No doubt, this statement inspired the formulation of Vision 2015. More concretely, Vision 2015 invites us to aspire to attain excellence in the following revenue-generating services sectors of the economy:

Hospitality Services: destination, cultural, thematic, transit, conference tourism;

Health and Care Services: foreign patient care, retirement destination;

Maritime Services: flag; transshipment; port; ship/boat/rigs; leisure, security;

Business and Financial Services: back-office; legal; banking and insurance; transaction processing, data warehousing, call-centres; and

Educational Services: language schools; executive training; postgraduate schools; educational tourism.

Moreover it is reasonable to envisage that Malta's manufacturing and software development base will depend more and more on our being able to move up the value-chain in specific niches, which in turn, will require such industries to be backed by cost-efficiency, creative product development, and readily available expertise.

In short, our future depends on the quality of our human capital; it depends on our aptitude, but, perhaps more so, on our attitude. The strategic thrusts set in Vision 2015 are no less than the initial steps in a quest to transform Malta into a knowledge and creative economy and society on a sector-by-sector basis. We must also be realistic and realize that not all of the sectors mentioned are at the same stages of evolution and that some will require more work and sustained investment than others for excellence to be attained. Moreover, in line with the original Vision 2000, and in the light of modern-day information and communication technologies, realistically excellence in the sectors identified can only be achieved through a harmonious interplay between technology and human capital.

The University of Malta

The University of Malta must take its rightful place as an integral part of brand Malta. With a legacy of over 400 years, it is inextricably part of Malta's past, and with the right strategy going forward, it can become a pillar of Malta's future.

In the past two decades, we have seen the University:

- expand its capacity to cater for circa 10,000 students of which 8 per cent are foreign;
- evolve from a undergraduate training school for the classical professions

dedicated exclusively to teaching, to one which is steadily stepping up its research focus;

- extend its undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes to a broad range of disciplines;
- encompass a wide range of ancillary activities including MATSEC, the Junior College and several commercial companies; and
- engage in a wide variety of EU and international research and teaching programmes.

More recently, the University has embarked on a number of projects to enhance its administrative systems which are in dire need to be streamlined and automated. The introduction of an integrated ICT system for student, alumni, human resources, financial, project, and facilities management is now underway.

The Faculties, Institutes and Centres of the University are being realigned and their functions rationalized: some new departments and faculties are being set up. New facilities are being built and equipped, thanks to European Regional funds, to house amongst others the new Faculty of Information and Communication Technology, a state-of-the-art Computer Services Centre which will also host servers for Distance Learning, as well as a number of laboratories in various areas of Science and Engineering. Other facilities need to be built to host the expansion of the Faculty of Education; the transformation of the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering into the Faculty of the Built Environment; as well as to cater for the growth in the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accounts. It is also envisaged that the Institute of Healthcare will be transformed into a Faculty to cover the various disciplines comprising modern-day healthcare. This new Faculty as well the Medical School are now hosted at the Mater Dei Hospital.

The University is also building strategic alliances with leading international counterparts in a bid to create a portfolio of International Masters Programmes. It is envisaged that the Old University Building in Valletta will be gradually transformed into an International Graduate School. The first programmes will be launched in September 2009.

The recent revision of the conditions of work for academic staff has marked a major milestone that will allow the University to enhance the quality of its teaching and research portfolio and will facilitate collaboration with industry.

In a bid to augment the number of students it caters for and the range of degree programmes on offer, during the past 15 years the University of Malta has invested in a significant cohort of academics who have pursued their doctoral research in some of the most prestigious Universities in the world. Recently, the Government of Malta has launched a Scholarship Scheme aimed at promoting emerging local talent further, by providing funding for young researchers to undertake postgraduate training in Malta or overseas.

Hitherto, many of the doctoral students who went abroad to pursue their studies have returned to a teaching post at the University of Malta. This said, a significant number, particularly those reading doctorates in fields of engineering, science and

technology, have not returned to Malta simply because, to date, the country has failed to create a milieu that is conducive to research, technological development, and innovation (RTDI). As the University is still building its teaching portfolio and capacity, most of those who return to the University of Malta on completion of their doctoral research, have to immediately immerse in a grueling teaching load which affectively stunts the growth of their research potential just as they are starting to become international currency.

The bottom line: the University of Malta lacks the crucial stratum of Post-doctoral Research Fellows and this is the principal reason why it has failed, to date, to project a significant and coordinated institutional RTDI portfolio. This is also one of the main reasons why Malta continues to lag behind vis-à-vis the Lisbon benchmarks with respect to RTDI.

Now that the collective agreement for academic staff provides the right enabling framework, the University of Malta needs Government's support to establish a Post-doctorate Research Fellowship Scheme which will support young outstanding researchers to dedicate their full-time effort in research initiatives that are essential to the socioeconomic development of the islands. Amongst the targeted areas of priority there should be those identified in the National Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation 2007-2010,⁷ namely: ICT, Health-Biotech, Environment and Energy Resources, and Value-added Manufacturing and Services.

Policy and Identity Understanding and projecting the Maltese identity and refining the system of public and social policy formulation in Malta: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ as an island and small State; ▪ vis-à-vis Europe and the Mediterranean region; and ▪ vis-à-vis Global Gouvernance. 		
Technologies and Systems to enhance the quality of Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hospitality Services ▪ Health Services ▪ Financial Services ▪ Transportation Services ▪ Educational Services ▪ Comm. Services 	Technologies and Systems to enhance High Value Manufacturing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Food ▪ Precision Engineering ▪ Software Development; ▪ Pharmaceuticals ▪ Cosmetics 	Technologies and Systems to enhance Sustainable Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Water ▪ Alternative Energy ▪ Waste Management ▪ Coastal Management ▪ Marine ▪ Agriculture
Fundamental Science and Technology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Digital Technology and Media ▪ Biotechnology and Pharmacology ▪ Earth / Environmental Sciences 	Design and Aesthetics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Artistic and Content Design ▪ Architectural / Engineering Design ▪ Product Design 	

Figure 1: *An Institutional Research Framework for the University of Malta*

Figure 1, illustrates an Institutional Research Framework that the University of Malta can adopt as a reference framework to prioritize its medium to long-term research projects. This Framework identifies six overarching themes under which specific projects or research clusters can be developed in response to identified national socio-economic needs or opportunities, namely:

- Policy formulation with an eye to the development of the Maltese Identity;
- Technologies and Systems to enhance the quality of Services;
- Technologies and Systems to enhance High Value Manufacturing;
- Technologies and Systems to enhance Sustainable Development;
- Fundamental Science and Technology in relevant niche areas; and
- Design and Aesthetics.

This said, unless it finds a way of sustaining a significant number of researchers working on coordinated projects within this framework, the University will fail to fulfill its potential as a leading driver of the development of Malta's economy and society. The costs involved in building and sustaining research of international calibre in just one of the areas identified in Figure 1, suggests that the Government must significantly increase its investment in RTDI at the University and thus come in line with Lisbon targets. Moreover, the financing of the University must be seriously rethought: the University must be allowed to accrue assets, investment in infrastructure and equipment for teaching and research should be tax exempt, and Government allocations should reflect the true cost-basis of teaching and research programmes. Moreover, the setting up of a University of Malta Trust Fund for Research, Development and Innovation and the updating of legislation to allow tax incentives for donors is a crucial step forward.

For the University of Malta to continue to build on its legacy of excellence, for it to contribute fully to the implementation of Malta's 2020 Vision, then the Education Act must be revised: at present, the governing structures of the University are not conducive to modern management practice, academic auditing, and accountability. In tandem, the University's autonomy also needs to be strengthened: today Government funding comes at the price of cumbersome procurement procedures, bureaucracy and procrastination.

It should not be hard for a country that has been blessed with a University which traces its roots over four centuries to understand its intrinsic value, its need for adequate and sustained funding, and its need for autonomy within affective structures of accountability. Or is it?

Endnotes

- 1 *Vision 2000: Malta a Mediterranean hub based on Information Technology*, published by the Malta Council for Science and Technology, 1992.
- 2 *Information Systems Strategic Plan (ISSP) for the Public Service (1999 – 2001)*, published by the Management Systems Unit, Nov. 1998.

- 3 J. Camilleri (ed.), *A National Strategy for Information Technology*, published through the Malta Council for Science and Technology, Oct. 1994. Cited in amongst others R. Mansell and U. Wehn (eds.), *Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development*, an official UN Publication, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 4 *The smart island: The National ICT Strategy for Malta 2008-2010*, published by the Ministry for Investment, Industry, and Information Technology, 2007.
- 5 <<http://www.smartcity.ac/malta/>>.
- 6 L. Gonzi, *Growing Stronger*, Talking Point, The Times, 25 April 2007.
- 7 *The National Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation 2007-2010: Building and Sustaining the R&I Enabling Framework*, published by the Malta Council for Science and Technology, 2006.