

‘Students and I are on same page’

ALFRED VELLA, the rector of the University of Malta, made a hard-hitting speech on Malta’s shortcomings in environmental sustainability as he opened the academic year earlier this month. **Claire Caruana** probed further.

You were quite critical of Malta’s performance on the environment in your speech. Why did you decide to use the speech to make such a statement?

A rector has the problem of what to tell students and staff present in the audience on the first day of semester, because this occasion comes around every year. New students would probably not have heard what was said the year before, but the other students and staff would have.

The theme needed to be different from the previous one. I felt the university could not remain totally silent about what we could call – and not to sound critical of any administration but the entire lot, government and people – the elephant in the room. It is something that can prejudice our quality of life and make meaningless any education that we are providing to the students.

You were criticised for saying all this while not doing anything about it. What is the university doing?

You cannot preach but then do nothing. Otherwise I don’t think we would be taken seriously and the message would not be readily embraced by the youth of today, the adults and leaders of tomorrow. If we want to form their minds and to be credible, you cannot just preach.

Last month I set up a committee for sustainability at the University of Malta called C-SUM. This is a group of nine persons who have been tasked with adopting, in terms of university practices, as many as possible of the more relevant sustainable development goals of the UN.

The group will be telling me about what we can do to adopt these measures, including for instance conserving paper. We will be looking at some of our practices: are these consistent with best use of resources?

Waste is an area in which we need to improve. How do we deal with our office and laboratory waste, which are particularly problematic?

C-SUM will overview what we’re doing to perhaps modify practices and to ensure that the university is itself more sustainable, so that any messages coming from our actions and words are more genuine.

Some would also argue that we need to concentrate a little more on how to ensure that the university, as an education entity, remains sustainable, even financially. Financial sustainability can either keep you afloat or sink you.

But this is not about financial sustainability. That requires other actions and engagement with the State so that any plans that we

have for the future are accepted and adopted by the State, and it would hopefully be putting its money where its mouth is.

We are at present bringing in around 20 per cent of our annual spend from monies generated by the university. That fraction must not decrease, it should increase. Although I would hate to think that the total would remain the same if the government is tempted to say, the university is making what it needs, so let’s give it less.

We have not received any messages of the sort but it’s always on your mind when you do these things. So that’s this year’s message is, think and act sustainably.

But what is the university doing to reach its students with this message?

The most overt thing that one could do is to ensure that coursework, wherever it is relevant, strives to include themes that involve concepts of sustainability. For instance, you would ensure that sustainability has a place in the teaching course.

Sustainability takes several forms. If, say, business students receive enhanced teaching content about ethical considerations, that is an action related to sustainability. If, as part of their course work, we get our lawyers to be more knowledgeable about anti-money laundering practices or how to

detect and prevent the financing of terrorism, this too ensures we are more sustainable as a country.

In the case of engineers and scientists, projects that deal with new ways of harnessing energy, as I know are taking place in our labs... that kind of support is also consistent with sustainability.

Traffic management is another challenge. Perhaps staff and students could be enticed to use alternative modes of transport to the university with a view to improving air quality.

It makes me extremely happy to see that the students and I seem to be on the same page here. Before my speech I was unaware that the students were making this their rallying call for this year, which makes me extremely pleased.

There has often been criticism about widespread apathy among university students. How concerned are you about this?

In my days as a student, I remember marching to stimulate the administration of the time to do something about the tremendous lack of housing, which was causing severe problems to the young folk, including students, trying to make a life for themselves.

Students then were fairly political, in the sense that they were engaged with the problems of the day.

You cannot force engagement with society. I suspect that the more relaxed and unproblematic

SUMMER JOBS SHOULD COUNT

Students’ summer jobs should count as part of their work at the university, the rector believes, insisting that the acquiring of the so-called soft skills are just as important as academic qualifications.

He said he wants students to be more engaged in work-based learning, adding that even temporary summer jobs help students gain certain experience.

“I would like to see students participate in work-based learning because ideally most of the graduates would not only have lecture, lab and assessment profiles at the end of every semester but also experience in the workplace,” Prof. Vella said.

Some courses already require students to do work placements, as is the case with those in teaching and nursing for instance. But the majority of students do jobs in summer that is not recognised as part of their university work, he said.

“I think we should formalise that because having a summer job – and this needn’t be some engineering job but any experience that brings you in contact with people – forces you to be on time and properly dressed, and that’s education.

“These soft skills should be incorporated into any programme. Most of the things you learn probably become obsolete within a matter of 10 to 15 years. These transferable or soft skills, including the ability to learn and not be spoon-fed, are never going to leave you.”

On comments by the Education Minister recently that Malta faced a skills deficit, Prof. Vella said that while concerned this was indeed the case, the University is putting its money where its mouth is and has already started introducing specialised courses aimed at equipping students with certain skills, as is the case with the English proficiency course that first started being offered two years ago.

that society perceives its life to be, the higher the level of contentment of a society, the lower the tendency to do something about it.

Perhaps that is a contributing factor to this general apathy because, let’s face it, the students are not apathetic insofar as enjoying themselves goes. Which is fine, I’m not trying to put them down for that. But they must not sense that there are severe problems that hound the community.

“I hope that students are not numbed into inaction simply because they are not looking around and observing”

When I was citing some numbers in my speech I was not inventing them, nor was I making easy comments. I was citing data and statistics which show that as a nation we have some ways to go in the way, for instance, we manage our waste.

That is not a governmental problem but a national problem and we, as citizens, need to do something about it. Now if students decide to eat non-meat foods for one day a week, they are doing something about it.

I hope they recognise that by doing so they would be making a contribution. I hope that they are not numbed into inaction simply because they are not looking around and observing.

Recently, for instance, when the government and the teachers were at loggerheads, the student teachers did not make their voice heard. What do you make of that?

There are two ways to interpret that. You can either say that students are apathetic and just don’t care. But another reason could be that they don’t see the point of the complaints or the issues that the union was highlighting.

Remember, they do not live the life that teachers in real classrooms live on a daily basis and so they may be in a protected zone. Therefore they may have downplayed the importance of what the union was saying. It’s not easy without the evidence.

Earlier this year, the university’s autonomy was in question after the government unveiled proposals as part of the proposed University of Malta Act. What is the situation right now?

The proposals elicited responses from staff, administrators, unions, students. These different stakeholders gave their points of view with regard to the proposals that were floated.

I understand that the ministry is looking at these various inputs and the government is, at this point in time, reflecting on them.



Alfred Vella.
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