

# Academic Duty

A single university in a country tries to be all things to all people. It struggles to achieve excellence in research, be it in science or the humanities, and tries to teach all students with no attempt to select subgroups for special attention.

*For large sections of the university, the practice of research as a career is a foreign concept.*

With the limited funding for research, it is not surprising that this aspect of university life is severely hampered, particularly in the sciences where heavy investment in laboratory equipment is mandatory. For large sections of the university, the practice of research as a career is a foreign concept. So perhaps we might be forgiven for devoting less time to this aspect of academic duty than the average academic in a university overseas.

One of the minimum requirements for a research career is the possession of a higher degree in research, usually a Ph.D or equivalent. This usually ensures that the holder has gone through an apprenticeship in research and has been trained to pursue individual and unsupervised research. In this respect it is fundamentally different from a higher qualification in a profession such as medicine where a long stretch of post-graduate apprenticeship is required to achieve technical excellence in a speciality, leaving little time for creative research effort. Unfortunately the number of lecturers possessing such a research-based degree is very variable within our university. Figure 1 below shows that the proportion of staff within a Faculty possessing a higher academic degree varies from 83 per cent within the Arts Faculty to 12 % within the Law Faculty and reaches a low of less than 5% within the Institute of Health.

It is also of interest to note that there appears to be an inverse relationship between the number of lecturing staff within a Faculty (which presumably corresponds to the number of students within that Faculty) and the proportion of staff members possessing a higher academic degree. Obviously, in our effort to increase the number of staff to cope with the increasing number of students, the university has had to accept staff with less impressive qualifications.

But it is in the realm of teaching that perhaps our shortcomings come most prominently to the fore. As in most other universities, lecturers simply step into a teaching job with no pedagogical preparation, and often no interest in this aspect of their work. Thus we find that lecturing becomes a burden, squeezed in between a busy professional life and other activities. The current emphasis on involvement and participation in business and other outside interests, while theoretically desirable, has in practice reduced even further the time left for preparation of lectures, and time available for student-lecturer contact. Even in those areas normally associated with a high lecturer:student ratio, such as the medical faculty, we find that too often courses have degenerated into a series of lectures, with no tutorials, and hardly any supervised practical/clinical work. In other areas, such as science teaching at IHC for instance, there is almost complete dependence on Health Department laboratories and an inadequate amount of formal science practical teaching

In the book "Academic Duty" (1997) by Donald Kennedy, president emeritus of Stanford University, some of the obligations of academics are emphasised. According to Kennedy these are:

# CONTENTS

<b>Academic duty</b> <i>Editorial</i>	01
<b>Students' views on transport problems</b> <i>Marthese Portelli</i>	05
<b>The mysterious pans of Gozo</b> <i>Maurice N. Cauchi, Carol J. Jaccarini</i>	07
<b>The public library, Victoria</b>	10
<b>John L. Grima: Gozitan artist</b>	12
<b>Il-flawtista</b> <i>Prof. Joe Friggieri</i>	13
<b>Diskors tal-Ministru ghal Ghawdex</b> <i>waqt seminar fl-okkazjoni tas-sena internazzjonali ta' l-anzjani</i>	14
<b>L-ghanja tač-činju</b> <i>Rev. George Mercieca</i>	17
<b>Jien</b> <i>Charles Bezzina</i>	17
<b>Contemporary Art Education in Gozo</b> <i>Mario Cassar</i>	18
<b>Sir Adrian Dingli</b> <i>Rev. Dr. Joseph Bezzina</i>	21
<b>Il-karnival spontanju fin-Nadur</b> <i>Dr. Mario Saliba</i>	26
<b>Migration: How many Gozitans were born overseas</b>	29
<b>Need assessment for breast cancer screening in Gozo</b>	30
<b>Points of View</b> <i>Viglio</i>	32

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- To Prepare
- To Teach
- To Mentor
- To Serve the University
- To Discover
- To Publish
- To tell the truth
- To reach beyond the walls
- To change

*"much of the world outside sees higher education as a credentialing devise"*

In relation to the function of the university, it is also well to bear in mind the dichotomy of purposes that may exist, differences between what the university expects and what the general public demands. In this respect, Kennedy emphasises (p 7) that: "Whereas those within the system generally believe that their mission is to produce graduates who can think well and work effectively, and who are able to understand, analyze, and reflect upon their culture and upon the natural world, much of the world outside sees higher education as a credentialing devise: a way of estimating, for employment or other purposes, the comparative worth of individuals."

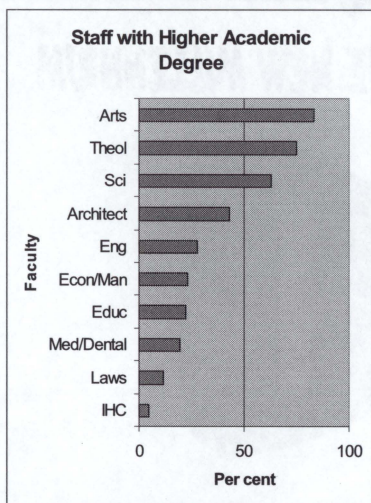


Fig 1: Proportion of staff within a faculty having a "higher" academic degree. [Source: University of Malta Calendar, 1998/1999]

This "credentialing" is reflected in the glut of students currently finding their way into the educational system. One might also safely say that the same is surely going to happen in other professions such as law and medicine. Where the emphasis becomes so overwhelmingly on obtaining a profession rather than a tertiary

education, this is the expected result. In the words of one student: " I am doing this subject because it is a required credit, not because I am interested in it!"

Our university works with the considerable handicap of part-time workers. The number of full-time, fully-dedicated lecturers is very slim indeed. The result is that most of these have other, usually more pressing, and undoubtedly more lucrative jobs elsewhere, resulting in margination of their university appointment. In this context it is of interest to note that the amount of free-lancing allowed by other universities is strictly limited to one day a week in the US or to 25 percent of one's full-time salary in other countries. As Kennedy remarks: "Off-campus engagement is a confusing and poorly mapped terrain of loyalty, commitment, and interest."( p 242), and, he continues, quoting policy at Stanford

University, "Outside professional activities are a privilege and not a right, and must not detract from a faculty member's full-time obligation to his or her university duties". ( p 248).

I believe we have reached a stage where we must take stock of our concept of university education. There was a time where doors had to be flung wide open to instil the idea and need for a higher education to a population where the participation rate was below 2 per cent - one of the lowest in Europe. Now that that has been achieved, I believe that we can afford to be more demanding in our selection of our students, ensuring that all have minimum entrance requirements to enable them to partake usefully of what the University has to offer. The university should never degenerate into an institution that prepares students to enter university.

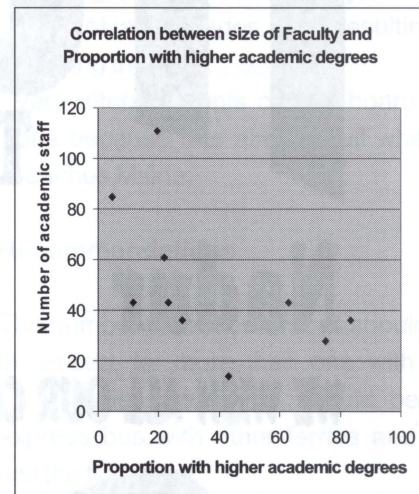


Fig 2: The proportion of lecturers with a higher degree correlates inversely with the number of staff (and presumably number of students) within that Faculty.[Source: University of Malta Calendar, 1998/1999]

I believe also that time has come to recognise teaching ability at least to the same extent as research productivity. Many universities overseas have instituted special awards for recognised teachers, particularly for those at the very beginning of their teaching career, as an incentive to further development in this area.

Finally, we must add that small as we are, we must endeavour to encourage research in all areas of intellectual activity within the university. This may not have a direct bearing on the teaching of undergraduate students, but it is the best way to ensure that the intellectual life within the walls of the institution does not become stale and outdated.

**Note:** For the purpose of this discussion, a higher degree is defined as a doctorate, such as a Ph.D, obtained after a set course of study and research, culminating in a presentation of a thesis. It excludes 'professional' type degrees common within the Medical Faculty, for instance, which usually consists of several years' apprentice-type training within a specialty. Such training, essential as it is, is not usually considered to be an ideal preparation for a research career.