

The University Gozo Centre – Some Historical Notes*

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A dream come true! That was how the Hon. Anton Tabone, then Minister for Gozo, described in a nutshell the story behind the Malta University Gozo Centre, officially inaugurated by the Prime Minister Dr Eddie Fenech-Adami on 4 May 1996. An event that is a fulfilment of what has been mere wishful thinking for almost two hundred years

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The First Proposal

As early as 1815, the Colonial Office in London was deliberating to make Gozo the seat of a “a considerable university which may attract the young men of the most enterprising Greek and Italian families and become at the same time a lasting instrument for the extension of our [British] moral influence through the Levant and at least the south of Italy.” This proposal was made by Henry E Bunbury, Under-Secretary of State, on behalf of Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. In a despatch of 12 February 1815 to Sir Thomas Maitland, the first British Governor of Malta, he dwelt at length on the argument. Yet the Governor was not the person to promote projects that were not his brainchild and he seemingly paid little or no attention to the suggestion of the Colonial Office.

One might assume that Bunbury’s proposal was a very fantastic suggestion – a University on a remote unknown island in the middle of the Mediterranean – but time proved that it was not far-fetched at all. When fifty years later, on 4 November 1866, the Gozo Seminary opened its doors as a secondary boarder and day-school for boys under the able direction of the Jesuit Fathers, a number of distinguished Sicilian families did send their sons to Gozo.

It was at the Sacred Heart Seminary, as the institution was called from 1881, that tertiary education was first imparted on the Island. Students preparing for the priesthood followed the course of the Scienze Sacre, studying Dogmatic and Moral Theology, Sacred Scripture, History of the Church, and Canon Law. Several attempts to obtain the authorisation from Rome to confer first degrees failed not because of a lack of intelligent students and knowledgeable professors, but because some quarters in Malta were afraid of competition from the smaller island.

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University of the Air

The idea of a University Centre in Gozo was revived once again in the 1960s, when the feasibility of a University of the Air was discussed between Dr Anton Tabone, then President of the Gozo Civic Council, and Professor Guzè Aquilina, at the time vice-Rector of the University of Malta. Gozitan-born Professor Aquilina began promoting the idea of University facilities for Gozitan students on the lines of the University of the Air, more precisely, on an adaptation of the British idea to the local situation. Through a sort of closed-circuit radio, students in a centre could listen to lectures imparted at the Valletta University with the facility to put questions and participate directly in the debate. He brought the matter to the notice of the University Council for approval of the idea which was fully supported by Dr Tabone, father of the above-mentioned Minister for Gozo. Yet, as often happens, the concept was not pursued further.

The idea was taken up again by the Ministry for Gozo soon after its establishment on 14 May 1987. The first Gozo Minister, Mr Anton Tabone, found full collaboration of the Revd Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, then Rector of the University, as well as of his colleagues in the Government cabinet.

Innumerable obstacles had to be overcome before the dream could come true. It was not an easy task to convince the University Council and Senate to open a Centre in Gozo. In the meantime, Professor Lino Briguglio became another promoter of such a foundation.

“When the idea of the Gozo Centre was first voiced, many thought it was just a nice dream and not practical,” explained the Prime Minister in the inauguration speech. “But the idea has become a reality because over the recent years we have come to appreciate two things: the importance of university education, and the opportunities for education in Gozo.”



Former Prime Minister (now HE President of the Republic) Dr Edward Fenech Adami, inaugurating the Xewkija premises of the University Gozo Centre.

The Centre's Establishment

The University of Malta Gozo Centre was established in September 1992, although its statute was formally approved in February 1993.

Mr Anton Tabone, then Minister for Gozo, who was the principal promoter of the whole project, described the Centre as a dream come true.

The Centre has been established to stay. During the Labour Party administration between 1996 and 1998, Dr Anton Refalo, Parliamentary Secretary for Gozo, gave it his full support. In September 1998, upon the return of a Nationalist administration, the Ministry for Gozo was re-established. The new Minister, the Honourable Giovanna Debono, declared her interest in increasing and widening the scope of the Centre from day one. She has never ceased to give the Centre her full support.

The creation of a University Centre is a landmark in the history of education in Gozo, for many years consistently kept down to the secondary level. The Island can certainly pride itself, as Professor Briguglio pointed out, on being one of the smallest, if not the smallest island in the Mediterranean with a University centre.

The Premises of the Centre

The Malta University Gozo Centre is located in a building best remembered by the people as il-Lazzarett, the Isolation Hospital of the Island. Located in an area known as Tal-Barmil, limits of the village of Xewkija, it was originally built as an experimental farm in the 1840s.

At that time, the economic depression that had hit the Maltese archipelago since 1813 was being slowly overcome. The British Colonial government, that for long had abandoned the people to their own destiny, began to take a closer interest in their plight. So it was decided to raise this experimental farm that had a section for fowls and rabbits, as well as a section for growing crops, both led by trained personnel. The results were

passed on to the local farmers to upgrade their products. They could also acquire chicks and rabbits as well as seeds from the farm. The premises continued to serve their original purposes until the early 1890s.

During the nineteenth century, regular outbreaks of plague, cholera, small pox, and fever made the establishment of an isolation hospital ever more pressing. Cases of infectious disease were previously treated in premises hired ad hoc by the Government but these were unsuitable for the purpose and often criticized publicly; hence the decision for the setting up of an isolation hospital.

Since the early 1890s, the experimental farm and the surrounding fields – all Government property – were being suggested for the purpose. When a final decision was taken, the farm was re-modelled on a traditional Maltese house, with rooms on two floors surrounding a central courtyard. After the building of a second floor and other alterations, the building was officially inaugurated as a hospital on 21 October 1897. The hospital, enlarged on more than one occasion, was not open on a permanent basis, but whenever the need arose, a situation that lasted till the 1960s.

Then the necessity of an isolation hospital was not felt any longer and it was closed down.

The building was left to rot, but in the beginning of the 1980s, it was rehabilitated and served as a mental hospital between 7 October 1983 and 26 January 1995.

After discussions between Mr Anton Tabone, the then Minister for Gozo, and Professor Peter Serracino-Inglott, then University Rector, an agreement was reached to refurbish the building and turn it into the University of Malta Gozo Centre. It was inaugurated on 4 May 1996.



The plaque commemorating the inauguration of the University Gozo Centre Premises.