

The University Gozo Campus – Twenty Years On*

Lino Briguglio

Twenty years ago, in August 1992, Rev. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, who was then Rector of the University, asked me whether I was interested in coordinating University courses in Gozo.

Professor Lino Briguglio, Director of the University Gozo Campus, 1992-2012.



I had a reputation of being a Gozo-lover, and I think that was the reason why I was asked to do the job. Coordinating part-time courses is not an easy task in the best of circumstances – but the Gozo assignment was even more difficult, since it required finding Maltese lecturers to teach in Gozo. I presume that Revd Professor Peter Serracino Inglott (or Fr Peter, as he was more familiarly known) thought that the prospect of frequent visits to the Island, involved in this assignment, was enough of an attraction for me.

At first I was inclined to refuse the offer. I was sure that very few lecturers – if any – would want to offer their services in Gozo, given the time and discomfort involved in travelling to and from Gozo. Relying on Gozitan lecturers was not an option, since there were very few of them and in any case, most of them worked in Malta. Finding a solution to this problem was a major challenge for me. After giving some more thought to the matter, I decided to accept the offer. Looking back, I am very glad I did.

The Establishment of the Centre

I was of the opinion that the operation should be organised in the form of a University Institute, with a specific statute, and a Director appointed by Senate and Council. The UGC started to operate in late summer 1992, although the statute was formally approved a few months earlier.

Fr Peter, who, I learned later, was being prodded by Mr Anton Tabone, then Minister for Gozo, to open a University branch in Gozo, was himself very enthusiastic about the idea, and he asked me to start the operation by coordinating a BA course. Unfortunately, such enthusiasm was not shared by many members

* This is an updated version of an article carried in the commemorative publication 'From Vision to Reality', published by the UGC on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of its establishment.

of the Faculty of Arts – they did not relish the prospect of going to Gozo after normal office hours. So it was obvious that some sort of incentive had to be devised to attract University lecturers to teach in Gozo.

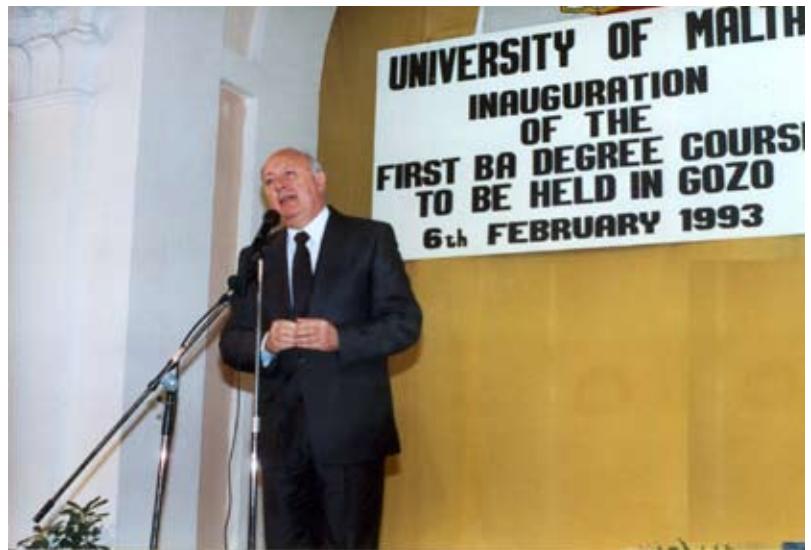
The solution – like most good solutions – was a very simple one.

I, in consultation with the University authorities, decided that lecture sessions were to be held on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. Included in the package for lecturers, apart from the normal university lecturing fees and refund of travelling expenses, was a free stay at a good hotel in Gozo on half-board basis, so as to encourage lecturers to stay overnight on Friday evenings and deliver lectures on Saturday morning. However, it should be stated, that crossing over to Gozo every weekend or every other weekend for fourteen weeks at a stretch still involved discomfort for the lecturers, especially due to the fact that every trip to Gozo required about five hours travelling, including the frequent long waits at the Cirkewwa Quay on Friday afternoons. During the winter months there was the added problem of inclement weather. The response of the lecturers was however very satisfactory, and the UGC took off, with the first BA course commencing in February 1993.

The Protagonists of the Story

The UGC story would not even have begun had it not been for the initiative and the seminal role taken by the Hon. Anton Tabone who wanted to put his vision into practice. Obviously, the Centre would not have been established without his seminal role and the support and encouragement he received from Revd. Serracino Inglott.

The lecturers who accepted to undertake the Gozo assignment also played a major role in this regard. It goes without saying



The Hon. Anton Tabone, inaugurating the first BA course in Gozo. His vision led to the setting up of the Centre and to the transformation of the former isolation hospital into University premises.

that without them, classes would not have been held, and the whole project would have floundered. It is not possible to name the lecturers that have given a contribution to the Centre one by one – because during the course of these twenty years, the Centre utilised the services of about 200 different lecturers. As stated, travelling to Gozo from Malta on a regular basis involves discomfort and requires dedication, and I take the opportunity to thank the lecturers concerned for their ongoing commitment.

The first administrator of the UGC, Mr George Aquilina, was my assistant on the ground during the initial years. I could only visit the UGC during the weekends, so the day-to-day administration was in his hands. The Centre owes a lot to George's dedication

and enthusiasm. Before taking over the Gozo University Office, he was a guidance teacher, and he used his skills to help students following courses at the Centre, who were mostly adults, to adjust to the rigours of University courses. I must say I also made use of his guidance skills, especially when I needed to understand the Gozitan psychology.

However, the star protagonists of the UGC story were the students. The first group of students that were accepted to join the BA course had made it possible for the Centre to come to life. It is true that they were the main beneficiaries of the service offered by the University, but it was also thanks to them that an idea was transformed into an institution.

I accept the compliment that I played an important part in the success of the UGC. I wanted the project to succeed and I really

Rev Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, former University Rector, addressing guests during the inauguration of the Xewkija premises, May 1996.



felt I had a mission to fulfil, namely that of promoting university education in Gozo. But the important driving force was that I loved (and of course still love) Gozo.

The Xewkija Premises

As is well known, the Centre moved into its current premises in 1996 – four years after it was established. Again the University Authorities and the Ministry for Gozo backed the move and provided the necessary support towards this end.

The Ministry for Gozo was particularly generous in this regard, and made available materials and labour, which, within a few months, led to the transformation of a dreary mental hospital into a beautiful cloister-like building, full of light and good feeling.

Before moving into the Xewkija premises, lectures used to be held at the Post-Secondary School at Victoria. We were offered different options as to which buildings to move into. One was a convent, partly inhabited by friars, which I considered to be unsuitable as University premises, for many reasons, not least of which was the incompatibility between short-skirted female students and the hallowed convent cells and corridors. I thought that a more ‘worldly’ building would be more appropriate.

As soon as I saw the Xewkija building I immediately felt that it was the right place. There were some who were not so keen about the idea of moving into a former mental hospital. The rooms seemed too narrow, the windows were barred with metal mesh for security reasons, the central courtyard was mostly used for dumping old mattresses and broken beds – the floors had an acrid smell. The place was obviously not very inviting. But most members of the Board of the Centre saw the potential of the place. We were of course aware of the

predictable joke that the place was going to change from one mental institution into another – but this was a very small price to pay for acquiring such a beautiful building. Admittedly it requires ongoing maintenance, and the shapes of the rooms are not ideal, but we are very happy with this place, and we are very grateful to the Ministry for Gozo for making it available to the University.

A Day in the Life of the Centre

The University Gozo Campus, under my direction which lasted till June 2012, was not an ordinary University Institute. We organised a variety of courses on different disciplines, prepared time-tables, approved payments of lecturers, acted as the University Office when it came to applications for admissions, organised logistical support for courses, including travel and accommodation arrangements for lecturers, kept records of students' progress, administered tests and examinations, ran the library and liaised with the Ministry for Gozo. Over and above all this, we had to provide for the maintenance and upkeep of the building and its surrounding grounds. We also looked after the welfare of the students and acted as a guidance office. As if this was not enough, we also carried out research and published books on Gozitan affairs, and cooperated with Gozitan organisations on matters of mutual interest. And, in addition to all this, we organised social activities, which, I am glad to say, were considered part of the cultural calendar of Gozo. These activities, I am sure, will continue to be offered and possibly upgraded under the new pro-rectorate.

Expression of Gratitude

There are many people, apart from the ones I already mentioned, who merit appreciation and gratitude for their contribution to the Centre and Campus during my directorship.



Professor Joe Friggieri lecturing during the early years of the BA course offered in Gozo. Before moving to the Xewkija premises the Gozo Centre was housed at the Sir Michelang Refalo Post-secondary School, Victoria.



A meeting with Dr Anton Refalo at the Parliament Secretariat for Gozo in 1986.

The Centre found excellent and constant encouragement from all University Rectors since its establishment in 1992. The Ministry for Gozo (and the Secretariat for Gozo between 1996 and 1998) never failed to extend its support.

The Centre also utilised the services of members of the Office of the Registrar and the administration of the University. We were also serviced by staff at the Gozo Ministry. I also wish to thank all those who provided the services we required. The Centre was run very efficiently – and I often got the credit for this. However, in reality, the credit should go to Mr Joseph Calleja and Mr Marvin Grech, who administered the place in a very

The Hon. Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi “virtually” talking to Professor Lino Briguglio during a video lecture session. Also present are the Hon. Giovanna Debono, Minister for Gozo, and Mr Joseph Calleja, administrator of the University Gozo Campus.



professional manner. They were diligent and well-organised, and have made the success of the UGC their own success. They were very respected by the students, lecturers and staff of the Gozo Campus.

The Gozo Campus also engaged the services of librarians, messengers and maintenance persons, who all know the meaning of flexibility in terms of tasks and working hours. I am very grateful for their contribution to the Centre.

Thanks are also due to UGC Board members. Before it was dissolved, the Board was chaired by the University Secretary, Mr Simon Sammut, who I wish to thank for his guidance and support.

The story of the UGC goes beyond lecturing and administration. We have seen many things happening here. Students got married during their studies, others have had babies (sometimes more than one), and still others found their soul-mates here. We passed through joyous experiences, especially when students graduated. We have seen students on the verge of desperation on learning that they failed a study-unit and others in a state of jubilation after getting an A, especially when they expected a lower grade. I presume this is normal for any Institution of higher education – but for Gozo it is only normal because somebody had a vision and found it possible to turn it to reality. I have lived this reality and I hope that, in the coming years, the UGC will continue to flourish.