

Experiences of a Mature Student at the University Gozo Centre

Mary Rose Vella

Introduction

It all happened when I learnt that a BA course was to be offered on a part-time basis at the University Gozo Centre. Little did I know at that time that I was to complete a BA course which took five years to complete, followed by another three-year course leading to a Masters' degree.

I decided to start my academic studies at tertiary level in my late forties, a big challenge at a rather mature age, especially as I had a full-time job and a family of three children. At that time I was working at the Foundation for International Studies, an academic institution where scholars, academics and researchers met to hold conferences and workshops in order to present papers and exchange ideas. I was therefore already working in an academic environment, with a very interesting job organising international meetings. This was not a nine to five job, particularly because it involved corresponding with scholars hailing from all corners of the world.

In spite of my heavy home and job commitments, I took the decision to join the BA course. One thing that attracted me most was the fact that the course was to be offered during the weekend. I thought that this was a good opportunity for me because although I resided in Malta I used to spend my weekends in Gozo where I was brought up.



The graduates who followed the BA course offered at the University Gozo Centre, just after the conferment of the degree, in November 2003.

The BA Course

The areas of study offered as part of the BA course were History, Economics, Philosophy and Sociology. I opted for Economics and Sociology since these were more related to my line of work – however I also took extra optional study units in Philosophy and History to fulfil the requirements of the course.

A Typical Weekend

Every Friday after work, I used to rush to catch the ferry to Gozo carrying a school bag containing a pencil box, note paper and books, reminding me of my days in secondary school. Although rushing to Gozo after work on Friday was rather hectic especially when the sea was rough, I still looked

forward to Friday evenings so that I could attend the lectures and meet my student colleagues. In fact when the course was over, I felt a great void during weekends, and it took me some time to get over it.

The weekend programme generally consisted of two 2-hour lectures on Friday evening and another two 2-hour lectures on Saturday morning, eight hours in all. These were held religiously throughout the whole course, lasting five years. Sometimes we had to attend lectures on Saturday afternoons also. Thus I spent a large portion of my weekends during term-time at the UGC.

The First Lectures and the First Examinations

When I attended the first lecture sessions I felt a bit strange, finding myself sitting on a wooden bench behind a table and

frantically scribbling notes, while peering up at a professor. I had not done this for almost thirty years.

I also found it a very somewhat frightening experience to sit for the first examination sessions. I was not sure I could compete with the students, most of whom were much younger than I was. However as the course progressed, my confidence improved, particularly when the grades I was obtaining were generally above average.

Eventually I got used to being a University student, having to read text books and write essays. I learnt to work in a team, as very often the assignments we were given required group work. I also had the opportunity to improve my communication skills and to understand the linkages between different disciplines, given that the course covered two major disciplines.

Study and Humour

All the lecturers were very experienced and were very helpful. Some had a good sense of humour. I remember one of the lecturers always called us by our name. On the first day he met us he asked us our names and wrote them on a piece of paper. We noticed that during all the lessons that followed, he used to look at this piece of paper and address students by their name. When we asked him how he managed to remember them he replied that next to our names he had written a comment related to our appearance (e.g girl with gold framed glasses). He remembered my name because next to it he had written (wife of so and so), since he knew my husband well.

We had all sorts of class experiences. Some lecturers sometimes preached their way through the lessons, as if they were talking from the pulpit, while others sometimes whispered to us – making us wish there was a loud speaker available. Some lecturers resorted to monologues, while others sometimes engaged us too

A Sociology lecture in progress.



much in question-and-answer sessions. I say sometimes, because overall we had excellent lectures, delivered by well-prepared lecturers, rendering the weekends at the UGC enjoyable and very informative.

The course also enabled us to forge new relationships with students and lecturers. I had wonderful experiences and made lasting friendships. I met people from all walks of life and of different ages from whom I have learnt a lot even though, as I already stated, most of them were younger than me. During the five years of the course, inevitably, some students got engaged or got married while others got pregnant and had babies. We therefore had many “extra-curricular” occasions to meet socially.

On completion of the course, I graduated BA (General) in November 1996, together with the other students who had followed the BA at the University Malta campus. This was an occasion which I will always remember, mostly because the graduation ceremony marked a major achievement in my life, resulting from five years of study.

MA (Islands and Small States Studies)

The saying that studying is addictive may be an exaggeration, but it does whet the appetite for further study. In my case, I got so much used to studying and reading, that when the opportunity to follow a Master’s course on a part-time basis arose, I took it. In fact not long after I had finished the BA course, I joined a two-year course leading to a Masters degree in Islands and Small States Studies with Economics as the major areas of study and Environmental Studies as the minor area.

Research Component

The Master’ degree was somewhat different from the first degree because it had a teaching component and a research



The graduates who followed the course leading to the degree of Master of Arts in Islands and Small States Studies with Professor Lino Briguglio, Director of the University Gozo Centre, just after the conferment of the degree, on 28 November, 2006. The course was offered at the University Gozo Centre between 2003 and 2006.

component, where towards the end of the course we had to submit a dissertation on a subject relating to small island states. I chose climate change which I thought would have a major impact on small island states, particularly as a result of sea-level rise.

Communication Skills

As take-home assignments we were required to write essays and prepare presentations to deliver in class and these entailed a considerable amount of reading and research. This also led to interesting class discussion. It enabled us to sharpen our communication skills and to engage in debate about different subjects.

During the Master’s course we had the opportunity to engage in various extra curricular activities. We were expected to attend

workshops, seminars and conferences relating to small island states that were organised at the University Gozo Centre at that time. We also had the occasion to engage in a video-conference session with students following a Master's degree in Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada.

In July 2006, the Associazione Culturale Politecnico Teatro, an Italian theatre group, performed 'The Arbitrant', a play by Menander, in the central courtyard of the Gozo Campus. The summer cultural activity has now become an annual event.



The Benefits of Research

Perhaps the most important benefit I derived from the Master's course was that I learnt to appreciate the value of research. As already explained, we had many assignments to prepare for. But most of my research was focused on my dissertation on climate change and small island states. This involved collecting a large amount of information from experts residing in small island states all over the world. I had to process, synthesize and interpret this information, and organize it into a structured dissertation.

During the viva-voce examination, in connection with the dissertation, I had to defend my arguments and conclusions. It was a very frightening experience, both before and during the examination, but this led to a feeling of exhilaration once I got to know that I did well.

Conclusion

Today, looking back, I know that the eight years of study were well-worth the hard work and effort I made. It is a nice feeling knowing that I managed to obtain two degrees with good grades. The two courses enriched my knowledge, which enabled me to understand realities more clearly and helped me improve my job performance. I am now able to communicate better with the academics with whom I relate with at my workplace.

I feel grateful to the University of Malta because through the Gozo Centre, I was given the opportunity to gain confidence in myself and to develop a love for learning, which I will carry throughout my life.