



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty for Social Wellbeing

MEMORANDUM

Making Our Voice Heard!

RECTOR ELECTION - 2021 <
University of Malta



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To: The Rector
The Pro-Rectors
The Registrar
The Council of the University of Malta
The Candidate/s for the Rectorate

This Memorandum is being presented following consultation amongst the academic body, administrative teams, students, Research Support Officers, casuals, part-timers, dissertation supervisors and placement teachers within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing. It has also been validated by the College of Heads of Department, the Faculty Board and the Office of the Dean and Deputy Deans.

Date: 28/1/2021

As a *Faculty* we believe that the University of Malta is at a crossroads. Each Rectorate represents a new phase in the life of the Alma Mater and hence the need for us to come together in consultation and discussion, gathering and sharing our thoughts for the future.

We feel, as a *Faculty*, that our biggest challenges and greatest strengths in our University stem from our commitment to be a much-needed voice within our communities, and to serve as a touchstone for society. In more ways than one, we have the responsibility to set, monitor and engage the national agenda.

Telegraphically speaking, as a *Faculty*, we feel that University:

1. should be focused on democratising knowledge and providing a much needed empirical and evidence-based 'voice';
2. should be a safe space whereby all feel comfortable debating openly without any restrictions or limitations;
3. should use effectively our social, intellectual and physical capital for the benefit of the common good;
4. should apply ourselves to the principles of fairness, forgiveness, empathy, social justice, diversity and inclusion;
5. should use the talents, passion and qualities that we have as an Institution to keep nurturing our scholarship and commitment to the cause of academia;
6. should craft more spaces for our effervescent student body to engage in this community;
7. should savour our academic traditions but at the same time use contemporary and technological platforms to take our University forward;

8. should do more to note the undervalued contributions of our administrators, Research Support Officers, casual academic staff and part-time academic staff;
9. should internationalise, possibly even more, engage in 'planetary' concerns thus acknowledging issues related to climate change but also moving beyond the human-centric approach, thereby addressing, exploring and questioning our relationships with, and dependence on the environment, non-human others and technology and our *Faculty* should be delegated the leading role of exploring these ethical matters;
10. should be engaging in conversations about our relationships with technology, AI and how these are impacting on the social wellbeing of our communities;
11. should have a stronger presence on the media platforms with such valid and important contributions that our scholars and students master;
12. should develop a gender representation mechanism at all levels of University boards;
13. should consider a system where board composition is rotated;
14. should encourage more inter-FICS courses;
15. should use our 'brand' more effectually to share the University's unique identity;
16. should ensure that ALL within the University structures are represented equally and fairly.

We look forward to this important phase in the *life* of our University and hope that this document will serve to create a healthy and stimulating debate. Ultimately, by strengthening our Alma Mater we are supporting the wellbeing of our communities and society as a whole.



PROF. ANDREW AZZOPARDI
Dean

PREAMBLE

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorship that **strengthens links with society at large**, including government entities, agencies, authorities, NGOs, businesses, civil society, and other academic institutions, while standing as a beacon of **academic freedom and institutional autonomy**.

A diverse, open and pluralistic learning environment is essential to support the academic community to draw on the power and democratisation of **knowledge, research and policy** to solve society's most pressing problems, and further support is therefore required to ensure the timely production and dissemination of such outcomes. Exciting spaces of learning, knowledge production, and leading innovation require that **the sensibilities and expertise of all members of the academic community are adequately respected**, no matter what their level or role.

A cultural shift is needed to **ensure that the essential contributions of the social and human sciences in society are valued**, by promoting innovative and mixed methods of research that speak directly to the people. Valuing synergies between FICS entails **making an investment in cross-disciplinary think tanks**, which are egalitarian in their structure and oriented towards accessible, public forms of scholarship.

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorship that:

- works towards protecting academic freedom, investment in research (especially in the area of social sciences), and respects professional expertise;
- works towards the nurturing of an inclusive and diverse space for critical debate and dissent;
- works towards acknowledging the importance for sustainable development across the Institution as a whole;
- works towards prioritising democratic and dignified work opportunities;
- works towards a University with a stronger voice in the community;
- works towards promoting long-term strategies for the holistic safety of students and staff;
- works towards equality and equity within the University structure;
- works towards investing in technology at all levels of operations.

PRIORITY AREAS

1. SCHOLARSHIP

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorship that **invests in initiatives which combine scientific methods, artistic processes, and multidisciplinary approaches** through innovative pathways and groundbreaking research in a range of disciplines. In order to do so, there must be **further allocation of resources to FICS seeking to offer MA and PhD degrees**. Rather than turn away potential students due to a lack of resources, administrative staff, and academic staff, further investment in these programmes is urgently required to keep research and policy goals high on the agenda.

Investment is also required in **“topping-up” options for EU nationals and TCN** to practice and be instructed in the various warranted professions offered for example by our *Faculty*. Therefore, it is essential to explore models that can be economically and socially viable within the existing University structures. More must also be done to **ensure that academics have the support to focus on publications and research**, by addressing issues of understaffing within certain FICS departments (for example those at FSW) that have a severely disproportionate ratio of staff to students.

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* is committed to community engagement, which plays a crucial role across departments. Many academics in the *Faculty* engage with society through various communities, thereby creating vital connections between the University and society at large. Therefore, **community engagement must be duly recognised and given further standing and recognition**, including formally taking academics’ community engagement into account for promotions, a process we advocate should be more transparent.

There is the need for **excellence in tutoring and lectureship to be institutionally acknowledged**, while also doing more to **involve and celebrate actors outside of University structures who support the Institution** in terms of placement opportunities and research collaborations. Excellent headway has been achieved in aiding and facilitating research development on campus, and there is now the need to **formally institute resident research (non-lecturing) posts**.

To this end, there must be the acknowledgement that departments, for example at FSW, have become increasingly research oriented. Increasing the research profile necessitates a **valuing of academic pursuits rather than academics and research officers doing more administrative work**.

2. INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorship that partakes in **more inclusive decision-making processes** that allow for solutions to arise through opposing ideas, reconfigurations of thought and constructive arguments that create a portfolio of alternatives.

Furthermore, the University requires a Rector who promotes knowledge among the academic community that **mitigates against the disabling effects of unjust systems** of governance, political partisanship and polarisation that lack integrity. To this end, a multiplicity of voices must be welcomed into the Institution. In practical terms, this includes **providing access to higher education to more refugees and migrants** and offering **more postgrad scholarships to persons facing financial burdens and disadvantages**. Furthermore, there is a clear need to **prioritise non-traditional learning** and courses that directly respond to the needs of diverse sectors.

Issues of accessibility (physical) on campus remain of concern and demand **a long-term strategy for accessibility, rather than ad hoc solutions**. Coming to University is the only means of social contact for certain disability groups, and it is their right to be socially present. However physical accessibility on campus (even during certain events, including Freshers Week) requires improvement. Access to information and directions across campus must also be improved by **ensuring that hearing and visual impairments do not detract from the experience of students and staff**.

Rector must seriously consider and respond to the concerns expressed within the *FSW* that **certain students are still not receiving adequate support by Institutional structures** due to factors that include (but are not limited to) disability, neuro-diversity, mental health and citizenship status. One practical example includes the limited availability of gender-neutral bathrooms in most UM buildings, a situation we have been speaking about for way too long.

The *FSW* believes there is an urgent need for **investment in a gender equality plan as part of a University-wide initiative**. This could be achieved by funding doctoral students to assist with the collection of data and the promotion of a gender equality plan. Additionally, an investment of human resources and finance to **secure a post in Human Resources devoted to vulnerable groups** (including, but not limited to, students with disability, mature female students, non-traditional learners and students who are the first in their families to attend University).

Such a strategy must be paralleled by an **investment in supportive structures that monitor and evaluate the progress of a gender equality plan**, both internally and externally to the University. The development of a visible body within the University, mandated to enact inclusive mechanisms with authority, is crucial. For example, a **Pro-Rector agenda that clearly embraces gender equality, diversity, and inclusion** and that links HR with academia to ensure that diversity is honoured and gender equality is prioritised.

The *FSW* expects the Rector to **address instances of sexual harassment and bullying** in the Institution with a zero-tolerance policy towards abuse. Strengthening mechanisms for detection and reporting, supporting people to come forward and share their concerns, and ensuring that there is an adequate response could be achieved by **investing in a sexual harassment policy that is streamlined across the University and is appropriately enforced**.

3. SUSTAINABILITY

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorship that **credibly upholds environmental concerns as part of a comprehensive green strategy** that applies across the University. A sustainable mentality that needs to be applied throughout the University, benefiting from good practices already at work within the *FSW* and other Faculties, would assist in the mitigation of unsustainable practices.

To this end, **continued investment in the work of the ‘Go Green’ campaign**, and further initiatives with similar aims, should be considered. Furthermore, Rector’s support for **issues of environmental justice** on campus must go beyond surface endorsement and result in **proactive responses at the level of policy and Institutional practice**.

The *FSW* is well placed to support Rector, to ensure that a long-term strategic plan for the sustainable development of the University is met by an equal commitment to the **wellbeing of future generations of students**. In this way, ad hoc or short-term solutions will not compromise the Institution’s fundamental commitment towards society and social wellbeing as a whole.

FSW students have particularly highlighted **the need for further regeneration of green areas on campus**, including the possibility of more green roof-tops, open-air libraries, and indoor garden (greenhouse) options to keep students in touch with the natural environment.

4. DIGNIFIED WORK

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorship that promotes **more transparent structures around promotions**, a more diverse promotions board, and more diverse boards generally. Senate and Council should also be the epitome of broad representation and positive measures should be considered.

It is essential that the University is **a model of respectful employment, particularly when it comes to casual and part-time academic staff** who are employed at a low wage level and often encounter precarity in their employment status. Moreover, it is fitting to the dignity of the Institution to ensure that all workers, most especially casual staff, **receive due payment in a prompt manner**.

Good practices in terms of dignified employment established by the FSW, in particular the strategies adopted by the Dean and Heads of Department, are an indicator of similarly supportive structures that could be further encouraged throughout the University.

The *FSW* is particularly concerned about a **sense of exclusion felt among administration staff** in decisions being made that concern them and their livelihoods. For example, instructions regarding major changes during the Covid-19 pandemic were formulated without the participation of admin staff, a state of affairs that the *FSW* finds to be unacceptable.

There must also be efforts to ensure further **harmonisation of digital systems** that facilitate the work of academic and administrative staff, to curtail the bureaucratic delays that plague the Institution. The **allocation of a permanent building to act as a home for the Faculty** and brings all staff in closer contact would also reduce problems currently faced, regarding booking of lecture venues and cramped working spaces for academics and other staff. The lack of space is a matter shared by various FICS and we need to have tangible solutions.

Further support is required for admin staff to integrate teleworking into their activities - **admin staff are unfairly restricted in their work flexibility**.

There is also the urgent need for **inequalities of payment for University administration staff** to be addressed, and **respect to be shown to management staff within administration**, in particular the differences in workload depending on the size of the respective FICS and the duties expected, which are not reflected in salary scales. **Union representatives should have a stronger presence within the University** and should be engaged in ongoing consultation about the working situation and needs of the administrative staff.

Consideration may be given as to whether **administrative staff and students should be eligible voters during the election of Rector and other major roles at the University**. **More stable and frequent contact between admin and the Rector, the Registrar and the various Directorates** would mean that these offices are more aware of what is taking place in the FICS and across the University holistically.

Acknowledging the hybrid position of research staff at University, and **standardising Research Support Officers' opportunities for job security and professional development within University structures**, would ensure that the seemingly precarity associated with contract work at University is successfully mitigated. Alternatives include an indefinite contract that clearly establishes duties and mechanisms for the monitoring of work.

5. VIRTUAL MODELS

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorship that **harnesses the advantages of virtual work, made evident during the pandemic**. Research shows that if workers are trusted, within good working relationships, people are productive when working off-site and there is an exponentially reduced risk of exposure to harm.

Further research is needed to ensure that the provision of **virtual lectures support optimal outcomes for both students and lecturers**. To this end, the Rectorate may consider investment in this area as part of larger adjustments in lecturing, learning, and research, post-pandemic. Interdisciplinary efforts spread across FICS is essential, to target the economic, psychological, social, and material wellbeing of the University community and society at large.

Therefore, a concurrent need exists to consider **shifting to online assessments that are psychometrically validated**. Not only is this a way of being environmentally responsible and more supportive of students who are already interacting with online tools daily, it is economically favourable by reducing the costs associated with resource expenditure and materials. **Promoting transitional models that include a blended approach** would minimise the potential stress associated with such a shift.

6. CRISIS INTERVENTION

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* supports a Rectorate that **protects all staff and students from failures in duty of care, during the ongoing pandemic and in other potential crises**. It is critical that the Institution learns from absence of leadership and the resulting lack of wellbeing that are due to delayed decision making and the restricted ability of FICS to put adequate planning in place. Responses to such emergency situations must be prompt and devolved to **include FICS-level participation from the outset to support the mental and physical health of staff and students**.

To this end, the *Faculty* believes it necessary to **create a permanent rather than ad hoc emergency team**, to research and execute appropriate strategies for the mitigation of emergencies. Rather than be lulled into a false sense of security, the lessons of Covid-19 point to **the need for Institutional preparedness**, to meet future eventualities that threaten the wellbeing of staff, students, and the University community as a whole.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* upholds a vision for the future of our University to always produce research and support education for the common good of society. A Rectorship that is engaged within the community, on campus and beyond, not only responds to this vision but also pushes it forward, in new and creative ways. A healthy relationship between the Office of the Rector and the Institution must therefore be flexible yet strong, celebrating change while also strengthening our core values.

Safeguarding the independence and autonomy of our University is essential, to ensure that staff and students are protected in their academic integrity, thereby better reflecting the identity of the Institution. For this reason, we believe that plans for a new law, which is uniquely dedicated to the University, should be resumed. Pursuing the fulfilment of such a law should be central to the mandate of the Rector, as an influential voice for our University.

We also need to keep building on the great work done in the University's Strategy Plan 2020–2025, *Serving students, scholarship and society, sustainably*. This should be reviewed to reflect the new era post-Covid-19 and also to assimilate the Rectorate's vision. We recognize that at the heart of an efficient organisation there is a good strategy, the cornerstone of a healthy Institution .

Finally, the *Faculty's* research points the way to a Maltese society which could be profoundly different. If we take the right steps, we could move towards a more vibrant society where people are engaged in their communities and active co-creators of their own wellbeing. A flourishing society would be healthier, more productive, creative, and engaged.

At its heart, the work of the *Faculty for Social Wellbeing* begs the question: "*What would research, policy, and practice look like if they were seeking to promote wellbeing?*" Discovering and enacting answer to this question are crucial. Likewise, we believe that the Rector has a mandate to ensure that this becomes one of the defining questions to be addressed by the Rectorship at the University of Malta.

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