



# Firsts, Numbers and Trends:

## GENDER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*During this year, 2019, the University of Malta (UM) will deservedly take some time to look back with pride and celebrate its two hundred and fiftieth anniversary as a state university. It became the 'University of Malta' in November 1769, after Grandmaster Pinto expelled the Jesuits who had been running the Collegium Melitense, the antecedent to the university, since 1592, and rechristened the university as a public institution. But this year UM is also acknowledging the hundredth anniversary from the enrolment of its first two female undergraduate students: Tessie Camilleri and Blanche Huber entered the University together in October 1919, the first choosing the Humanities and the other Medicine.*

*This article takes the second commemoration as an excuse to reflect critically on the role of gender at the University of Malta (UM). It examines the stubborn progressive reduction of females from the highest academic ranks of the university, and tries to establish the main reasons for such a condition.*

### **A SERIES OF FIRSTS**

As her course was the shorter one, Tessie Camilleri was destined to become the University of Malta's first female graduate. She followed courses in English Literature, Philosophy and Latin Literature and graduated B.Litt., on May 2, 1922 (Camilleri, 2007, p. 44). Sadly, she died in 1930, aged just 29. Meanwhile, Blanche Huber graduated as the first female doctor from the University of Malta, even though, once a graduate, she preferred to work as a pharmacist (Savona Ventura, 2006).

A few years previously, Lucia Levanzin Inglott was probably the first Maltese woman to attend a course at the University of Malta where she gained her diploma in midwifery; the two-year, non-degree course started in 1915 and ended in 1917 (Vella, 1969, p. 67).

At around the same time, another Blanche, this time a Blanche Tonna Barthet, may have been the first Maltese woman to have secured a diploma or a degree from a foreign university: she had read an L.L.A. (Lady Literate in Arts) from St Andrew's University, Scotland, and was the Headmistress of the Sliema Primary School (Camilleri, 2007, p. 45).

We can go on and celebrate a list of other firsts for women at the University of Malta.

From the available evidence found so far, it would appear that the first female to be appointed to the academic body of the University of Malta was a British citizen: Sylvia Mary Haslam (1934 - ), in 1964 (RUM, 1966, p. 21). She graduated PhD from Newnham College, University of Cambridge, UK, in 1961 and was a lecturer in Biology, Faculty of Science at UM for a few years in the mid-1960s (The Peerage, 2018). Dr Haslam is an international authority on her subject and is the author of various publications, many of which relate to Malta and its ecology and natural landscapes.

The first *Maltese* female to be appointed to the academic body of the University of Malta appears to be either Maria Ganado or Hilda Micallef. Both received their appointment to UM in 1966. Ms Maria Ganado, BA (Hons.), BA (Cantab.) was an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts; Dr. Hilda Micallef, BSc, MD, D.C.P. (Lond.) was a Demonstrator in Pathology, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery (RUM, 1966, pp. 43, 48).

Marie Therese Camilleri Podestà was the first female full professor at UM, appointed in 1981, and the first female deputy dean, appointed in 2001. Agatha Barbara, by virtue of serving as President of the Republic of Malta, was also *ex officio* Chancellor of UM between 1982 and 1987, the only woman to have served so far in this position. Valerie Sollars was the first female dean, appointed in 2007 to lead the Faculty of Education. Mary Anne Lauri was the first female Pro Rector, serving between 2006 and 2016, responsible for Student and Institutional Affairs. Bernardette Mizzi became the first female Pro-Chancellor of UM in 2011. Maureen Cole became the first female dean of a brand new faculty, that of Social Wellbeing, in 2012. Indeed, the only position of rank that a female has *not* occupied at the University of Malta is that of Rector: all 81 Rectors at UM, and the *Collegium* before it, so far have been male.

The current rectorate, led by Professor Alfred J. Vella, includes two female Pro-Rectors for the first time: Carmen Sammut and Tanya Sammut Bonnici. There are also

two female deans out of fourteen at the time of writing: Noellie Brockdorff (Media & Knowledge Sciences) and Roberta Sammut (Health Sciences). (See Photo 1).



Photo 1: Rectorate and Deans, December 2018.  
Source: Tufigno Photo Service for the University of Malta

The photo shows: In the centre of the front row, Pro-Chancellor and President of Council, Dr Michael Sciriha, along with Prof. Alfred J. Vella, Rector. They are flanked by the five Pro-Rectors. From left: Prof. Ing. Saviour Zammit, Prof. Joseph M Cacciottolo, Prof. Tanya Sammut Bonnici, Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino and Prof. Carmen Sammut. Back rows include 10 Faculty Deans. From left: Prof. Dominic Fenech (Arts), Prof. Andrew Azzopardi (Social Wellbeing), Prof. Manwel Agius (Theology), Dr Roberta Sammut (Health Sciences), Prof. Noellie Brockdorff (Media & Knowledge Sciences), Dr Ing. Andrew Sammut (Engineering), Prof. Frank H Bezzina (Economics, Management & Accountancy), Prof. Sandro Caruana (Education) and Prof. Nikolai J. Attard (Dental Surgery). Missing from the photo are four deans (all males): Prof. Kevin Aquilina (Laws), Prof. Ernest J. Cachia (Information & Communication Technology), Prof. Godfrey La Ferla (Medicine & Surgery) and Prof. Alex Torpiano (Built Environment).

Student numbers also suggest a happy development in terms of female presence. It may have taken women almost 330 years to enrol at UM; but their presence on campus has grown extraordinarily fast. By 1938, females at the University of Malta were 12% of the total student body, then consisting of just 21 females and 149 males (Cremona, 2001). In 1972, the number of female graduates reached 30: 21% of the total number of graduates for that year. By 1980, the percentage of female graduates was around 33% out of a graduating class of 182: 45 females and 137 males. In 1991, for the first time, the percentage of female students at the university increased beyond the 50% mark, and that has been the case ever since. As at 2018, it stands at 59% (see Table 1). Indeed, it is the higher dropout of males from higher education in Malta that is a cause of concern.

Table 1: Male-Female Student Ratio at UM (June 2018)

Male Students	Female Students	TOTAL
4695 (41%)	6628 (59%)	11323

Source: Office of the Registrar, University of Malta.

## REMUNERATION BY GENDER

Looking next at the gross salary package of the academic staff, one can also safely conclude that there is no significant difference in take home pay on the basis of gender at the University of Malta. When all benefits are included – including those associated with additional duties, headships, and so on – female full professors at UM in June 2018 received an annual remuneration package that is slightly higher, on average, than that of their male counterparts. The difference between gross pay by gender, however, is not significant (See Table 2).

Table 2: Male-Female Gross Pay Compared among (Full) Professors at UM (June 2018)

	Male Professors	Female Professors
Number (†)	76	14
Mean Gross Annual Pay (€)	80,996	81,739
Standard Deviation (€)	7,320	9,356

Source: Office of the Director of Finance, University of Malta.

(†) Excluded from this calculation are: the Rector (1 male) with his allowance; two Pro-Rectors (2 males) with their allowance; and professors on 'Option A', with a reduced gross salary (5 males).

The University of Malta had 675 full-time resident academic staff on its books in June 2018: just over a third of these (232) are female and just under two-thirds (443) are male. This gross ratio, however, masks some dramatic differences across the five steps of the progression available to members of the academic community at UM.

Coincidentally, the male-female student ratio (41-59%) is quite similar to the male-female academic staff ratio at the assistant lecturer level (46-54%), which is the lowest level of the academic hierarchy at UM. But: this is where the analogy stops.

What becomes a source of concern is the progressive dwindling of female academics as one goes up the hierarchy at UM. The erosion is systematic: with each of the four promotion 'hurdles' beyond assistant lecturer, there is a reduction of at least

7% in the proportion of female representation. The most daunting hurdle appears to be that from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer, where the proportional shift is 17%; even though this is implicitly the least onerous promotion at UM, achieved following five years in the grade of lecturer and subject to a satisfactory performance review and the completion of a professional development/ in-service training course (see Table 3). In the transition from assistant lecturer to lecturer, achieved after the completion of a PhD or equivalent, there is a shift from a female majority to a male majority: this gender split becomes more glaring as one continues up the hierarchy.

Table 3: The progressive erosion of female representation amongst Full-Time Resident UM academic staff (N = 675) as at June 2018

Rank	Male (N, %)	Female (N, %)	Total
Professor	84 (84%)	15 (15%)	99
Associate Professor	90 (77%)	27 (23%)	117
Senior Lecturer	129 (71%)	52 (29%)	181
Lecturer	97 (54%)	83 (46%)	108
Assistant Lecturer	43 (46%)	55 (54%)	98
Total	443 (66%)	232 (34%)	675

Source: Office of Human Resources Management & Development, University of Malta.

The visual representation of these trends is referred to as a 'scissors effect' (e.g. Abele & Nitzsche, 2002), and is quite widespread in academic institutions across the world. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Scissors Effect: Number of Male Academics (solid line) and Female Academics (dashed line) in each of the five academic occupational grades at UM: Assistant Lecturer, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor (as at June 2018).



A similar observation can be made on the basis of those members of the academic community at UM who have a public *Google Scholar User Profile* (GSUP). This is now a standard metric for citations and is a statistic used in the computation of university rankings across the world. At the time of writing (February 2019), there are 527 entries with a GSUP affiliated to the University of Malta. These include academics with a visiting appointment to UM, those working at the UM's Junior College as well as PhD candidates at UM, so comparisons need to be undertaken with caution. However, what one can deduce from this public list is that, amongst the twenty most cited UM academics with such a profile, there is only one female: Giovanna Bosica, from the Department of Chemistry: She is 10<sup>th</sup> on the list. The next female to appear is Isabel Stabile, from the Faculty of Medicine, who ranks 22<sup>nd</sup>. The third and fourth female academics most cited, Romina Cachia and Maria Cristina D'Adamo, are in 35<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> place (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Most Cited UM Academics as at 26<sup>th</sup> January 2019, according to Google Scholar (GS)**

	<b>Name of UM Academic</b>	<b>Citations on GS as at 26 January 2019</b>
1	Stephen Montefort	9700
2	Albert Caruana	8836
3	Giorgios Yannakakis	7828
4	Lino Briguglio	5296
5	Giuseppe Di Giovanni	5081
6	Joseph N Grima	4910
7	Bruno Biavati	4751
8	Godfrey Baldacchino	4328
9	Patrick J Schembri	3544
10	Giovanna Bosica	3347
11	Peter Mayo	3243
12	Maurice Apap	3102
13	Holger Mitterer	2836
14	Ronald G Sultana	2789
15	Victor Grech	2704
16	Vasilis Valdramidis	2690
17	Ian M Thornton	2663

18	Ruben Gatt	2591
19	Joseph M Cacciottolo	2598
20	Neville Calleja	2462
21	Albert Gatt	2263
22	Isabel Stabile	2017

Source: [https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=view\\_org&hl=en&org=4588726212334080767](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_org&hl=en&org=4588726212334080767)

This means that, while females make up 15% of (full) professors and 20% of all (full and associate) professors at UM, they still make up *just 10%* (4 entries amongst the top 40) of the most cited scholars at UM (according to Google Scholar) at the time of writing.

## DISCUSSION

The situation suggests that structural and systemic obstacles towards the progression of females pursuing an academic career continue to hold sway. The inability of most female academics to match the publications output – and, as a consequence, the larger number of citations – of their male colleagues suggests itself as a serious impediment, especially for promotion to the top two positions in the academic hierarchy: that of associate and full professor respectively, where publications matter.

This local situation is symptomatic of a widespread trend: women are under-represented in the authorships of prestigious peer-reviewed publications when compared to men. The under-representation is accentuated amongst those articles published in the highest-impact journals (Bendels et al., 2018a, 2018b). Another study suggests that male Ph.D. candidates submit and publish papers at much higher rates than women, even at the same institution. Another factor is that women are taken up with more time teaching during their Ph.D. studies, whereas male PhD candidates serve more often as research assistants, thus making it easier for the latter to publish than the former (Lubienski et al., 2018).

It is also quite possible that females in academic careers do nevertheless maintain a motherhood and homemaker burden, being expected to take on most of the responsibilities for child minding, house managing and – an increasingly common practice with greater longevity – tending to sick and/or infirm parents.

Women are more likely to support their male partners as the latter embark and excel on their academic career paths; the likelihood that the opposite happens – with men supporting their female partner's academic aspirations and ambitions – may not be that common.

There is clearly room for reflection here.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article has benefitted from the research support of a considerable number of members of staff at the University of Malta, including the Library (especially Mary Samut Tagliaferro and the Melitensia Section), the Office of the Rector (Angela Tabone), the Finance Office, the Office of Human Resources, and the Office of the Registrar. The usual disclaimers apply.

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