

EDUCATION

'eSchola' to promote ICT in schools around Europe

'eSchola', the European Commission's five-week campaign for 'eLearning' in Europe, will kick off on April 8.

eSchola was organised for the first time in 2001 and brought together teachers and pupils from thousands of schools all over Europe and beyond.

The virtual event, organised in cooperation with private partners, is designed to provide an opportunity for schools to learn together and from each other about information technology and communication (ICT) in education.

eSchola is a contribution to the implementation of the European Commission's strategic 'eLearning initiative'. Its objective is to support the large-scale deployment of ICT in schools, cities and regions around Europe.

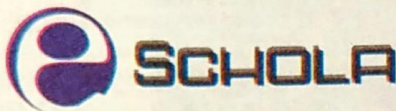
The event will provide a broad demonstration of ICT as a tool for teaching and learning, where public and private partners can work together to help schools exploit ICT best practice and showcase their achievements and innovations.

Schools will be encouraged to learn how ICT can be used to raise quality and to provide new learning opportunities.

In addition, eSchola will aim to bring

together schools around European themes and issues. The event takes place in the period leading up to Schuman Day (9 May) and it will build on this annual commemoration of the Schuman Declaration to encourage collaborative projects between schools around the themes of European citizenship and cultural diversity.

Besides being a virtual event, eSchola will also include live activities and events, particularly at local level.



However, eSchola is more than a limited event. Its showcases, examples, projects and activities will be kept accessible and active by the European Schoolnet over the next year to allow schools to use them in developing their ICT strategies and activities beyond the eSchola period.

A major strength of the eSchola initiative is its close link to the European Schoolnet and the 23 national ministries

of education and large networks of schools that are partners of this initiative.

The eSchola initiative will have five actions:

Open Doors: A wide presentation of what is happening in the field of ICT in learning in Europe and beyond.

Favourites: In this area educators present their personal favourites of innovation in learning and teaching on the web or described on the web in a personalised way.

eLearning Awards: Excellence and innovation in using ICT for learning is awarded in two categories, eSchool awards and eTeaching awards.

@Europe: This is the collaboration area, presenting projects from the EUN and other networks for shorter, low-key activities or longer more sophisticated collaboration.

iPool: This is the eSchola hub for interaction, new online tools and community building. Teachers are offered thematically organised workshops, chats, discussions, forums, online lectures and collaborative learning.

The eSchola website is at: <http://eschola.eun.org>

Maltese teacher among finalists

Last year, local teacher Norman Borg placed among the 100 finalists out of 946 submissions from 27 countries for the eLearning Awards 2001.

The project was submitted in the 'eTeacher Training Awards' section, in which there were 14 other finalists.

The awards were handed out in the presence of policymakers and researchers from all over the world at a prestigious ceremony in Lisbon in December.

Mr Borg's project is a web site designed to aid Maltese primary school teachers in the implementation of ICT across the curriculum.

The site includes strategies, practical suggestions, troubleshooting for hardware and software problems, downloadable files, links to related sites and project ideas, among other material.

The site is at: <http://www.geocities.com/nor-comm99/ICTPrim/ict-home.htm>

The university: Planned future vs "imbaghad naraw!"

"We will worry about it later", as expressed in "imbaghad naraw!" is fairly typical of the Maltese attitude to anything about the future.

Trying to think about the future is challenging and uncertain. Yet consider it we must, if we do not want to repeat the mistakes of others.

There are many examples that can help convince us. Barnes and Noble was caught napping by Amazon.com. Xerox missed the market for small photocopy machines to Canon's delight. IBM failed to foresee the PC revolution with disastrous consequences to its share price. One can go on.

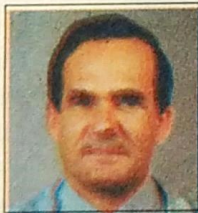
While the university is not a profit driven organisation, this does not exonerate us from the need for strategic thinking.

The first challenge in the formulation of a planned future is some common understanding of what are the current drivers at work. The aim is to obtain an informed view of the reality the institution will face in the coming years.

The uncertainty linked to the decision as to whether Malta will join the EU or not is a convenient way of doing nothing. It is worth pointing out that contrary to the expectations of some, the sun will still rise on the next day after the referendum, whichever way it goes.

There are other trends currently at work that are as or more, critical. These will come to haunt us unless we take the necessary remedial action now or soon.

For example, there is no doubt that gov-



Prof. Albert Caruana

ernment financing will remain tight whatever happens and the university will find it increasingly hard to maintain the current percentage allocation of government's cake. There are many other 'worthy' causes out there vying for government finance. Funding is but one concern. Technology is moving ahead and the rate of change here is breathtaking, making predictions in the medium term hazardous.

There are social changes that are likely to keep demand for tertiary education buoyant. Globalisation is affecting businesses and will affect universities too. Will universities become global with a few major elite brand names and a declining and dying number of secondary brands?

Competition from other tertiary institutions is and will continue to increase. Some of it will be home grown and we can expect MCAST to become a technical university; others will be local arrangements of foreign

institutions. Some of these are already here and chip away at the more lucrative segments. Which segments should we defend or build for?

What is our University like at this point in time and what University do we need to build that is able to face the expected new reality?

There is no doubt that our University has contributed in no small way to the intellectual capital of this country. Many of today's leaders can recall some time spent at University and hopefully something that they learnt there too.

We have done and continue to do a reasonable job at undergraduate level. There are problems like perhaps an over reliance on part-timers in certain areas. Problems, there will always be.

We are weaker on the post-graduate side. We can expect higher demand and competition here. If we want to compete effectively in this segment it is imperative that we start

training people today. Good academics do not grow on trees and it takes years before you can have the critical mass in terms of staff to be able to offer credible postgraduate degrees.

Another equally important pillar of a university is the research side. Here we are generally weaker. There are some pockets of research and there is little doubt that there has been improvement in recent years, but there are still some, too many perhaps, who only see their job at University as a teaching job.

Contrary to the conception of some, research does not have to involve major breakthroughs in human knowledge. Much of it is incremental and as the saying goes, what you do is add a few grains of sand to the mountain. This is not to say that breakthroughs are not possible, but these are often few and far in between. Yet, without this pillar, we cannot have credibility in the global community to compete effectively.

Any strategy needs to build on what there is, taking that which is good and building on it while discarding the obsolete.

However, before starting to decide this we need to be clear as to our teaching and research objectives. Only then can we determine what position the University of Malta needs to adopt in the reality that we envisage in five, 10 years time - more competition, relative decline in government support, new technologies, more people wanting to join...

(Continued on opposite page)

Managing conflict in schools



Audrienne Spiteri-Gonzi, an accredited mediator, outlines the far-reaching and often life-changing benefits of programmes that encourage teachers and students in schools to resolve conflict through mediation

Students who experience any form of physical or psychological "violence" in schools suffer from anxieties that affect both their academic and socio-emotional development process.

However, issues can be resolved in ways that benefit everyone involved in the problem.

Conflict resolution education and mediation training programmes can provide students with sophisticated negotiation and mediation skills that effectively deal with everyday problems encountered in schools and other educational institutions.

Incorporated into the personal and social development curriculum or as part of a classroom management plan, the programmes would provide a support system for a better understanding of conflict as a normal part of child and adolescent behaviour.

Frequent disputes arise out of lack of communication and cooperation, negative group dynamics and weakened sense of belonging, low self-esteem, unconscious bias and stereotyping, peer pressure and bullying.

The focus of the programmes would be on teaching students how to value constructive conflict, develop social emotional competence and proactive behaviour, engage in problem-solving and integrative negotiations, develop empathy and appreciation for diversity, master self-control and self-efficacy and mediate classmates' conflicts.

Each student would be provided with opportunities in how to manage conflicts constructively, thereby significantly transforming the way students manage conflict for the rest of their lives.

Recent studies indicate a strong relationship between social-emotional literacy and conflict resolution skills, traditional intellectual skills (reading, writing and mathematics) and success in the adult workplace. Teaching students how to successfully resolve conflicts should therefore be a key component of the educational process.

Many individuals, whether at home, work, school or in our com-

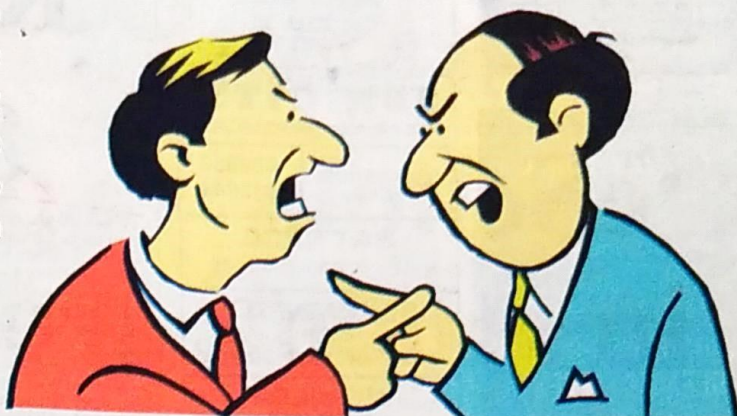
munities face a wide variety of conflicts on a daily basis, but few recognise that conflict, when managed effectively, can be tremendously beneficial. Despite the high physical, emotional and financial stakes inherent in many disputes, few people have learned to harness the power of conflict and direct it towards positive outcomes.

Instead, many have a natural tendency to avoid dealing with conflict. While this may be an appropriate first response in many circumstances, avoidance rarely addresses the underlying issues in a dispute and can contribute to mounting tensions. When conflicts escalate, they can erupt into "violence" especially when there is a general sense of powerlessness and a lack of understanding about how to get one's needs met in a socially acceptable way.

It is clear that introducing conflict resolution education improves the quality of our schools, families and places of work.

Indeed, research indicates that when schools or colleges adopt conflict resolution education and create peer mediation programmes, suspensions decrease and teachers spend less time dealing with disruption and more time on task.

The most notable effects on student perfor-



mance in schools include less disruptive behaviour, greater accountability, improved academic performance, positive student leadership, and the development of competencies (self control, self-respect, empathy, teamwork) needed to make a successful transition into adulthood and society.

An effort to make conflict resolution education a central part of the educational system, from elementary level on through tertiary level, will create more collaborative schools and will help prepare students with the skills to be effective leaders, problem-solvers, decision-makers and accountable citizens.

The initiative would also help cultivate a new generation of teachers and other professionals who understand the importance and benefits of effective non-confrontational, non-litigious conflict resolution.

For these models to work effectively, it is critical that school teachers, administrators, guidance counsellors and parents also be taught conflict resolution skills through structured mediation programmes. If students are taught these skills, but educationalists model a very different form of conflict resolution, students get a weakened mixed message, and the school atmosphere cannot be truly transformed.

The author is a B.Ed.(Hons) graduate from the University of Malta and read for a Masters degree in Negotiations and Conflict Management at the University of Baltimore. She is an accredited mediator certified by the Maryland Circuit Courts in the US. If you have further questions or would like to learn more about in-service courses for teachers, or view a course outline presentation, please contact Ms Spiteri-Gonzi or Christopher Bezzina at agonzi@malta.net or on tel. 99882225 or 21242713.



"If we are to reach real peace in the world we shall have to begin by teaching cooperation to children" – Mahatma Gandhi

What is conflict resolution education?

Conflict resolution education helps students understand the dynamics of conflict, use communication and creative thinking to build relationships and manage and resolve conflict effectively.

Conflict is resolved through mediation, whereby the disputants have the chance to sit face to face and talk uninterrupted so each side of the dispute is heard. After the problem is defined, solutions are created and then evaluated. When an agreement is reached, it is written and signed.

When one person wins and another loses in a dispute, we say it is a win/lose situation. Sometimes both people in a conflict situation lose, as is the case when someone works so hard to hurt the other person that he or she also gets hurt. We call this a lose/lose situation.

Mediation is a win/win approach to conflict: Losses are minimised and gains are maximised.

Mediators can be adults/teachers or students, while peer mediators are students chosen by teachers or by students themselves. Peer mediation is a process of conflict resolution in which students intervene among fellow peers who are in conflict in order to bring about an agreement.

Peer mediation recognises the unique competence of youth to participate in the resolution of their own disputes. It encourages individuals to take ownership of their own problems and fosters accountability. Often enough, this leads to a better understanding of the problem/dispute and is reflected in longer-lasting settlements.

No credibility without research

(Continued from opposite page)

What do we want the University of Malta to stand for out there in the minds of prospective users and stakeholders? What is going to help make us different? Can we exploit the Mediterranean dimension or is it just a concept we pay lip service to? What alliances and relationships would this require us to build or strengthen with other Universities, business and existing entities? Can we do so without a clear idea of what we want to be? It is to these and similar questions that we need to find answers to.

This process needs to be inclusive, seeking consensus without jeopardising leadership. I would be the first to agree that academics are not the easiest people to obtain agreement about anything on. The exercise requires a huge communication job. The alternative is some document on a shelf that quietly gathers dust.

Once we are clear on the positioning and competitive stance we wish to adopt we can turn our attention to the current set-up. Can it achieve what we want to do?

Organisational structures, in terms of faculties, centres, institutes and what have you, are tools for strategic implementation and therefore not immutable. What should we strengthen, remove, amend? What type of people do we need and how many? What sort of systems do we put in place? How do we fund all this – is the stipend system cast in stone, iron or butter? Should we, can we, charge fees?

These latter questions can only be answered if we are clear about the answers to the competitive strategic position we wish to adopt – are we?

Prof. Caruana holds a Ph.D. in Marketing from Brunel University. He lectures at the Centre for Communication Technology at the University of Malta.

HIGH COMMISSION OF INDIA, REGIONAL ROAD, ST JULIAN'S MALTA

The High Commission of India would like to sell its old stock of several furniture items, like office chairs, office tables and electric/electronic items like typewriter, photocopier, fax machine, TV, VCR, music system, electric fans/heaters, etc. on as it is where it is basis.

These items can be examined on all the working days from 2-5 p.m. Interested buyers are requested to participate in the open bidding for these items on Monday, March 25 at 11 a.m. at the premises of the High Commission.

For further information please phone 21344302/3