

STATUTE GOVERNING THE OPERATIONS OF RESEARCH CLUSTER



The University of Malta AI@UM Research Cluster (hereinafter "the Cluster") is a multidisciplinary research initiative that aims to drive national and international research collaboration in AI, fostering stronger partnerships between academia, government, and industry. By prioritising ethical principles, ensuring transparency and accountability in algorithms, and promoting inclusive AI, the cluster aims to be the national hub for AI expertise. We will proactively address the ethical, legal, and existential challenges of AI, integrating these considerations across all our initiatives to ensure responsible and impactful advancements in the field. Aligned with the Government's AI strategy, the AI@UM cluster will spearhead significant advancements in AI Research and Innovation by creating an environment conducive to the exchange of skills and expertise. The cluster will actively engage researchers from diverse fields, industry partners, government entities, and society at large to collaboratively pursue international relevance and excellence. In five years, the cluster aims to:

- Cultivate a robust pipeline of at least 3 Ph.D. graduates every 3 years specialising in AI;
- Secure funding for at least ten RSO3/4 positions dedicated to cutting-edge projects;
- Partner with industry on funded research initiatives at any point of its existence.

The cluster vision also encompasses a commitment to addressing the ethical, legal, and existential challenges of AI, ensuring these considerations are integral to the three pillars of research, collaboration, and innovation. The main objectives of the cluster are meant to bring together the expertise and experience of numerous academics and professionals that have employed AI in their various fields of work. The three proposed pillars are meant to assemble academics of closely related interests in an attempt to optimise the synergy amongst them while providing a sustainable cluster structure. Current RSOs and Ph.D. will also contribute to the different pillars while cluster-specific RSOs will be employed, 1 in each pillar, to work exclusively on the individual pillar theme. The pillars are:

- i. Vision/Image/Sensing/Detecting/Signal Processing
- ii. Language / Data Mining / Knowledge Discovery
- iii. Creative/Emerging/Fintech/BlockChain Technologies

There shall be a Research Cluster and an Executive Committee:

I. THE RESEARCH CLUSTER

1. The organisational structure of the AI@UM will be as follows:

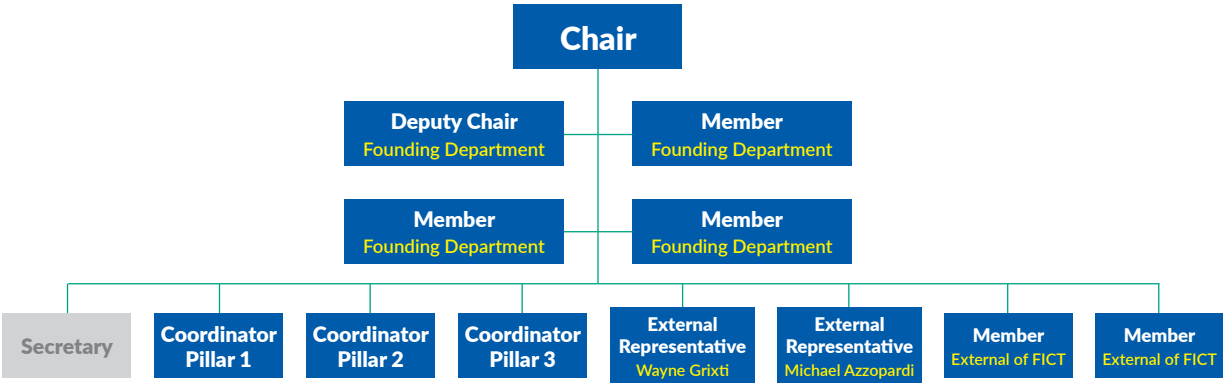


Figure 1: The Structure of the Executive Committee for the proposed AI Cluster

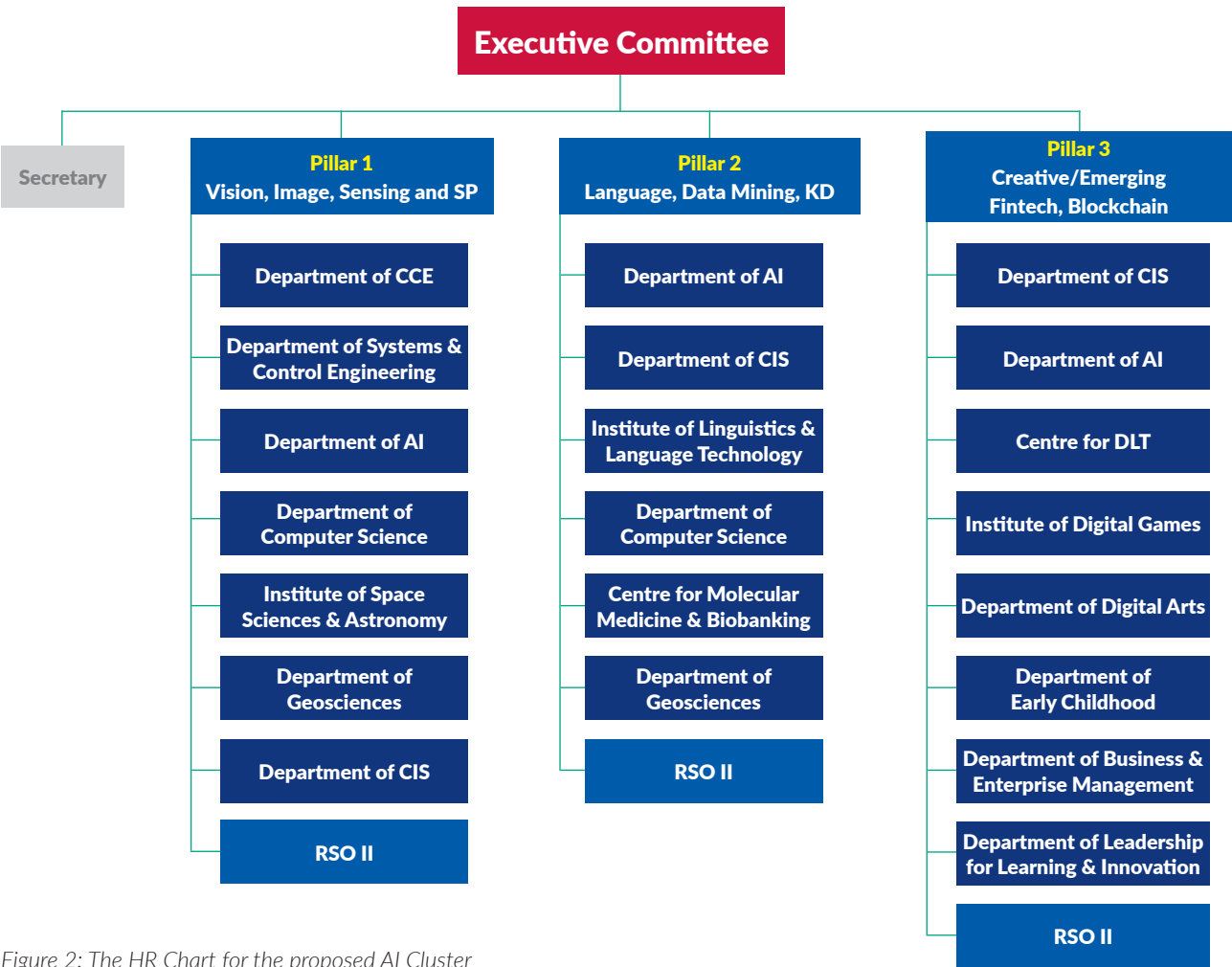


Figure 2: The HR Chart for the proposed AI Cluster

2. Membership of the Cluster shall proceed as follows:
- i. All academics who are Council appointed University of Malta members of staff having a proven research track or interest in the subject matter of the Cluster, are eligible to become members of the Cluster.
 - ii. To attain membership, the applicants require the approval of the Executive Committee. Such approval shall not be unreasonably withheld and the Executive Committee shall adopt the following criteria for membership approval:
 - **Academic Affiliation:** University academics from the Faculty of ICT and other relevant faculties or departments who have an active interest in AI, deep learning, NLP, or related fields are eligible for membership.
 - **Research Engagement:** Prospective members should demonstrate a commitment to AI research, either through ongoing research projects, publications, or a genuine passion for advancing the field. Active involvement in AI-related academic activities is encouraged.
 - **Collaborative Spirit:** University academics seeking membership should be open to collaboration with fellow members, including researchers from other disciplines, industry partners, and government representatives. A willingness to share expertise and contribute to the cluster's objectives is essential.
 - **Alignment with Ethical Principles:** Membership requires a commitment to ethical AI practices and principles. Academics should be dedicated to promoting responsible and transparent AI research in line with the cluster's values.
 - **Contribution to Cluster Goals:** Members are expected to actively engage in the cluster's initiatives, which may include participating in research projects, organising events, or mentoring students. Their involvement should align with the cluster's mission and vision.
 - iii. Prospective University academic members are encouraged to express their interest in joining the cluster and provide a brief statement outlining their qualifications, research interests, and how they plan to contribute to the cluster's success.
 - iv. Membership applications will be reviewed and approved by the Executive Committee to ensure that academic members are enthusiastic about advancing AI research and are aligned with the cluster's overarching objectives.
 - v. By adhering to these criteria, the AI Research Cluster aims to create a vibrant and collaborative community of University academics who can collectively drive the growth of AI research and innovation within the University of Malta and beyond.
 - vi. The Research Cluster must maintain an up-to-date webpage, within the UM website framework detailing, among others, the statue, the organizational structure, current and past research projects, achievements, and deliverables.
 - vii. The Cluster is subject to appropriate fiscal controls and audits that ensure that it remains true to its approved mission. All the UM's financial, human resources and research policies, IP policy, regulations, SOPs etc. shall apply to the Research Cluster.

- viii. The University Research Clusters Committee will review the Cluster every three years to decide whether it shall be allowed to continue its operations if an updated proposal for cluster continuation is submitted.
 - ix. The Research Clusters Committee retains the right to dissolve the Cluster and/or the right to remove a cluster member for valid grounds, including among others, mismanagement, significant deviation from objectives, significant under achievement of targets/deliverables, and transgressions related to research integrity.
 - x. Without prejudice to the fact that the funding of these Research Clusters by the UM is wholly dependent and subject to the availability of governmental funding, the AI@UM Research Cluster will operate as a revenue centre with the ability to raise its own funds, subject to the UM's financial regulations. Any revenue generated by the Research Cluster shall be used solely for re-injections into that same cluster fund.
 - xi. Any grievances of any kind between the members of the Research Cluster and /or with the Executive Committee should be brought to the immediate attention of the Research Clusters Committee. The Research Clusters Committee will investigate the grievances and aim to settle the issue amicably, it may if the need arises, propose remedial action where necessary for Council's approval.
3. The Research Cluster will initially comprise 3 Pillars as approved by the Research Cluster Committee.
- i. The 3 Pillars will initially be as follows:

*** PILLAR I: Vision/Image/Sensing/Detecting/Signal Processing**

This first pillar proposes to pool together the experience and expertise of academics and industry players within the fields of vision, image processing, sensing, detecting, and signal processing, as AI has revolutionised all these fields leading to remarkable advancements and applications across multiple industries.

*** PILLAR II: Language / Data Mining / Knowledge Discovery / Media Generation**

The second proposed pillar proposed to connect academics and professionals with interests in the related areas of language processing, data mining, and knowledge discovery, as significant AI contributions have facilitated remarkable advancements and insights in these domains.

*** PILLAR III: Creative/Emerging/Fintech/BlockChain Technologies**

The third and final pillar proposes to unify the efforts and AI expertise in the areas of creative, emerging, fintech, and blockchain technologies as AI has been instrumental

in driving innovation, efficiency, and new possibilities in these domains. By leveraging AI, these technologies have witnessed significant advancements and transformative impacts.

ii. The following criteria apply to the Pillars

- Joining an Existing Pillar
 - Expression of Interest: Interested academics or researchers should formally express their interest by submitting a request to the Membership Coordinator. This request should include:
 - Qualifications and research expertise.
 - Research interests and how they align with the objectives of the pillar.
 - A brief outline of intended contributions to the pillar.
 - Approval by Pillar Coordinator: The coordinator of the respective pillar will review applications to ensure:
 - Alignment with the focus areas and goals of the pillar.
 - Adequate resources and support for the new member's participation.
 - Induction: Upon approval, the new member will be:
 - Added to the pillar's roster.
 - Included in ongoing projects and activities.
 - Provided with information and resources to facilitate their involvement.
- Appointment of Members to a Pillar
 - Nomination: Individuals may be nominated by:
 - Existing pillar members.
 - Affiliated departments or the Membership Coordinator.
 - Selection by Pillar Coordinator: The coordinator, in consultation with the EC, will:
 - Assess the nominee's expertise and potential contributions.
 - Ensure a balanced representation of skills and experience within the pillar.
 - Role Definition: Selected members will be:
 - Assigned roles or responsibilities that leverage their expertise.
 - Integrated into specific projects or initiatives aligned with the pillar's objectives.

These processes aim to maintain transparency, inclusivity, and alignment with the AI@UM Research Cluster's mission while fostering collaboration and excellence in theoretical and applied AI research.

iii. During the course of its work, the Research Cluster may identify the need to establish additional pillars to cover emergent and important elements, or the need to remove an existent pillar.

iv. The following criteria apply to the establishment of new Pillars:

- Adding a New Pillar
 - Proposal Submission: Submit a detailed proposal to the Executive Committee (EC) that outlines:
 - The theme and objectives of the proposed pillar.
 - Its relevance to AI research and alignment with the Cluster's mission.
 - A list of potential members and research projects.
 - Expected outcomes and resource requirements.
- Evaluation Process:
 - The EC will evaluate the proposal based on criteria such as:
 - Alignment with the overarching objectives of the Cluster.
 - Potential for interdisciplinary collaboration across departments.
 - Feasibility and availability of resources.
- Approval:
 - The EC will vote to approve or reject the proposal. If approved, a coordinator for the new pillar will be appointed.
 - The inclusion of the new pillar will be communicated to all Cluster members, and its objectives and activities will be integrated into the Cluster's operations.

Once approved, any new pillar will follow the procedure established in Clause 3 above.

v. The following criteria apply to the removal of existing Pillars:

- The EC will assess the status of each pillar on an annual basis that will include:
 - Performance Review Report: A report detailing the performance, challenges, and strategic alignment of the pillar.
 - Consultation with Stakeholders: Discussions with members of the affected pillar and the wider cluster community.
 - Executive Committee Recommendation: A formal recommendation by the Executive Committee.

Following this review the EC will decide whether to remove the existent pillar or not based on the following criteria:

- Lack of Active Participation or Engagement
 - Persistent low levels of engagement or contribution from researchers affiliated with the pillar.
 - Inability to attract viable project proposals or doctoral candidates over multiple funding cycles.

- Minimal collaboration or integration with the other pillars.
- Misalignment with Strategic Priorities
 - The pillar's thematic focus may become misaligned with the evolving strategic goals of the university or funding agencies.
 - Shifts in societal, technological, or academic trends may render the pillar less relevant or less impactful.
- Overlap or Redundancy
 - Significant thematic overlap with another pillar, leading to duplication of efforts and inefficient resource use.
 - The opportunity to merge or reconfigure the pillar into a broader or more coherent thematic structure.
- Weak External Funding Prospects
 - The research areas under the pillar consistently demonstrate limited potential for attracting competitive external funding.
 - Lack of scalability or limited applicability beyond internal interest.
- Insufficient Outcomes or Impact
 - Repeated failure to deliver high-quality outputs, such as publications, collaborations, or successful grant applications.
 - Minimal contribution to building the interdisciplinary network or to the cluster's visibility and growth.
- Internal Evaluation and Strategic Review
 - Recommendations from periodic internal evaluations conducted by the Executive Committee or an external advisory board.
 - Data-driven reviews showing underperformance in comparison with other pillars.

vi. Pillar Coordinator

- a. Role and Responsibilities: Each Research Pillar of the AI@UM Cluster shall be coordinated by a designated Pillar Coordinator. The Pillar Coordinator shall be responsible for overseeing the activities and development of their respective Pillar, facilitating collaboration among Pillar members, coordinating research initiatives, ensuring alignment with the cluster's objectives and ethical principles, and reporting to the Executive Committee on the progress and needs of the Pillar.
- b. Term of Office: The Pillar Coordinator shall serve for a term of two (2) calendar years. The Pillar Coordinator may be reappointed for subsequent terms following the procedure outlined below.
- c. Appointment Process: The appointment of a Pillar Coordinator shall proceed as follows:

- i. Pillar members shall be invited to submit nominations for the role of Coordinator.
 - ii. Nominees must be full members of the AI@UM Research Cluster and have active research engagement within the thematic area of the respective Pillar.
 - iii. Where more than one nomination is received, an election shall be held among the members of the Pillar. The nominee receiving the majority of votes shall be appointed as Pillar Coordinator.
 - iv. The appointment must be ratified by the Executive Committee.
- d. Eligibility Criteria: To be eligible for appointment as a Pillar Coordinator, an individual must:
- i. Be a full academic member of the University of Malta;
 - ii. Demonstrate a sustained track record of research and/or project leadership within the thematic area of the Pillar;
 - iii. Exhibit a commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and the promotion of ethical AI research;
 - iv. Be willing and able to dedicate sufficient time and effort to the coordination and advancement of the Pillar's activities.
- e. Removal or Replacement: The Executive Committee may remove a Pillar Coordinator before the end of their term for valid and serious grounds, including but not limited to:
- Failure to fulfill the duties of the role;
 - Persistent lack of engagement with the Pillar's activities;
 - Breach of the University's or Cluster's ethical guidelines and regulations.
- In the event of a vacancy due to resignation, removal, or inability to continue serving, a new Coordinator shall be appointed following the appointment process outlined above. An interim Coordinator may be nominated by the Executive Committee to ensure continuity.
- f. Reporting Obligations: The Pillar Coordinators shall submit biannual reports to the Executive Committee summarising the activities, achievements, and challenges of their respective Pillars, and shall assist in the preparation of the Cluster's Annual Report to the University's Research Clusters Committee.
4. The Research Cluster must maintain an up-to-date webpage, within the UM website framework detailing, among others, the statute, the organizational structure, current and past research projects, achievements, and deliverables.
5. The Cluster is subject to appropriate fiscal controls and audits that ensure that it remains true to its approved mission. All the UM's financial, human resources and research policies, IP policy, regulations, SOPs etc. shall apply to the Research Cluster.

6. The University Research Clusters Committee will review the Cluster every three years to decide whether it shall be allowed to continue its operations if an updated proposal for cluster continuation is submitted.
7. The Research Clusters Committee retains the right to dissolve the Cluster and/or the right to remove a cluster member for valid grounds, including among others, mismanagement, significant deviation from objectives, significant under achievement of targets/deliverables, and transgressions related to research integrity.
8. Without prejudice to the fact that the funding of these Research Clusters by the UM significantly depends and is subject to the availability of governmental funding, the AI@UM research cluster will operate as a revenue centre with the ability to raise its own funds, subject to the UM's financial and procurement regulations. Any revenue generated by the Research Cluster shall be used solely for re-injections into that same cluster fund.
9. Any grievances of any kind between the members of the Research Cluster and /or with Executive Committee should, in the first instance, be resolved internally using the Cluster governance structures. If unsuccessful, these should be brought to the immediate attention of the Research Clusters Committee. The Research Clusters Committee will investigate the grievances and aim to settle the issue amicably, it may if the need arises, propose remedial action where necessary for Council's approval.

II. THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1. Membership of the Cluster shall proceed as follows:
 - i. A maximum of 12 members who are Council appointed University of Malta members of staff, one of whom is nominated to act as Chair of the Committee, which shall include, but is not limited to, experts in the area of Artificial Intelligence. The appointment of the nominated Chair of the Executive Committee needs to be endorsed and approved by Rector. The Chair will be a UM resident academic who is also an expert in the area and will be one of the five members that are appointed as representative of the five founding departments from the Faculty of ICT. The Chairperson will also assume the role of Treasurer. The Chairperson will provide leadership, preside over meetings, and oversee the financial aspects of the cluster's activities;
 - ii. Each of the five founding departments within the Faculty of ICT will nominate one member to serve on the EC. These representatives will bring a wealth of expertise from their respective departments, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration within the cluster;
 - iii. Two members of the EC will be elected from academics who are not affiliated with the Faculty of ICT but are part of other Faculties at the University of Malta. This inclusion of diverse perspectives will enhance the cross-faculty collaboration and broaden the cluster's impact;

- iv. The coordinator of each of the three pillars will automatically be elected as members of the EC unless the coordinators are representatives of the five founding departments (see Figure 2);
 - v. Two (2) members from relevant stakeholders who are external to UM.
2. The Executive Committee will serve for a term of two (2) years, after which it may be reappointed
- 3.
- a. The procedure for the selection of the Executive Committee members and nomination of the Chair shall be as follows:
 - i. Nomination by Founding Departments: Each of the five founding departments within the Faculty of ICT will have the privilege of nominating one representative to serve on the Executive Committee. These nominated individuals should have a strong background in AI research and be actively engaged in the department's academic activities.
 - ii. Open Elections: In addition to the departmental nominations, two members of the Executive Committee will be elected through open elections. These elections will be open to all members of the AI Research Cluster who meet the membership criteria and are interested in serving on the committee.
 - iii. Qualifications and Commitment: All candidates, whether nominated or running in open elections, must demonstrate their qualifications, dedication, and alignment with the cluster's mission and values. This includes a commitment to ethical AI practices and a passion for fostering collaboration within the AI community.
 - iv. Term Duration: Each member of the Executive Committee will serve a term of two years, as per the cluster's governance guidelines. This two-year tenure allows for continuity while providing opportunities for new voices and perspectives to contribute to the committee's work.
 - v. At the end of their two-year term, Executive Committee members may be eligible for re-election. This process allows for experienced committee members to continue their valuable contributions while ensuring that fresh leadership and ideas can be introduced as well.
 - vi. The election process for the two open positions on the Executive Committee will be conducted in a transparent and fair manner, allowing all eligible cluster members to participate in the voting process.
 - vii. The combined efforts of the nominated representatives from the founding departments and the elected members will form the Executive Committee, which will play a pivotal role in shaping the AI Research Cluster's strategic direction and activities.
 - b. The nomination of the Chairperson is a critical decision as they will provide leadership and direction to the AI Research Cluster. The selection process is designed to ensure that the individual nominated is well-qualified, dedicated to the cluster's mission, and capable of effectively guiding its activities. The criteria for nomination are:

- i. **Experience and Qualifications:** The next Chairperson should have a distinguished track record in AI research, deep learning, NLP, or related fields, with a depth of knowledge and expertise that commands respect within the AI community.
 - ii. **Leadership Qualities:** Nominees must possess strong leadership qualities, including the ability to inspire, motivate, and guide members of the Executive Committee and the broader cluster community. They should have a demonstrated ability to lead and collaborate effectively.
 - iii. **Commitment to Ethical AI:** The Chairperson must be committed to promoting ethical AI principles and practices, aligning closely with the cluster's dedication to responsible and transparent AI research.
 - iv. **Vision for the Cluster:** Nominees should articulate a clear and compelling vision for the AI Research Cluster, outlining how they intend to advance its mission, foster collaboration, and achieve its strategic goals.
- c. **The Nomination Process will be as follows:**
- i. **Call for Nominations:** The nomination process will begin with a call for nominations from the current Executive Committee and cluster members. Members will be invited to nominate individuals who they believe meet the criteria outlined above.
 - ii. **Nominations Review:** The Executive Committee will review the nominations and assess the qualifications and suitability of each nominee. Nominees may be required to provide a brief statement outlining their vision for the cluster.
 - iii. **Selection Committee:** A selection committee, composed of members of the Executive Committee and other cluster representatives, may be established to ensure a fair and impartial evaluation of nominees.
 - iv. **Approval by Members:** The nominees who best align with the cluster's goals and vision will be presented to the cluster's members for selection in an election. Members will have the opportunity to vote on their preferred nominee, and a majority vote will determine the next Chairperson.
- d. **The Transition of Leadership will be held in the following way:**
- i. Upon approval by the cluster members, the incoming Chairperson will work closely with the outgoing Chairperson to ensure a smooth transition of leadership. This transition period will facilitate knowledge transfer and continuity in the cluster's strategic direction.
 - ii. The nomination process for the next Chairperson is designed to be transparent, inclusive, and aligned with the cluster's values. It aims to ensure that the selected Chairperson is not only qualified but also shares the vision and commitment needed to lead the AI Research Cluster toward continued growth and success.
 - iii. **Nominations Review:** The Executive Committee will review the nominations and assess the qualifications and suitability of each nominee. Nominees may be required to provide a brief statement outlining their vision for the cluster.

- iv. Selection Committee: A selection committee, composed of members of the Executive Committee and other cluster representatives, may be established to ensure a fair and impartial evaluation of nominees.
 - v. Approval by Members: The nominees who best align with the cluster's goals and vision will be presented to the cluster's members for selection in an election. Members will have the opportunity to vote on their preferred nominee, and a majority vote will determine the next Chairperson.
- 4. The quorum of the Executive Committee meetings of the Board shall be 50% plus 1 of the members.
 - 5. Apart from keeping regular Agendas and Minutes of meetings, the Committee shall regulate its own procedures during meetings, provided that every decision requires the approval of the majority of members at said meeting. It is recommended that the Executive Committee should meet regularly and as necessary but should hold not less than three (3) meetings annually.
 - 6. Subcommittees may be set up at the discretion of the Executive Committee, and shall be regulated internally by it.
 - 7. The Executive Committee shall submit annual progress reports to the University's Research Clusters Committee. In this respect it is recommended that the Committee appoints a secretary for minute taking and recording purposes.
 - 8. Any grievances of any kind between the members of the Executive Committee and /or with the Research Cluster should be brought to the immediate attention of the Research Clusters Committee, it may if the need arises, propose remedial action where necessary for Council's approval.

III. DISTRIBUTION AND OVERSIGHT OF FUNDS

- 1. All funds shall be managed and all expenditures formally approved by the Chair of the Cluster. This approval is only a step in the standard procedures adopted by the University for the approval and disbursement of funds and expenses, which should be followed at all times.
- 2. As per Cluster Funding regulations, a Cluster is allowed to make changes to the financial plan that can take the form of either: (a) a shift from one budget heading to another; or (b) a transfer of funds from one year to another. While such shifts are regulated by the cluster funding rules, decisions in relation to such shifts require the approval of the Executive Committee by simple majority voting of members present at the Executive Committee meeting.

III. THE STATUTE

1. This Statute is without prejudice to the Research Clusters Launch Plan Document issued by the Rector, dated _____.
2. This Statute and any subsequent amendments thereto must be approved by the Council of the University of Malta.

Executive Committee Members for 2025 to 2026

Professor Matthew Montebello

Professor John Abela

Professor Johann Briffa

Signed by Chair: _____

Name of Chair: _____

On this date: _____

C- 30 April 2025