



L-Università  
ta' Malta

# Strategic Plan for Doctoral Education

2025/26 – 2027/28

*The University of Malta aims to enable doctoral researchers to advance knowledge through original independent research, be creative, embrace risk, and to provide them with the right skill-set for multiple knowledge-based and leadership roles.*

---

**DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

**2025**

# Contents

	<b>Vision</b>	<b>2</b>
1	<b>The Doctoral School</b>	<b>3</b>
2	<b>How this strategy was developed</b>	<b>4</b>
3	<b>How this strategy is structured</b>	<b>4</b>
4	<b>How this strategy will be implemented</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>PILLAR 1</b> Research Quality	<b>5</b>
	<b>PILLAR 2</b> Holistic Doctoral Education	<b>7</b>
	<b>PILLAR 3</b> Communication, Engagement, Visibility	<b>9</b>
5	<b>Measuring success</b>	<b>11</b>
6	<b>Reporting and review</b>	<b>11</b>

*This document has been prepared by Professor Maurice Apap and Professor Nicholas Vella for the Doctoral School. It was approved by Senate at its meeting of 6 February 2025.*

*Feedback and comments are welcome and can be sent on: ✉ [doctoralschool@um.edu.mt](mailto:doctoralschool@um.edu.mt)*

# Vision

The vision of the University of Malta is to be among the leading institutions of higher education, contributing to the development of our region, our country and society in general. We will continue our long tradition of developing the knowledge required to help Malta flourish as a small island nation and a member state of the wider international community.

– *The Strategic Plan 2020-2025, University of Malta, 2020*

---

The University of Malta aims to enable doctoral researchers to advance knowledge through original independent and impactful research, be creative, embrace risk, and provide them with the right skill-set for multiple knowledge-based and leadership roles.



## 1 | The Doctoral School

---

The Doctoral School was set up by the University of Malta in 2017 to act as a coordinating and support structure for doctoral researchers, academic supervisors, and other staff involved in doctoral education. It responds to the remarkable change that has taken place in the scale and nature of doctoral education over the years, and builds on the recommendations of the Strasbourg Principles (2005, 2010) of the European University Association's Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE). The Doctoral School operates with a small team of dedicated staff who interact with and are supported in their roles by the Rectorate, offices in Faculties, Institutes, Centres and Schools, the Office of the Academic Registrar, and other Directorates. The Doctoral School has successfully shaped policy, facilitated process, and enhanced student experience progressively since its inception.

### Mission

To provide guidance and support to the thriving community of doctoral candidates and academic supervisory teams across all doctoral degree programmes at the University of Malta.

Our team is committed to support and enhance the research experience of all doctoral candidates at the University. We bring together doctoral researchers and supervisory teams to benefit from the sharing of best practices developed by academic disciplines and specialisms. We work with different groups across the University to promote widespread dissemination of doctoral research. We work with other service providers to ensure that researchers are equipped with knowledge and skills that can be applied to academic and diverse career paths they choose to follow.

### Values

To enable and support research excellence; work with and foster an ethos of integrity; be sensitive to diversity; believe in a healthy balance between work and personal life; create knowledge to promote equity and inclusion; and engage with communities beyond academia.

– *The Statute of the Doctoral School, University of Malta 2017*

– *Building the Foundations of Research: A vision for the future of Doctoral Education in Europe. EUA-CDE, 2022*

## 2 | How this strategy was developed

---

Improving research culture is a complex, time-intensive process. The Doctoral School acknowledges this and the priorities identified here reflect the aspirations of our doctoral researcher community and the staff who support them. A number of consultative activities led by the Director and Deputy Director were held with a range of stakeholders that fed back into this strategic plan:

- › Doctoral School Board, including input from doctoral student representatives, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023
- › Pro-Rector for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2023
- › Network of FICS Doctoral Committee Chairs, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2023
- › Feedback from a survey with doctoral students, March 2024
- › Feedback from a survey with academics, March 2024
- › Feedback from a survey with FICS Doctoral Committee Administrators, March 2024
- › Feedback from directorates identified as leaders/co-leaders, 21 January 2025

The input from these activities has been systematically gathered and commonalities and thematic priorities have been identified. The result of this is a comprehensive and ambitious, yet achievable set of deliverables which are consonant with the wider strategic plan for the University of Malta.

– *The Strategic Plan 2020-2025, University of Malta, 2020*

## 3 | How this strategy is structured

---

The strategy is organised under three main pillars that reflect the values of diversity, ethics and integrity, wellbeing, structured learning and impactful research:

1. **Research quality**
2. **Holistic doctoral education**
3. **Communication, engagement, visibility**

Under each of these overarching pillars, we set out the main themes, summarise the already ongoing work, address specific deliverables for each pillar, and identify areas for future development. Areas for improvement which require further resources and/or for which ownership has to be identified, have been included among the future areas planned for development.

## 4 | How this strategy will be implemented

---

This strategy will constitute part of the wider implementation plan for the University of Malta which falls under the remit of the Pro-Rector for Strategic Planning and Sustainability. The Doctoral School will work closely with the named lead (or co-lead), in particular FICS, in each pillar to support implementation of the plan. It is clear that some action lines on this plan require additional dedicated resources. Careful consideration will be given as to how success is measured for each of the deliverables.

## PILLAR 1

## Research quality

The University of Malta aims to educate and support doctoral candidates so that they make significant contributions to knowledge, within and beyond conventional disciplines, working responsibly, and with integrity. The strategic priorities are:

<b>RESEARCH QUALITY</b>	<b>a. Research Excellence</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Maintain high standards in doctoral research</li> <li>› Encourage doctoral researchers to publish their research in peer-reviewed publications</li> </ul>
	<b>b. Quality of Supervision and Assessment</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Provide supervisory skills development opportunities for academics undertaking supervisory roles</li> <li>› Provide guidelines for doctoral supervision and encourage doctoral committees to promote quality supervision and assessment within their respective academic entities/disciplinary domains</li> </ul>
	<b>c. Research Integrity</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Ensure that researchers abide by the highest standards of research ethics and research integrity</li> </ul>
	<b>d. Research Funding</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Campaign for greater funding opportunities to enable high quality doctoral education</li> </ul>

### Action lines

#### What is already happening?

The Doctoral School offers a compulsory 6-hour workshop on research ethics and integrity as part of its Professional Development Programme. We have recognised first-author publications of peer-reviewed contributions as part of the 100-hour professional development training required for all doctoral students. An Outstanding Doctoral Thesis Award in two categories – STEM and Humanities/Social Sciences – has been introduced to acknowledge high research standards and award excellence. We have supported the Research Innovation and Development Trust (RIDT) in awarding conference travel grants to doctoral students. We have supported FICS in awarding Ph.D. grants, scholarships and bursaries when these fall outside the Research Support Officer (RSO) scheme. The Doctoral School has worked with the Office of the Academic Registrar, the Directorate of Human Resources Management and Development (HRMD) and the Office for Professional Academic Development (OPAD) to provide training for academics about supervision of Ph.D. candidates and the appropriate regulations and assessment procedures.

DELIVERABLES / COMMITMENTS	TIMEFRAME			LEAD/S
	Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3	
1.1 Launch student-supervisor charter so that roles, responsibilities, expectations of all parties are clearly defined.	✓			Doctoral School (DAC)
1.2 Strengthen supervisor professional development through the design and launch of a structured programme		✓		OPAD, Doctoral School (PDC)
1.3 Strengthen the professional development of academics who act as Ph.D. examiners through the launch of a structured programme		✓		OPAD, Doctoral School (PDC)
1.4 Recognise and reward good supervisory practice		✓		Doctoral School
1.5 Develop resources to support research ethics and integrity training for practice research students and supervisors			✓	FICS, UREC, Doctoral School

#### Future areas for development

UM has been successful in gaining financial support for research students but ideally this should be extended to all students so that the shift to full-time studies is facilitated.

Develop communities of practice for Ph.D. supervisors, including those specifically involved in practice research.

The results of the mentorship scheme piloted by OPAD should be reviewed to determine whether a mentor would bring added value to the student - supervisory team relationship.

<b>DAC</b>	<i>Doctoral Academic Committee (Doctoral School)</i>
<b>OPAD</b>	<i>Office for Professional Academic Development</i>
<b>PDC</b>	<i>Professional Development Committee (Doctoral School)</i>
<b>UREC</b>	<i>University Research Ethics Committee</i>

## PILLAR 2

## Holistic doctoral education

The University of Malta aims to educate doctoral candidates holistically so that they are not only prepared to make significant contributions in academia, but also in non-research jobs where critical thinking, leadership and organisational skills are valued. The strategic priorities are:

<b>HOLISTIC DOCTORAL EDUCATION</b>	<b>e. Professional Development</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Promote the importance of training in interdisciplinary and transferable skills to enhance and widen future career prospects of doctoral researchers</li> <li>▶ Equip doctoral students with research skills and a wide range of training opportunities for personal and professional development to respond with flexibility to employment market needs</li> </ul>
	<b>f. Doctoral Student Experience</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Promote networking among doctoral researchers and foster interdisciplinary knowledge by offering space and events for doctoral researchers to be acquainted with doctoral research in diverse fields</li> <li>▶ Encourage the recognition of doctoral researchers as partners in the research mission of the university</li> <li>▶ Foster a student satisfaction culture where the University through the Doctoral Committees, academic entities and the Doctoral School, reacts to the views and needs of doctoral students</li> <li>▶ Promote the mental well-being of doctoral researchers through a healthy work-life balance</li> </ul>
	<b>g. Adapt to new models of doctoral education</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Encourage the development of diverse models of doctoral education that respond to employment opportunities beyond academia, including industrial doctorates, professional doctorates, and joint doctoral programmes.</li> </ul>

### Action lines

#### What is already happening?

The Doctoral School offers a Professional Development Programme for all doctoral researchers served by a community of experienced UM academics and managers, and practitioners from outside the UM. We published and promoted guidance and processes concerning the M.Phil./Ph.D. transfer process and Ph.D. examination together with the Office of the Academic Registrar. We have published in a timely manner the annual Doctoral School lecture which concerns issues related to doctoral education. We participate in annual gatherings of the European University Association-Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) to ensure that the UM is abreast with current developments and trends in doctoral education.

DELIVERABLES / COMMITMENTS	TIMEFRAME			LEAD/S
	Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3	
2.1 Continue to review bi-annually the feedback received on the workshops delivered as part of the Professional Development Programme	✓	✓	✓	Doctoral School (PDC)
2.2 Provide students with study and networking space as part of the Doctoral School relocation to the Sustainable Living Complex to foster a sense of belonging to a researcher community	✓			Doctoral School
2.3 Introduce a student "exit survey" to monitor experience, including early termination of study	✓			OAcR, Doctoral School
2.4 Organise writing retreats for students giving priority to those who have family commitments		✓		FICS, Doctoral School
2.5 Develop training, guidance and support for using AI tools in doctoral research		✓		Doctoral School, OPAD
2.6 Pilot a system for comprehensive doctoral student representation on governance structures at UM and FICS			✓	FICS, OAcR, KSU

#### Future areas for development

Evaluate the feasibility of introducing mandatory professional development training for students who are following SThD and DMus doctoral degree programmes.

There is a lack of recognition and resolution of inappropriate supervisory practice. This needs to be rectified.

Gather data and information on models adopted by reputable universities about awarding Ph.D.s following an acceptable set of linked high-quality publications.

Migrate the current system which monitors doctoral student progress from the traditional filing system to a digital platform/dashboard which allows straightforward generation of doctoral student metrics.

**KSU** *Kunsill Studenti Universitarji*  
**OAcR** *Office of the Academic Registrar*  
**PDC** *Professional Development Committee (Doctoral School)*

### PILLAR 3

### Communication, engagement, visibility

The University of Malta believes that the knowledge generated by its researchers should reach diverse audiences, locally and internationally. The impact of research needs defining in its broadest sense, to include the effect on public policy, communal activities, eclectic culture, public health, societal wellbeing, industry, and education. Effective communication and engagement methods are continuously evolving and require sustained attention and review. The strategic priorities are:

COMMUNICATION, ENGAGEMENT, VISIBILITY	<p><b>h. Public Engagement and Promotion of Doctoral Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote the importance of doctoral education and its contribution to society through innovation and the creation of further knowledge</li> <li>Organise events that showcase doctoral research and offer doctoral students the opportunity to communicate the importance of their research to a wider audience including the lay public.</li> <li>Work towards increasing the visibility of doctoral research at UM and towards increasing the proportion of UM top graduates enrolling in doctoral research</li> </ul>
	<p><b>i. International Outlook</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster international collaboration in doctoral education and support the development of joint doctoral programmes with reputable partner universities</li> <li>Encourage doctoral researchers to publish their research in international conference proceedings and journals to gain exposure as wide as possible</li> <li>Promote doctoral education at UM for international students by ensuring that the doctoral research journey and research opportunities at UM are well documented online and by providing timely and effective information to prospective international candidates</li> </ul>

### Action lines

#### What is already happening?

Consistent and appropriate communication of initiatives and opportunities has improved greatly since the setting up of the Doctoral School. The annual meetings of FICS Doctoral Committee Chairs and Administrators ensure that challenges and issues are discussed formally. The Doctoral School website has collated information aimed at students, supervisors and administrative staff and it is complemented by FICS handbooks and guidance. The migration of the Annual Doctoral Symposium to UM's Research Expo, led by the Pro-Rector for Research and Knowledge Transfer, has ensured that doctoral students view themselves part of the wider academic community. Visibility of doctoral research is achieved through established communication platforms, including THINK magazine and the CAMPUS 103.7 radio station. A drive by the University of Malta Library to advertise open access publishing possibilities in different journals is an ongoing project.

DELIVERABLES / COMMITMENTS	TIMEFRAME			LEAD/S
	Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3	
3.1 Organise training sessions for prospective students – local, EU, non-EU – to embark on doctoral studies	✓			FICS, IO, MCAO, Doctoral School
3.2 Publish annually a list of doctoral awards	✓			Doctoral School
3.3 Include list of doctoral researchers/abstract of research under entries for academic staff on UM's staff webpage		✓		FICS, MCAO, Doctoral School
3.4 Ensure that holders of scholarships/bursaries/grants generated by, or on behalf of UM, communicate their experience widely in the appropriate fora		✓		MCAO, Doctoral School
3.5 Expand professional development training to identify and define research impact – national, regional and global			✓	FICS, RSSD, Doctoral School
3.6 Identify and remove the hurdles to effective and timely recruitment of Ph.D. candidates from countries outside the EU			✓	IO, IAO
3.7 Redesign the "Meet the researcher" initiative to showcase ongoing Ph.D. research projects to ensure sustainability and wider visibility			✓	MCAO, Doctoral School

#### Future areas for development

Secure funds to engage a translator/interpreter responsible for overseeing the publication of thesis abstracts in Maltese, in line with the UM Language Policy.

IO International Office  
 IAO International Admissions Office  
 MCAO Marketing, Communications & Alumni Office

## 5 | Measuring success

---

Measuring the successful outcome of a strategic plan for doctoral education has traditionally been predominantly associated with quantifiable metrics, such as number of students engaged in doctoral research, the successful award of the degree, and time to completion. Even within this limited field, straightforward access to data to enable fast, informative report generation is not available, and the ability to analyse and compare datasets is severely hindered. Of course, a key limitation of the data when available is the assumption that award of the degree indicates a successful experience during the doctorate. In actual fact, the individual nature of the doctoral experience for each student is often missed. Relevant approaches to include broader parameters exist. Regular, systematic surveys held in the course of the doctoral journey, including an exit survey to obtain retrospective views on the overall experience, will help measure and define success and identify important areas where improvement is required. In addition, because response rates in such systematic surveys may be low, more pro-active approaches may be required to obtain meaningful experience data. These approaches should consider better formal and informal communication channels between university and doctoral students, both at the level of governance and social activities targeting doctoral students.

*Identifying metrics to track improvements in research culture (University of Leeds, 2023)*

## 6 | Reporting and review

---

An annual report on the implementation of this plan will be submitted to the Doctoral School Board, which in turn will communicate with the Pro-Rector for Strategic Planning and Sustainability. This annual report will also be shared with the Network of Doctoral Committee Chairs.



**L-Università ta' Malta**  
Doctoral School

**Doctoral School**  
University of Malta  
Msida MSD 2080

- 📍 [um.edu.mt/doctorschool](https://um.edu.mt/doctorschool)
- 📞 +356 2340 3608
- ✉ [doctorschool@um.edu.mt](mailto:doctorschool@um.edu.mt)
- 📌 [/umdocschool](https://www.facebook.com/umdocschool)