

A Small University in a Small Country: Malta in a Global Age

Charles Farrugia

Charles Farrugia is pro-rector of the University of Malta. E-mail: charles.farrugia@um.edu.mt.

Twenty-five years ago, the then prime minister convinced himself that the Islands (Malta, Gozo, and Comino—316 sq.km, 370,000 inhabitants) were too small and too poor to afford a university. He proceeded to close down the University of Malta: first suppressing the Arts, Science and Theology Faculties as being nonutilitarian and then restricting student entry into the others. By 1978 student numbers had dwindled to 1,637, with 57 academic staff. A change of government in 1987 and a reversal of policy led to an unprecedented expansion. In 2003, academic staff stand at 562, and students number 9,686, 7 percent of whom are international students.

The University of Malta (UoM) was established in 1597 by the Knights Hospitallars, who ruled the Islands, when they amalgamated the Humanities and Science Faculties at the Collegium Melitansis with its renowned Medical School. Eventually, new areas of study were added so that now the university has 10 faculties together with several institutes and centers (<http://www.um.edu.mt>).

Today, Malta is still a small and relatively poor country (GDP U.S.\$4.02). However, most Maltese are convinced that the Islands cannot afford *not* to have a university. Apart from its mid-Mediterranean location with a rich history as a tourist destination, Malta's other known natural resource is its people, who are industrious, enterprising survivors. The UoM has contributed significantly to the transformation of the Island's economy—from being dependent on funds earned as a British military base to operating a vigorous service industry in Malta and in the surrounding countries. UoM graduates work in the fields of medicine, international law, architecture, engineering, I.T.C, financial services, microelectronics, accountancy, marketing, and the teaching of English. The university provides the highest value added to the Maltese economy as any other body.

Yet, being the only university in a small island-state poses problems that are particular and perhaps unique to the institution. Academics may become isolated from their counterparts overseas. Self-satisfaction with one's academic performance in the absence of tertiary-level academic competition constitutes a related hazard. The UoM guards against both risks through a long-established system of visiting and nonvisiting external

examiners who are invited to review course content and teaching methods, inspect resources, evaluate students' work, and sit on examination and degree classification boards. Recent academic quality assurance protocols have incorporated the role of external examiners into a system of departmental evaluation that includes peer review, student feedback on taught courses, and the research profiles of academic staff.

To prevent isolation, the university has instituted a policy of networking with international institutions. Traditionally, the strongest links, through the exchange of staff and students, have been with British Commonwealth universities—most notably U.K., Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand institutions. Since the 1980s, Malta has extended its traditional links with Italian and French universities to institutions in other European countries. Its International Office ensures active participation in the Utrecht, Compostela, and Santander networks. UoM's European Unit promotes collaboration in the European Union's SOCRATES, Comenius, and ERASMUS programs. Fulbright Fellowships for staff and the International Student Exchange Program for students maintain contacts with U.S. universities.

In addition, the UoM has introduced an Academic Work Resources Fund to enable staff to overcome their insularity and keep abreast with professional developments overseas. The fund provides academics with a 13 percent salary supplement, which they can spend on study visits, attendance at conferences, journals, books, equipment, and membership in professional associations.

Ironically, the UoM's international networking efforts have created other problems. Visits to other universities expose Maltese academics to cutting-edge research and highly sophisticated facilities, which the UoM cannot always afford. At best, this exposure leads to disappointments that some of the experiences encountered overseas cannot be replicated locally. In the worst instances, staff return frustrated and are sorely tempted to leave the UoM. Local industry also significantly poaches UoM staff.

Brain drain impacts the university most negatively in areas where the number of specialists is limited. The size of the university does not warrant more than one or two specialists in most subjects, and the departure of one or both results in the loss of their expertise, in the waste of the time and money spent on their training, and the need to start the process anew. Bonding staff does not act as a deterrent when Maltese academics can obtain salaries at overseas institutions five or six times over their UoM remuneration. The islanders' propensity to return home once they have benefited in experience

and affluence from their sojourn abroad is more effective than bonding. Recent joint research and teaching projects with local industry and overseas institutions have managed to limit the brain drain damage.

The university's traditions and its unique role as the Islands' only institution of higher learning place special demands on it. For example, in financial terms, the UoM cannot sustain a Department of [Maltese] History with seven full-time and several part-time lecturers when the number of students rarely exceeds 50. However, the History Department renders a unique contribution to the Maltese national identity and in nation-building. Often the UoM adopts policies that place national interests before financial considerations.

In a similar vein, the university has to abide by social conventions even when it is uneconomical to do so. For example, the UoM does not need a Classics Department with barely five or six students. Yet it retains this department for two completely unconnected reasons. The first is historical: the university's Classics

Department goes back to its inception, and the Senate would never contemplate abolishing it. The second reason is social: Malta's precarious employment situation is a perennial problem and dictates a practice whereby national organizations do not dismiss employees unless these are convicted of crimes. The state-funded UoM would be hard put to dismiss staff because of redundancies. As a result, all academic, administrative, and support staff are retained until retirement age.

Quality assurance measures and promotion exercises serve to promote quality education and an efficient administration. Still, a small amount of deadwood accumulates over the years, and however small the percentage, this drains the university's finances, which are always inadequate.

Quality teaching and research, a streamlined administration, internationalization, and revenue generation are four major goals of the UoM's current strategic plan. The attainment of these goals will ensure that this small but vibrant institution will continue to serve the Maltese and the wider communities as it has done over the last four centuries. ■

News of the Center and the Program in Higher Education

The Center's new initiative on women's higher education, led by Francesca Purcell and Robin Helms, is currently engaged in a circulating a questionnaire worldwide to collect detailed information on the number, scope, and nature of women's colleges and universities worldwide. The *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, cosponsored by the Center and CODESRIA in Senegal, is moving toward publishing its first issue. The editors-in-chief are Dr. Damtew Teferra, research assistant professor at the Center and Prof. Adebayo Olukoshi, the director of CODESRIA. We move toward completion of our book on the future of Asian universities. The book will be coedited by Philip G. Altbach and Toru Umakoshi, and will be published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. *The Decline of the Guru: The Academic Profession in Developing and Middle-Income Countries*, edited by Philip G. Altbach, will be published in a Spanish translation by the Universidad Autonomy Metropolitana in Mexico City. Alma Maldonado-Maldonado and Hong Zhu are completing work on a reference/bibliography volume on private higher education in international perspective. This project, carried out in collaboration with the Program on Research in Higher Education (PROPHE) at the State University at Albany, will be published at the end of the summer. PROPHE continues its research on private higher education.

Several CIHE books remain available without cost to those interested in them in developing countries. These publications include:

Philip G. Altbach and David Engberg, *Higher Education: A Worldwide Inventory of Centers and Programs*, 2000.

Philip G. Altbach, ed., *The Changing Academic Workplace: Comparative Perspectives*, 2000.

International Higher Education remains available on the Center's website. We have updated our index so it is possible to find all of the articles printed in *IHE* in the past—the index is organized by topic and country for easy access. In addition, it is possible to receive *IHE* regularly by e-mail. Please sign up for this service at <http://www.bc.edu/cihe/>.