Memorandum to the Political Parties

Preamble:

In keeping with their objective of acting as catalysts for progress of the academic profession and of the University, the University of Malta Academic Staff Association (UMASA) and the University Academic Staff Committee (UASC) within MUT are proposing this memorandum to the political parties for their due consideration in the light of the coming general elections. These two university organisations wish to continue in their commitment to support measures intended to raise the profile of the University of Malta, through improvements in the extent and quality of its service, both to Maltese society, as well as to the international body of knowledge through research, teaching and other associated activity.

The Context

Malta today has a heavily tertiarised economy, which recognizes that its competitive advantage lies primarily in the sphere of quality service provision. In this respect, the bulk of local managerial, technical, supervisory and professional staff are trained and educated at the one and only University of Malta. Various important policy documents – such as the Value 2000 Document (prepared during the latest Labour Government) or the National Training Development Plan (soon to be launched by the Employment & Training Corporation) – emphasise the role and multiplier effects of investment in tertiary education in order to foster a knowledge-driven economy.

A University perspective in the funding of Higher Education

The University’s unique role in the model of a modern and vibrant European nation to which Malta is aspiring takes on a particular significance and requires to be given central importance. This nation’s education sector needs to grow not as a result of having a growing economy but in order to act as one of the critical prime movers towards dynamic economic growth. The question of finding the requisite funds is therefore not an option but a necessity. There is an immediate need to boost the local tertiary education sector, which sadly lags behind the rest of Europe. The increased investment and economic growth resulting from such bold decisions would generate the necessary economic impetus to reinforce the primary and secondary school sectors.

It needs to be emphasised that although Malta’s tertiary education system has made huge strides over the past years, it is still grossly underdeveloped, especially in the light of new challenges. This is largely the result of a chronic lack of funds and inefficient funding methods.

Public expenditure on education in 2001 stood at 5.4% of the GDP.\(^1\) This compares well with the EU average of 5.1%. However, the percentage of the population (between the age 25-64) with tertiary education in Malta, currently standing at 7.0%, is three times lower than

\(^1\) Source: Structural, Poverty and Social Exclusion Indicators 2001, NSO.
the EU average and the lowest amongst all EU candidate countries\(^2\). As income levels and the standard of living of the Maltese continue to increase, Malta’s only hope to remain competitive in the world market is to continue to transform our economy into a knowledge-based one and to do this with increased vigour. For this to be realised, the number of graduates must be drastically increased. This is especially true in view of the fact that Malta lacks any natural resources. Finances are desperately overstretched and the University is not in a position to meet the challenge of global competitiveness if the current funding structure is maintained.

In the same way that it is imperative to ensure a quality education at the primary and secondary levels, it is equally imperative that tertiary education be brought in line with European standards in terms of funding methods. It must in fact boldly exceed these funding levels in the short-to-medium term until Malta manages to bridge the knowledge gap. A formula must be found to maintain the present level of financial support, partly available through maintenance grants, in order to encourage an increase in university student numbers, whilst at the same time to ensure that the greater part of these funds are actually spent on education. Supporting student participation in tertiary education should be undertaken via cost-effective ways, to achieve the underlying goals of helping disadvantaged sectors of the population and encouraging lifelong education. Potential university students must not only be sought from the 18-23 year old cohort but should also be actively sourced from older groups and those in gainful employment, within the spirit of lifelong learning. Priority areas should be identified and funded at adequate levels.

Given this situation, UMASA and the UASC are inviting the political parties contesting the April 2003 general election to consider the following general approach to tackle these problems:

a) University funding should be increased in order to
   - maintain and improve the current academic quality levels
   - improve the staff - student ratio
   - be able to adequately support a substantially increased student population in the coming years
   - improve the research & development contribution to the nation
   - be able to support a greater number of post-graduate students

b) Funding levels as agreed between the MUT and Government in the last collective agreement should be maintained and increased further to ensure that the University is not hindered in its primary role of developing Malta’s only national resource.

c) A formula funding scheme should be introduced to address the issues of adequate funding by priority area and more efficient use of available funds. In such a funding arrangement, Government enters into a contract with the university to provide the agreed funds, not on a yearly basis but at least over three-year periods. This would permit the University to plan its development effectively and with confidence.

d) Through increased funding, the University will be in a position to ensure
- improvement in its academic auditing
- improvement in its financial auditing
- the introduction of Quality Charters.

e) Incentives should be introduced to enhance academic excellence and contributions to Maltese society.

f) Changes in the Education Act

The Education Act should be amended to reflect changes in our society. Whilst better defining the role that the University should play in society in order to achieve the goals of a knowledge-based economy, the Act should be drafted in such a way as to promote the autonomy of the University and to ensure adequate funding. Therefore, in line with these objectives:

- The Rector should be elected by and from the academic staff.
- The representation of academic staff on the University Council should be increased.
- The University’s administrative structures should be reorganised to enable a wider executive power, so as to increase efficiency and reduce bureaucracy. Academic status should be given due consideration in this regard.
- Adequate funding should be ensured, to raise national educational levels to European norms, with particular emphasis on the tertiary education sector. If this does not occur, economic development would be retarded. Such funding should address the needs of students and academic staff.
- Faculties, Institutes and Centres of the University should be empowered to make financial decisions and assume responsibility for these. Such powers currently rest exclusively with the Financial Director, a situation that has resulted in excessive bureaucratic delays and inefficiencies. This proposal derives urgency from the financial requirements of present and future EU Framework collaborative research projects. The current system of University centralised financial administration taking over the financial aspect of such projects is not in line with the EU norm, apart from serving to embarrass local researchers.
- To establish an effective identity for the Junior College as a distinguished and distinct entity, where the institution and its teaching staff are adequately supported and financed to fulfil their role in the preparation of students for entry into University. University and the Junior College should have similar but separate funding structures that would ensure that each institution utilises allocated state funds in line with its clearly defined function.

g) National Research Council

A National Research Council (NRC) should be setup with representatives from the University, Government and the private sector. The NRC should have a separate and substantive budget that will be allocated to
- sponsor national research projects
- fund basic/fundamental research
• co-sponsor international research projects and networks
• sponsor student research scholarships both at the University of Malta as well as in foreign Universities.

The NRC should identify priority areas for the Maltese society and economy and be in a position to focus the efforts of several different stakeholders.

Dr Ing Victor Buttigieg                          Dr Gorg Mallia
President                                      Chairperson
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1st April 2003