



CASE STUDY

Valetta, Malta, June 2012

This case study entailed a site visit to the University of Malta and meetings with Dr. Raphael Vella, Dr. Vince Briffa and Prof. Jo Butterworth. The university currently provides for approximately 10,000 students, serving an island-wide population of approximately 400,000, occupying an exceptionally important role in the country's intellectual and cultural life. While the emphasis on creative arts education in the University of Malta is currently focused on the second cycle (masters level), as will be seen a critical issue that emerged from the site visit was the key role that graduates of third-cycle (doctoral level) programmes in creative practices (particularly Fine Art and Architecture) were playing as agents, leading the development of first- and second-cycle education in the arts.

There is a range of first- and second-cycle creative arts programmes provided by the University of Malta, which includes the disciplines of Dance, Art Education, Digital Arts, Music Studies, Theatre Studies and Architecture. While not all the disciplines are currently represented at both first and second cycle, there is a clear pattern of development, demonstrating the university's commitment to creative arts education. For example, in 2011, the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences was established, building upon the 13-year existence of the Centre for Communications Technology, which was set up to address local opportunities arising from the opening up of the airwaves to independent operating licenses by educating a range of different creative professionals for the media. The conversion of the centre into a faculty signalled capacity for an intake of approximately 100 new students per annum.

In recent years, there has been considerable growth, with the development of new bachelor and masters programmes. Several faculties are actively involved in the delivery of creative arts education, including Education, Built Environment, Media and Knowledge Sciences, Arts and the Mediterranean Institute. There are also ongoing discussions about this School / Faculty tier of organisational division as the university grows. It seems likely that some form of closer inter-operation will emerge in the coming years, perhaps in the form of two key sub-clusters of performing arts programmes and of art, design and media programmes respectively.

The cohorts of most creative arts education programmes are small, ranging from four to 15. In part, this reflects the scale of Maltese society, but it is also determined by the numbers of qualified staff available to teach on the different programmes. Organisationally, the potential for cross-departmental, cross-faculty and interdisciplinary collaboration has been very important in enabling new programmes, increasing the pool of available expertise to inform development. However, other limitations are less easily negotiated; for example, there is a limitation on art teacher education programmes, by virtue of the limited opportunities for trainee teacher placements, which are an essential feature of the pedagogical development of the student. There is an uneven pattern of capital and human resourcing in relation to different disciplines, which would seem to reflect a contingent history of development rather than a specific policy of prioritising one discipline over another, although, more recently, a clear strategic priority has emerged in favour of creative technologies and digital media that reflects internationally trends.

Another notable feature of the University of Malta's provision is its international aspect, which is particularly evident in the international masters programmes that it realises in conjunction with several US universities (according to one estimate, 10 percent of the university's student body is attached to these international programmes). While there is no clear timeframe for the development of third-cycle awards with a substantial body of creative practice, the logic of development trajectories to date would seem to indicate that this will become an explicitly framed strategic goal within the next few years. Two of the academic leaders consulted during the site visit explicitly identified third-cycle development as something that was under discussion, albeit primarily in an informal manner. One respondent indicated that he believed that the existing PhD framework in the Faculty of Education could be utilised to support a creative arts education doctoral project without anything new needing to be added to the regulations. All respondents placed great emphasis on a combination of theoretical and practical competences in artistic education across all three cycles, and projected the doctoral level of creative arts education as a logical development from the current trajectory of new programmes and initiatives.

An important issue that emerged during the course of the site visit was the importance of PhD bearers as agents of change and leaders of new programme initiatives. It was notable that those members of staff who had achieved a doctoral qualification were critically active in developing new first- and second-cycle initiatives. This raises issues that are often left unaddressed in discussions of the doctoral level of studies in the creative arts. On the one hand, the influence of the PhD bearers was pronounced, and it was suggested (at an anecdotal level) that there was a strong correlation between research qualifications among educators and innovation in first- and second-cycle educational provision. On the other hand, the potential cultural hegemony of a particular educational model might also require consideration, as the majority of PhD bearers operative in the creative arts in this context had been formed in the British educational system. An important consideration in the future development of third-cycle awards through the creative arts in Malta is likely to be the specificity of a small country with a narrow population base and a modest number of research students in the arts. However, the rich internationalisation potentials – building upon existing relationships across the Mediterranean, Europe and the US – might indicate an alternative approach to building critical mass in the context of a small nation. Whichever development pathway is adopted, it seems likely that a key consideration will be that of addressing the particularities of the Maltese context rather than simply importing predefined 'off-the-shelf' strategies for artistic research degrees.

An important consideration for the development of the creative arts third cycle in Malta is the broader context and research relevance that doctoral-level studies in the creative arts might engage. In this respect, several themes recurred in dialogues with academic leaders. At the time of our visit, Valetta, the Maltese capital, was in a second-phase bid to become 2018 European City of Culture, and the University of Malta was a major stakeholder in the bid process. This created a context in which the question of the arts could be foregrounded in the strategic mission of both the university and the city. (It is worth noting here that the bid is supported by neighbouring municipal authorities, indicating a national level of coordination and the potential for high-level access and influence by arts educators and advocates.) Thus, the timeframe of 2013 to 2018 will be an interesting one in terms of the potential for developing a strategic vision for artistic research development. An important consideration could be the ways in which development of a public and political agenda around the arts might require concomitant growth in critical culture and debate within the arts. This, in turn, suggests a pathway for research development. All of the respondents made particular mention of recent cultural development within Maltese society, as manifested in new venues and initiatives for the performing and visual arts, as well as cultural events that invited the residents of Malta to enter into public spaces and increase participation in civic culture. A clear challenge to the arts and to arts education in Malta is the development of an appropriate physical infrastructure. This could itself be taken as a research agenda for the arts, using the arts in order to better understand and plan the resource needs of the arts for the future.

During initial contact with educators based in Malta, some doubt was expressed as to the value of a case-study visit because of the absence of third-cycle activity. However, the experience of being on site and meeting people in their workaday environments was, in fact, very important. The key insight that emerged was the role of PhD bearers in leading innovation in first- and second-cycle teaching and learning. This also brought a new issue onto the agenda: the diffusion of educational models and artistic research paradigms from one country to another, through the agency of the PhD bearers themselves. Balancing this insight was the recognition that greater attention needed to be paid to the specificity of regional and national contexts, particularly when it came to questions of scale and critical mass. This is a theme that will be developed in subsequent case-study visits, in which the opposite extreme – very large scale cohorts and well established programmes – was experienced.

Coda

After circulating this draft report of the site visit made in summer 2012, the following updates were received. Prof. Jo Butterworth noted that, within one year, the situation described in the summer of 2012 was already well out of date. She noted that, in July 2012, the Senate of the University of Malta had approved the establishment of a new School of Performing Arts, comprising the departments of Dance Studies, Music Studies and Theatre Studies. This unit now offers a full range of programmes (BA, MA, MMus, PhD and DMus). According to Prof. Butterworth, staff in the school have an especial interest in developing Practice as Research courses as these methods ‘support the philosophy to synthesise theoretical and practical/performative aspects, a very important factor in the development of the performing arts cultures here in Malta’.¹ This development is, in itself, indicative of the rate of change in the artistic research education landscape in Europe.

¹ From a correspondence with the editors 11 November 2013.