



THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
RESEARCH, INNOVATION
& DEVELOPMENT TRUST

Annual Report '23

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Prof. Alfred J. Vella
Chairman, RIDT

Message from the Chairman

As we stand at the threshold of a knowledge-driven economy, the significance of research and development cannot be overstated. It is imperative for us, as a nation, to invest in sustainable research endeavours that pave the way for economic growth and societal advancement.

Despite our unwavering commitment, it is evident that we are yet to fully realise the potential of research funding. While government support remains pivotal, we acknowledge the indispensable role played by philanthropic contributions in fuelling our ambitions. This is where the Research, Innovation and Development Trust (RIDT) steps in.

Established in 2011, RIDT serves as a bridge between academia and society, mobilising resources to propel our research initiatives forward. Through philanthropic donations from individuals and engagement with corporate CSR programmes, we strive to secure the necessary funding to drive transformative projects and attract top-tier talent.

The support we receive empowers us to pursue ambitious research initiatives, ranging from tackling severe diseases to providing sustainable energy solutions. From leveraging artificial intelligence to preserving our cultural heritage. Moreover, it enables us to address global challenges head-on, positioning our institution as a beacon of innovation on the international stage.

While philanthropy enriches our endeavours, it should complement, not replace, public funding. It is through a collaborative effort that we can unleash the full potential of research and drive meaningful change in our society.

With this report, we aim to showcase the tangible impact of your contributions and reaffirm the pivotal role of philanthropy in shaping the future of university research.

Together, let us continue to invest in tomorrow's innovations and build a brighter, more prosperous future for generations to come. ■

Message from the CEO

In 2023, the RIDT achieved significant milestones, marking a noteworthy year of progress and achievement. From a financial standpoint, we successfully returned to pre-Covid levels of donations, signaling a positive trajectory for our organisation. Additionally, we secured valuable donations and forged key collaborations, while solidifying existing partnerships.

On the communications front, our engagement efforts were robust, leveraging multiple platforms to reach diverse audiences. Our radio program, 'Riċerkaturi', now in its fourth edition on Campus 103.7, continued to garner positive feedback from the public. Furthermore, our participation in the inaugural University of Malta Research Expo provided a platform to showcase our ongoing efforts in supporting and advancing research at the university. We bolstered our digital presence through strategic utilization of social media channels and secured regular appearances on various television and radio programs, where RIDT representatives actively discussed our initiatives and projects.

A notable achievement of the year was the successful collaboration with the Malta Tourism Authority, that will finance the conservation of the Nympeum at the Argotti Gardens. This collaboration, made possible through the generous support of the Ministry for Tourism and the National Development and Social Fund, exemplifies our commitment to conservation efforts and enhancing cultural heritage for both local and international visitors.

We are grateful for the substantial contributions received from esteemed entities such as Hili Ventures, the ALIVE Charity Foundation, Evolve Ltd, the Farsons Foundation, and Europadonna Malta, among others. These contributions underscore the growing support for our mission to drive a paradigm shift and champion research at the University of Malta.

With over 12 years of dedicated service, we remain humbled by the increasing number of businesses, organizations, and individuals who have embraced our vision. What once seemed improbable has now become a reality, thanks to the unwavering support of our community. ■



Wilfred Kenely
Chief Executive Officer, RIDT



IN NUMBERS

80+ PROJECTS
SPONSORED

12 Ph.D.
SCHOLARSHIPS

900+
DONORS

60 MAJOR
DONORS
(> €10,000)

€5.3 million RAISED



Investing in Knowledge: A Call to Support Research at the University of Malta

In a rapidly evolving global landscape, research and innovation fuel advancements across industries, foster economic growth, and cultivate a society that thrives on knowledge and ingenuity. On the local landscape, the University of Malta serves as a beacon of knowledge and innovation in our community. Yet, as we strive to remain competitive on the global stage, it is imperative that we recognise the indispensable value of sustained support for research across the board within our university.

Research is the cornerstone of progress, driving innovation, fostering economic growth, and enriching societal well-being. Through its myriad of disciplines, research at the University of Malta has not only expanded the boundaries of human knowledge but has also yielded tangible benefits for our nation. From advancements in healthcare and technology to solutions for environmental sustainability and cultural preservation, the impact of research reverberates across every aspect of Maltese society.

However, sustaining this momentum requires unwavering commitment and investment. Despite commendable efforts, the University of Malta's

research endeavours continue to face significant challenges, primarily due to limited financial resources. The government's contribution, though appreciated, remains modest in comparison to the growing demands and aspirations of our academic community.

In light of our obligations as a member of the European Union, which emphasises the importance of research and innovation as drivers of growth and competitiveness, it is imperative that we align our national priorities accordingly. The EU's framework for research funding presents a unique opportunity for Malta to leverage additional resources and foster collaboration on an international scale. By increasing its investment in research, Malta not only fulfils its commitments but also ensures our participation in the global knowledge economy.

Moreover, the responsibility for supporting university research extends beyond the realm of public institutions. Companies and individuals alike have a vital role to play in nurturing the intellectual capital of our nation. Through philanthropy and Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, businesses can contribute to the advancement of knowledge while enhancing their own competitive edge. By investing in research

partnerships with the University of Malta, companies can gain access to cutting-edge expertise, drive innovation in their respective industries, and create a positive impact on society.

Likewise, individuals have the power to make a difference through their support for research initiatives. Whether through donations, scholarships, or legacies, every contribution serves to empower the next generation of researchers and innovators. By fostering a culture of giving within our community, we not only enrich the academic experience but also ensure that research remains accessible and inclusive for all.

As we look towards the future, let us reaffirm our commitment to investing in knowledge. Let us recognise the transformative potential of research and its capacity to shape a better tomorrow for generations to come. Together, let us champion the cause of research at the University of Malta, calling upon the government, businesses, and individuals to increase their support and secure a brighter, more prosperous future for our nation. ■

LifeCycle Foundation Malta

Always an uphill struggle

When founder Alan Curry organised the first LifeCycle challenge in 1999, he had a very clear aim in mind: to raise money for equipment needed by the Renal Unit. Now, the money is also going to research and, a quarter of a century later, the members of this extraordinary physical challenge get just as much satisfaction from seeing how they can help.

Over the past years, Alan has lost track of the amount raised by the LifeCycle Foundation, but it is certainly close to €4 million. The daunting cycling challenge, which sees the team cycle 2,000 kilometres, had originally set its sights on raising money to purchase more dialysis units, especially ones that patients could use in their own homes, enabling them to avoid having to go to hospital for their four-hour sessions.

Over the years, the Unit – first at St Luke’s Hospital and then at Mater Dei – was given all it needed, and the focus then went back to services for patients, for example, organising transport to ferry them to dialysis.

“We were in constant contact with the Unit to see how best to spend the money that we raised,” Alan explained. It was clear that once the priorities had been purchased, LifeCycle should focus on the causes of the disease, so research was the obvious place to go.

The LifeCycle Foundation is the only NGO dedicated towards renal care, and Alan admits that it is a tough target, especially since it is, so to speak, an invisible disease.

“This has always been our problem. There are people who are on dialysis who come to the gym. They can seem to live a fairly normal life as long as they get dialysis. But there is nothing normal about having to rely on dialysis. And the only long-term solution is to get a kidney transplant,” he added.

The agonising wait for a kidney match is hard to imagine. There are some 90 people on the waiting list and only a handful of transplants are carried out every year. It does not help that the number of kidney donors has gone down since COVID, and the LifeCycle Foundation works closely with the Transplant Support Group, handing out donor cards at all its events and encouraging people to sign up as organ donors.

This is one of the reasons that a very important part of any LifeCycle challenge, apart from the months of training, is visiting the Renal Unit. This is not mandatory but it is almost certainly one of the toughest things that the cyclists and the support team will go through.

“I have been doing this for 25 years and I still find the visits and talking to the patients incredibly moving,” he admitted.

Indeed, Alan describes himself as stubborn for refusing to make the challenge easier, saying the point had always been to remind all those involved, from participants to donors, that kidney disease is a relentless uphill struggle.

Dedicating funds for research to learn more about the disease was not easy, as the outcome is far from guaranteed. However, the Foundation teamed up with RIDT several years ago for the first project. In 2023 the Foundation donated another €25,000 to research from the €150,000 collected through the 2023 challenge from Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur, which is directed to the ongoing second project.

Alan admitted that the current study, on polycystic kidney disease, is not easy to communicate.

“Prof. Edith Said gave us all a demonstration to explain the results of their work, but even though I was concentrating, I only grasped a fraction! It is very technical, so imagine how difficult it is to explain to the person making a €100 donation,” he said.

“Raising money for research is not as glamorous as buying something that people can touch and see. But make no mistake, without research you are only putting buckets under the drop from the roof instead of finding out why the water is pouring in...” ▶▶▶



And so the team continues with its quest, which in October 2024 will see 15 people – including Alan – cycle from Botswana through South Africa to the Cape of Good Hope, certainly a fitting target...

They will be supported by a team of 10, with the emphasis once again being to reduce costs as much as possible to make the donation as generous as possible, at least half the amount raised.

"I can assure you that this is very far from a holiday! We train in the gym and outdoors for 17 weeks – a very punishing schedule – but the participants also have to raise €3,000 each, quite a large amount, to qualify. Over the years, we have become quite rigorous about this, so we have seen fewer and fewer youngsters take part. Students very often did not have enough contacts to raise the money needed, so the group is now quite middle-aged," he said.

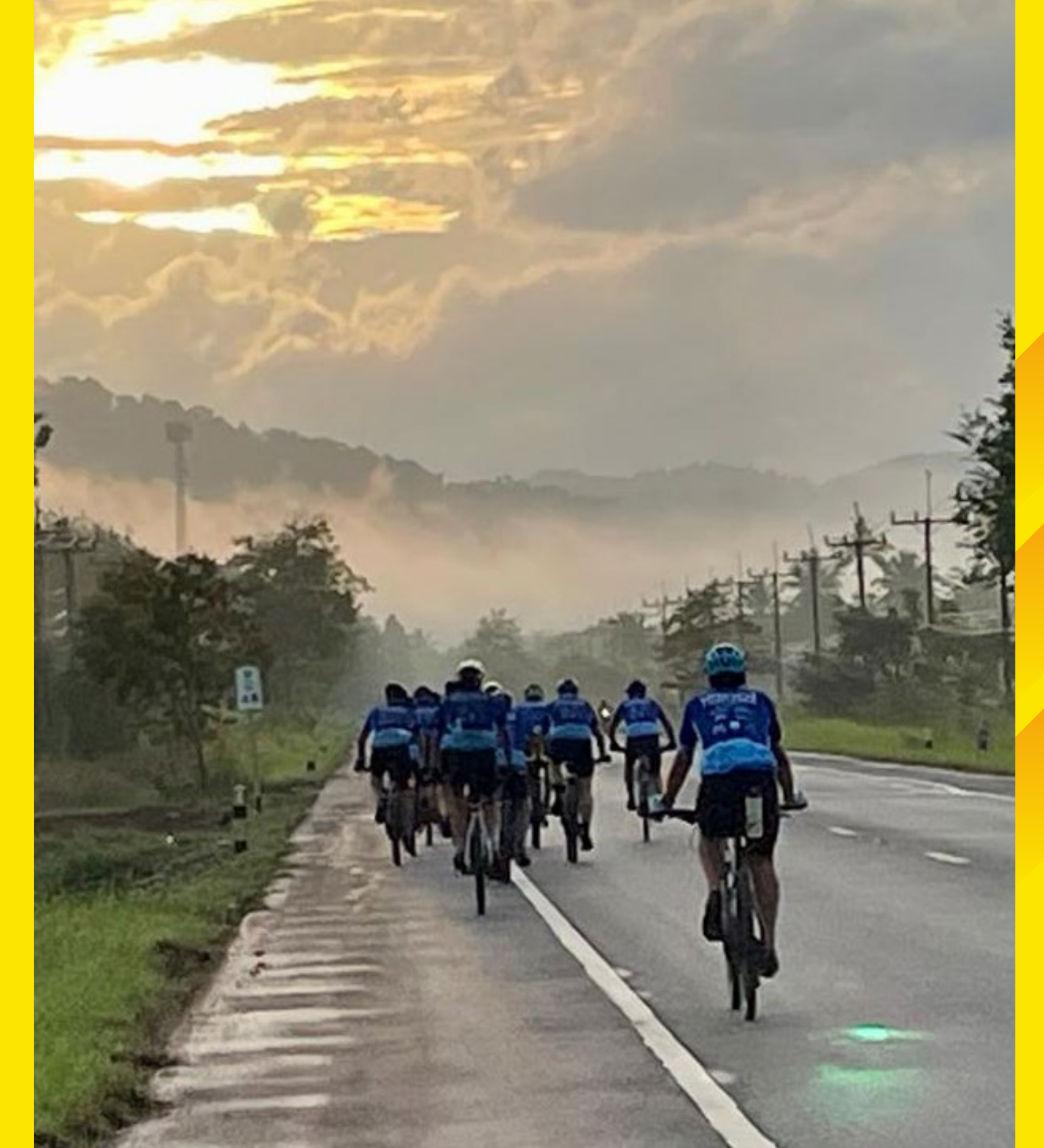
"And I am the oldest in this group," he shrugged.

There is one woman in the 2024 group and, yet again, a number who have relatives who were or still are affected by kidney disease.

What will come next? The Foundation is aware that the Unit is getting crowded, and that there are now beds where there were once offices. The obvious solution would be to extend the hours of dialysis but that would mean extending the evening shifts later into the night, hardly the optimal solution for either patients or staff.

"Whatever the solution is, the Foundation will help – maybe we can decorate?" he mused. "And who knows, maybe one day we can encourage more patients to sign up for psychological help. This has always been my dream." ■

[To watch the film "Blood, Sweat and Gears" click here](#)





Following the Science - Edith Said

No disease is pleasant but when it comes to kidney disease, it is hard not to single it out as being particularly nasty. The problem is that there are no symptoms and by the time a patient goes to the doctor, it is usually too late to do much.

“Kidneys are very elusive. They might not be functioning but the patient will not feel anything,” Prof. Edith Said explained.

Edith, Associate Professor in the Anatomy and Cell Biology Department of the University of Malta’s Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, has been involved with a study that started in 2021, doing research into polycystic kidney disease (PKD), a genetic, inherited disorder. Simple kidney cysts are sometimes seen and may be harmless, but PKD cysts cause kidneys to enlarge or lose function over time, leading to kidney failure and other complications such as high blood pressure, liver cysts, and even blood vessel malfunction in the brain or heart.

The research gave tantalising results about the genetics of the condition in the Maltese population, with results of the first phase presented at two European conferences and published in local symposia. That was already quite an achievement in the scientific world, but the recent publication in the *European Journal of Medical Genetics* is truly admirable.

“It was well received,” she said, adding that the work was being done as part of the Ph.D. research of student Nathalie Ciantar, supervised by herself and Dr Graziella Zahra. Other members of the research team include the head of the Renal Unit at Mater Dei Hospital, Prof. Emanuel Farrugia and Prof. Jean Calleja Agius from the Department of Anatomy



Out of those with PKD in the research group, almost half have a particular type of change, called a variant, in one gene. This is in contrast with other countries where only one in five cases would have changes in this particular gene.

This has a real impact on the clinical management of people with this gene, especially those with a family history of PKD, as it can be identified with a simple blood test.

“The fact that we have a very small genetic pool results in widespread presence of this variant. We also proved scientifically that this variant dates back to a common ancestor in the local population and then spread, which is a phenomenon seen in island populations,” she explained.

The research project brought Edith and Nathalie to the Renal Unit, where they met most of the 60 patients who accepted to take part in the study. It was their first visit there, and she still recalls how impressed they were by the ambiance and mood.

“We were left in awe of both patients and medical team. But we also realised how important our research was,” she added.

When they started to receive results from the group being tests, she admitted that they were quite excited: the same variant was present in quite a few of them.

Now the team wants to understand how this change in the gene causes an organism to react – the so-called phenotype. Edith and the team especially want to investigate why family members with the same genetic defect nevertheless have a different phenotype, as this knowledge can help to provide clarity for the patient with regard to their clinical prognosis and management. This will form the next phase of the project being funded through RIDT from the LifeCycle Foundation.

In the meantime, they are keenly following developments overseas on the treatment of people with PKD and are trying to raise awareness locally on the importance of early diagnosis. Edith explained that blood tests and the ultrasound associated with pregnancy could identify a kidney problem. Given that the disease usually develops in patients aged between 30 and 40, this means that at least one segment of the population can be checked. It is, at least, a starting point. ■

The Genotype–Phenotype of Autosomal Dominant Polycystic Kidney disease in Malta project is being carried out in collaboration with the Departments of Medicine and Pathology at Mater Dei Hospital. Mater Dei Hospital’s Nephrology Department has been vital in the recruitment of patients.



Hili Ventures support projects with long term impact

As the Director of Business Development for Hili Ventures, Martin Xuereb takes his role in what he calls the ‘impact led approach’ very seriously. He actually sits on the Selection Board at the University of Malta that assesses the proposals for the Hili Ventures Ph.D. scholarships, and remembers Estelle Zahra’s presentation well.

“When we talk about family, we have the nuclear family in mind. What was fascinating about Estelle’s project – and what really sold it to me – is that her scope would also include the social workers and the institutions looking at young children who are either fostered or in care,” he said.

In 2023, Hili Ventures signed a three-year agreement, committing to an annual donation of €40,000 to the RIDT to invest in Ph.D. students. Hili Ventures and the RIDT worked closely to establish the parameters of the research, and the eventual decision was to focus on projects that support families and the community – where ‘families’ also refers to the extended family that stands in when the birth family is not there for any reason.

Estelle responded to the University’s Call for Expression of Interest and was short-listed, eventually being awarded the scholarship. A part time Ph.D. candidate at the time

of applying, Estelle will now be able to switch to full-time research from April 2024, for a two-and-a-half-year period.

Martin explains that for Hili Ventures, it was important to participate in the process: “We did not want to just fund the research but also play an active role in Estelle’s studies, which was possibly a bit new to the University and the RIDT. We wanted to be partners in the process, from the call to applications to the selection,” he explained.

“The Selection Board of the Doctoral School have been very accommodating and welcomed our participation as an integral part of the project.”

The approach to the scholarships is aligned with the impact-led ethos adopted by Hili Ventures and its subsidiaries, which looks for projects that have direct and indirect impact for families in the communities it is present in, not just in Malta, but in 10 countries in Europe and North Africa. It has set up Ronald McDonald House Charities – independent not-for-profit organisations in four of its markets, in fact, each with a special focus on the health and wellbeing of children and their families. In Romania, it runs three homes providing accommodation for the hundreds of parents whose children are being treated in hospital. In Latvia, it ►►►



Martin Xuereb
*Director of Business Development,
Hili Ventures*

runs a mobile medical clinic, while in Greece, it recently signed a five-year agreement with the main public paediatric hospital there which will turn an abandoned building on the premises into family rooms, including accommodation for the parents of children receiving treatment there.

RMHC in Malta has invested nearly three-quarters of a million Euro on a learning centre in Qawra which acts a hub for around twenty NGOs. The centre hosts and supports educational programmes for children and families facing intellectual, social and development challenges.

“The space is used as a base by the Franciscan Welfare Association to teach English to Ukrainian women for example...” he explained.

Hili Ventures and its subsidiaries donate a large share of the funds required to keep the organisations going but also help with fundraising, bringing in other sponsors, and supporting the charity from an organisational standpoint – with crucial aspects such as marketing, finance and legal assistance.

Care is one of the group’s core values, and this spirit guides many other initiatives undertaken across the business. For example, most of its 11,000 strong team are allocated two days a year for volunteering. From the McDonald’s business in Romania to the Apple retail operation in Poland, all employees spend valuable time contributing to their communities through clean-ups, offering a helping hand at

soup kitchens or supporting RMHC in their region.

When he was approached by RIDT’s Senior Executive Officer Claudette Buttigieg to discuss supporting the RIDT, Martin saw an opportunity to deliver a project with a long-term impact. A second Ph.D. has already been provisionally approved by the selection board of the Doctoral School and another call will eventually be issued in 2024.

In the meantime, Martin said the group was excited to see the high calibre of research projects being put forward, and their ability to bring about meaningful change.

“This multiplying effect is how we see our impact build momentum. There is charity and there is philanthropy and we try to do both – it is important to be there for those who need immediate assistance but also to plan and implement change for the benefit of those who come after us.”

What message would he give other companies considering donations? His answer was very simple: “In the wake of the Corporate Social Responsibility Directive, businesses can benefit from partnering with organisations like RMHC for example, because investors and clients are increasingly aware of corporates’ sustainability credentials. But I think you do it for one simple reason: because it is a good thing to do. ■



First Hili Ventures Scholarship awarded through RIDT

Estelle Zahra is clear about what prompted her decision to do research into maltreated children: empathy.

“The results of research that has been done on maltreated children was really shocking and it is what really pushed me into this Ph.D.. It chilled me to the bone,” she said.

Estelle had worked as a speech and language pathologist at Primary Health Care for over 11 years. She already knew from her work experience that there was a long-standing relationship between language difficulties and emotional behaviour difficulties. But when she came across the term ‘school-to-prison pipeline’, she started realising how many of those individuals end up incarcerated.

“The association is even more pronounced in those with a history of maltreatment and astoundingly so for those with undiagnosed language difficulties. I was reading studies which described how they have to self-represent and narrate what had happened to them – but without the linguistic abilities to do so appropriately...” she lamented.

“Imagine if you are already angry and are put into this position with no way out! On some level I identified – especially with children who don’t have a voice... Those who lack linguistic skills through no fault of their own are not in a position to truly represent themselves as they deserve.”

There was another reason why her reaction was so impassioned: she has fostered two half-brothers who had already – at the tender ages of four and five – been through several different homes.

“When they came to our home, with my speech pathologist hat on, I realised that there were particular presentations I had not seen before in a clinical context. Even though we knew little about their history, I started researching the situation and it turns out some believe that the linguistic profile might be so distinct from other pathologies that it might also play a part in identification of that pattern!”

“The boys needed further therapies and assessments. I was quite taken aback when I realised that therapists knew so little about the impact of maltreatment and as a result were almost misdiagnosing them. You go from one therapist to another hoping that something sticks, rather than being in a situation when you are given a report referring you to someone else...”

She is now seeking to investigate whether there is a relationship between childhood maltreatment and language difficulties, using an assessment tool which was developed for the multilingual scenario – particularly useful in bilingual Malta.

“Some of the other research did not control for variables such as multilingual families. So if you happened to be from a minority language culture then the results would be affected. This is what prompted the idea to conduct the causal comparative group study, which will be a tough one,” she explained.

She is also applying a non-verbal ability scale which will allow her to rule out any additional difficulties which could confuse the results.

“So far, some other researchers based their findings on a ▶▶▶

Estelle Zahra née Farrugia – recipient of the first Hili Ventures Ph.D. scholarship in family-centred care, through RIDT.



vocabulary scale which is of course not indicative or representative of their linguistic ability!” she said, adding that she was focussed on children aged five to eight.

Her research is structured in a formal way, with a pilot review which will soon be published as a protocol, which will allow the actual review to start which will establish the scope of the research. She is also carefully revisiting the research methods that she had originally planned to use, but one thing she is clear on is the importance of looking at current practices across different entities, rather than limiting herself to the speech pathologists’ view.

“I want to understand all those who are involved in looking after individuals, from social workers across different entities to other allied health professionals. There are numerous professionals working with these children from the same entity or even across different entities who do not communicate with each other and who lack basic information about the maltreatment history... How can you deliver the right treatment if you don’t have this basic information about their history?

“The aim is to map out current practices and come to grips with the definition of trauma-formed care. The theory could eventually

lead to more informed practice but also provide a working model that different entities could use, perhaps even a transdisciplinary approach to interventions.

“The ultimate aim would be to contribute to the existing literature as to whether there is a relationship between childhood maltreatment and linguistic difficulties. Bear in mind that there was a recent study where the authors said that at this point in time, with what we have you could not say with certainty whether there is a relationship.”

Estelle did the first year of her research as a part-timer but the Hili Ventures scholarship will mean that she is now taking unpaid study leave to focus on it full time.

“It will be hard to make the change but the scholarship was instrumental when it came to taking the decision,” she acknowledged. ■

Estelle’s supervisor is Prof. Daniela Gatt from the Faculty of Health Sciences Communication Therapy Department at the University of Malta, and her co-supervisor is Prof. Judy Clegg from the University of Sheffield.

Farsons Foundation - Backdrops to our History

Michael Farrugia remembers his father Louis reminiscing about his childhood and how he had to listen to opera played rather loud on a machine made by his own father Lewis.

Michael is now the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Simonds Farsons Cisk; his father Louis became the company's managing director in 1980; and Lewis was the man who had founded the brewery in the late 1920s after the family's flour mills in Hamrun were destroyed in the Sette Giugno riots and it became necessary to diversify.

"My grandfather was a very keen opera man and he actually designed and built a massive record player which is now housed within the Farsons Brewery Experience," Michael explained.

But it was not only Lewis that was interested in opera: Michael's great-uncle Giuseppe Farrugia was the impresario at the Royal Opera House for the period 1932-35, when it was in its heyday.

It is clear that the family behind Farsons has quite a soft spot for the Royal Opera House – and this is perhaps why the project proposed to the Farsons Foundation by the RIDT through former Farsons colleague Antoinette Caruana resonated immediately. This research project is being led by Prof. Vicki Ann Cremona from the School of Performing Arts at the University of Malta.

"We have a great deal of respect for Vicki Ann and she is doing an excellent job researching the Royal Opera House. It is really a labour of love. When she and RIDT representatives came to visit us, we were immediately taken by the story of this spectacular find," he recalled.

A dark and inaccessible cubby hole at the Manoel Theatre had yielded a stash of canvas backdrops which had been used at the Royal Opera House and which probably date back to the 19th century. Vicki Ann is now doing research into these amazing canvasses and is weaving their story into the wider context of a publication she is working on.

"From a small project, this has evolved into something much bigger than she ever imagined! She has already written thousands of words covering the whole cultural, social, political context of the time! She is finding it so fascinating to discover more and more about the Italian, British and pan-European influences of the time," he explained.

This is the first agreement with RIDT but Farsons' ties to the University of Malta stretch back over a decade, with the latest three-year agreement signed in early 2024. Michael explained that it made sense to foster collaborations with the University, bringing industry and academia together. Over the years, the Foundation has sponsored the History Department through a dissertation award, and also the Faculty of the Built Environment, apart from organising student visits, lectures and so on.

Apart from Vicki Ann's contagious passion, the project definitely fell within the remit of the Farsons Foundation, which had been set up in 1996 to support local culture and heritage.

"We choose projects carefully and try to go for ones that are close to our heart. This was a good match," Michael said.

The Foundation had been set up by Michael's father Louis, and it is testimony to the role that the group plays in society.

"We have a role as corporate citizens, giving back to society, being part of the community. Corporate social responsibility has given a strategic importance to our whole business rationale – and it forms part of our values. It is an opportunity to support good causes," he explained.

The Foundation is run by a Board of Trustees as a non-profit organisation. They meet at regular intervals to discuss the various requests it receives, not just to do with culture and heritage but also for charitable donations and good causes. ►►





“We don’t make a big splash about it but we have been giving back to society on a regular basis,” he added. “The concept of ESG has made the issue more visible in terms of regulation but it is something we have been doing for a long time and it is deeply ingrained in our way of doing things.”

Another area that Farsons promotes wholeheartedly is industrial heritage and its preservation. The recent award-winning Brewhouse project was carried out with this in mind, but Farsons did not stop there and teamed up with the University of Malta to organise a series of lectures promoting the importance of industrial heritage and the built environment.

“We are an established company – almost 100 years old – and have a responsibility to lead by example. We know that people follow what we do, and that means we bear more responsibility – but it also provides more opportunities to do things the right way. It is part of our culture, and our employees certainly respect that and look up to us. This is what has made us the good company we are today.” ■



Saving Royal Opera House Scenery

Vicki Ann Cremona spent decades thinking about the dusty pile lurking in an inaccessible cubby-hole at the very top of the Manoel Theatre, beyond the grid from where scenery is let down. She had been taking part in a panto and had wandered off up to the darker parts of the building – but there was not much she could do at the time as the thought of bringing them all down from there was out of the question. Intrigued, she dreamt of the day when she could investigate them further.

“It was clearly a major find ... and a major project!” she recalled.

The years passed by but another theatre lover, architect Adrian Mamo, had by then also discovered the scenery and managed to open up and photograph a few, he too realising that these were scenography from the 19th and 20th centuries. And also, from their size, many of them were not from the Manoel Theatre but must have been brought there for safekeeping when the Royal Opera House was bombed during World War II.

“He mentioned the scenery during one of his lectures at the University

on scenography and one of my students, Daniel Formosa, told me that he wanted to do his dissertation about them. It was the opportunity I had been waiting for!” she said, noting that this had also led to their joint work on a short film for the National Library. It is also leading to a documentary with filmmaker David Serge, that is being financed through the University’s Excellence Fund.

By now the Resident Academic and Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Malta, Vicki Ann faced her first hurdle: getting permission from the Culture Minister Owen Bonnici was actually easier than she thought, but bringing the scenery down was harder.

“It was a nightmare – there was very little light and we had to use the torch on our mobile phones! We could only access the cubby-hole by walking across a plank, and we would pick the heavy scenes one by one and hand them across to the University workmen who were standing at the other end of the plank on a spiral staircase, so that they could carry them down. We all ended up covered in dust from head to toe!” she recalled.

It was a bounty beyond her wildest dreams: 360 pieces, many of them paper, some canvas. The unwieldy pieces were all moved to the University, where they are being kept under lock and key – but the work needed to start as soon as possible. The ones that were folded with the pictures facing inside were mostly in quite good condition, but the humid environment meant that they were all covered in dust and mould, and there had also been some water damage. Others were very damaged, and the paint had flaked off.

“There were many tears and rips...” she lamented, adding that the pieces are too fragile to ever be used again unless they are mounted on a backing that supports all their weight.

They were so large that Vicki Ann, assisted by a team of people – including university workers, family, friends and student volunteers intrigued by the find – arranged to have the seats removed from the Valletta Campus theatre so that they could be opened up on the floor, one at a time.

“It took at least eight people to open one!” she recalled. ▶▶▶



With the invaluable help of Anthony Spagnol, the chief painting conservator from Heritage Malta, the small team were able to apply first aid – especially first interventions to remove the mould.

Having to work in between the busy theatre schedules just before and after COVID-19 meant that the process took years, although more work was done using the hall at St Joseph School in Blata l-Bajda, which was generously lent for the project, and even the University gym.

Each and every piece was catalogued and given a unique identifier. A huge spreadsheet was slowly populated with all sorts of details, with colour coding and description to detailed measurements. Some pieces had indications regarding which performance they were used for, but the majority remain a mystery. The scenes were documented photographically by James Moffett from University, particularly by means of a drone used indoors.

Apart from the photos, Rosalie Formosa, an art teacher from St Joseph School, prepared sketches and is now even making models as they will help the researchers to understand how the scenes were used on stage.

Stories emerge from the smallest details: some of the sections had been folded back and secured with nails through the fold, indicating

that they may have been adapted for use in other, smaller theatres.

All this information is just the tip of the iceberg for Vicki Ann. She is writing a book about the Royal Opera House, its history and its scenography. Daniel Cilia has photographed the entire collection in view of creating a highly-illustrated, full-colour book. The work will be published by Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti.

Vicki Ann hopes her book will fill in the gaps left by other writers. Her research led her to take a one-year sabbatical from the University and, in her own words, she “lived at the National Archives and the National Library”.

“I was there every single day including Saturdays, and loved every minute!”

Her quest to find information knows no bounds. She went to the Notarial Archives to examine contracts, checked police permits and even the plans filed at the Public Works Department. She has even managed to find samples of the theatre’s wallpaper! She is constantly looking out for people who can show or lend her material, and has found very generous help in that respect.

“We are all curious to know more about the Royal Opera House. [Architect] Barry created such minute sketches of the outside. But there

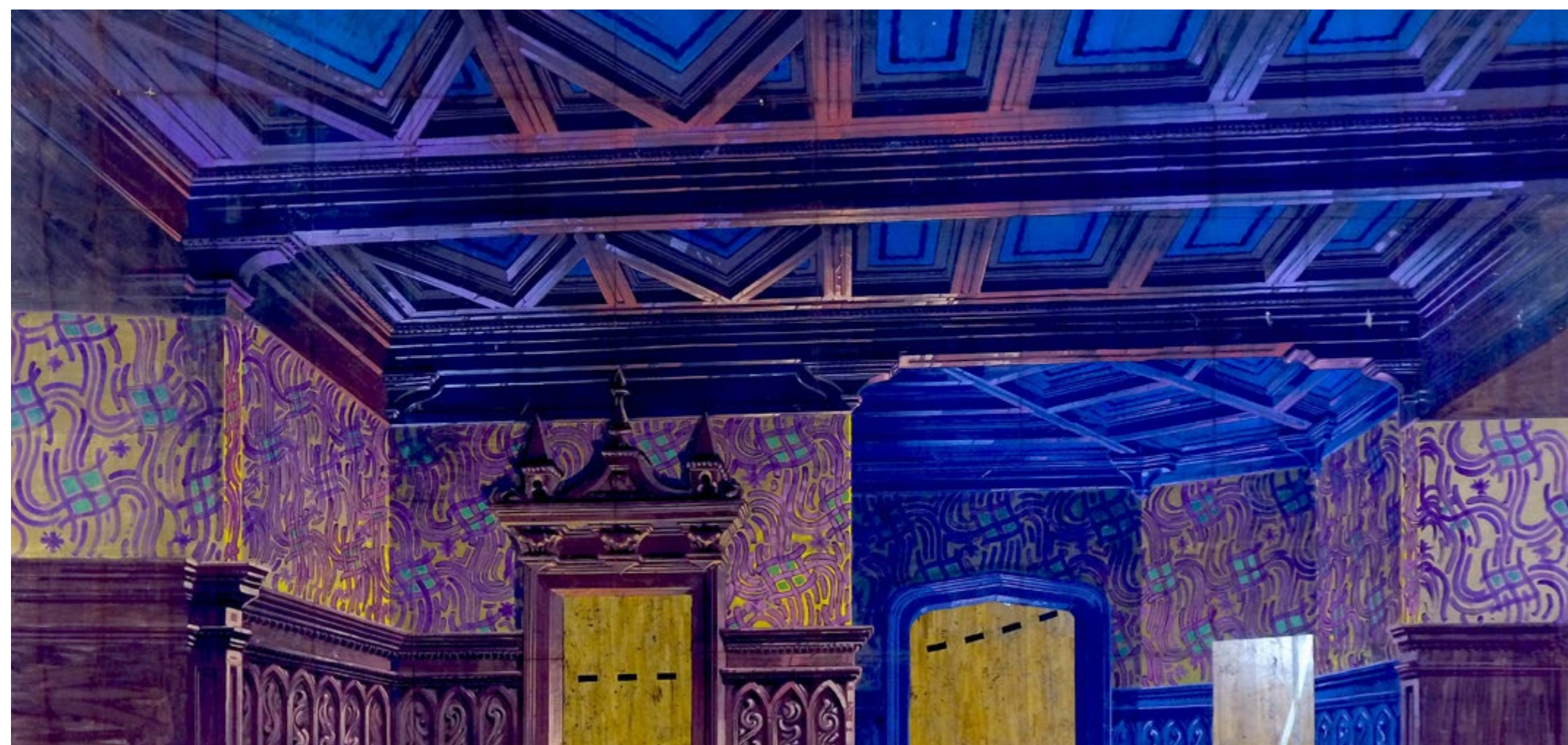
are such vague descriptions of the interior and we need to describe it properly, floor by floor. It was such a huge part of the cultural calendar; in one particular season, there were 23 operas!”

She admits that she has already got to 78,000 words, and that her problem is what to leave out, rather than finding enough material to include. A book that size – with full-colour photos – is not cheap, which is where Farsons, after being approached by RIDT to support this project, stepped in as sponsors to help with its publication.

She was full of praise for Farsons’ family member Giuseppe Farrugia, describing him as “a fantastic impresario who brought very important artistes to Malta”. However, she is certain that her work will give rise to new research and finds.

“I hope that the book will inspire others to keep digging as I am sure that there is a lot more material out there. It would be wonderful if this book led to more discoveries about this amazing location!” she said. ■

Some of the magnificent hand-painted scenery found tucked away at the Manoel Theatre.



HSBC Foundation - Getting from here to there: improving freight

When the HSBC Malta Foundation first heard about The Research, Innovation and Development Trust proposal to research transshipment opportunities and internal freight logistics, the 'sustainability' bulb immediately switched on.

The Foundation had already scored success in changing sustainability behaviour with its water conservation campaign, which had tapped into €1 million provided by the HSBC Group and created awareness across all age cohorts about water shortage, conservation and harvesting through the HSBC Water Programme – Catch the Drop Campaign.

It managed to bid successfully for these funds because sustainability and sustainable finance projects are, after all, one of the key pillars of the HSBC Group's strategy for corporate social responsibility. The concept was embedded into the HSBC Malta Foundation's approach around five years ago, and since then the Foundation has made it a cornerstone of its approach.

Its first major foray into the area of sustainable finance came about when Glenn Bugeja, Head of Corporate Sustainability for HSBC Bank Malta, and Manager for the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, reached out to then president of the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Industry David Xuereb, who was also becoming a figurehead for ESG in Malta. Following that chat, the Malta Chamber proposed to the HSBC Malta Foundation a research project around green office buildings for Malta.

There was agreement that Malta needed to work on facilitating the

move towards sustainable buildings in order to reduce the increasing burden on emissions and reach the islands' targets.

This fitted in perfectly with the local Bank's commitment to becoming a net-zero organisation by 2030, and HSBC Malta Foundation funded a two-year project titled 'Maximising energy efficiency through building renovation: HSBC Case Study'. This project was aimed at raising standards in energy efficiency and conservation in the building and construction sectors. The first challenge was the creation of a framework for Green Sustainable Buildings in Malta, which till then did not exist. With this project the HSBC Malta Foundation started, so to speak, at home. The research included the Bank's own head office which was being renovated at the time, and provided the opportunity to identify ways to maximise energy efficiency.

The outcome was the Green Buildings Project, which was eventually launched in the presence of the Prime Minister in early 2024 at the Bank's Head Office in Qormi, at HSBC Hub.

Knowing that this important project was running smoothly, the Foundation began to search for another one. Although it helps out numerous NGOs and entities on large and small projects, it also tries to focus on ones where it can make a difference in the long-term.

"We also support research and, in fact, we have sponsored medical research quite recently through RIDT. However, when the Trust approached us to pitch this project on sustainable freight transport, we immediately realised its importance, especially since Malta is an





island where most of the goods are imported. However, we were also intrigued by the idea of creating a hub in Malta where value could be added. This is already being done by a major retail group which looks after the region, using Malta as their distribution centre, but it is an economic activity which has a lot more potential for growth," Glenn said.

It is also an area where HSBC as a Bank could provide support through its own international expertise, as one of the most connected international banks in the world, drawing on the experience of its customers around the world to help understand how this activity could contribute to Malta's economy and its logistics problems.

The project was presented to the HSBC Malta Foundation board and was immediately accepted, resulting in a donation of €150,000 over three years. The project is being led by Prof. Maria Attard, who is the Director of the Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development of the University of Malta.

However, the project does not only want to look at the transshipment potential but also at internal freight movements which contribute to daily traffic on the islands' roads.

"In addition to the funding, the Foundation also plays an active role in the projects supported by the HSBC Malta Foundation. It is pointless to

sponsor a research project which is then just left on the shelf gathering dust. We look for projects which could lead to meaningful change," Glenn explained.

What this means in practice is laying the groundwork for the outcome to be supported, identifying the champions – from individual companies to the decision-making levels – who can make those changes happen.

This is why the Foundation has already reached out to a number of authorities to explain its aims and will extend this consultation to the political level. Glenn explained that it is important to have input from Ministries and relevant authorities and support in the initial stages of this research as they may want to include aspects of research that they may not have considered.

"When we talk about internal freight, we are looking at ways to improve efficiency and productivity, which has major implications for the commercial entities in this sector. We really hope that this project can lead to concrete recommendations that can be taken up as a country," he said, adding that this was the same approach they were using with the Green Buildings framework.

"Our main aim is to put resources into a project that could lead to something tangible. The research will map out the existing situation and the three-year term being sponsored will allow institutional knowledge to be created. We will establish a benchmark against which to monitor trends," he said.

"If you want change, you have to start somewhere." ■

Mapping for solutions in Sustainable Freight Transport

Prof. Maria Attard from the University of Malta's Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development has always believed that the first step to finding solutions to problems is to have the necessary data and information, so part of her new project poses quite a conundrum as there is at present little to no data on Freight Transport.

Through RIDT, Maria received €150,000 from the HSBC Malta Foundation to work on the two-phase project on the theme of Sustainable Freight Transport: the potential for growth of the transshipment sector; and the movement of freight in Malta.

The first phase, which the Foundation knows well from the Bank's international partners, is relatively straightforward. The Malta Freeport, which handled nearly 3 million TEUs in 2023, has been an important pillar of the islands' economy for several decades. Historically, Malta has been an important geostrategic port within the Mediterranean with an enviable position along established trade routes.

Maria and her colleagues Dr Enrico D'Agostini and Prof. Alexander Micallef are analysing how the economy can derive more value from this important activity.

"How do we capitalise on this? The obvious thing is transshipment where you add value to the products being shipped via Malta through packaging, assembling, even adding stickers, for example, before the goods are forwarded and delivered to the end markets. This is not a new concept and is one that has been used by China for some time: it exports in bulk and then adds value in countries en route," she explained,

adding that at present only a few companies in Malta are involved in this activity.

This work requires, among other things, the development of a free trade zone and this project aims to look at the challenges of the current situation and what is required to sustain potential future growth.

She is also taking a new approach, following on from discussions with colleagues: "There has been a shift in logistics research and we are now more focussed on co-creation and co-design. So the idea is to listen to the stakeholders and avoid mistakes that occur when people have good intentions but no oversight of the actual situation! We aim to build it from the ground up," she said, adding that stakeholder meetings had started and the process of employing researchers are in hand.

The second phase of the project is about local freight movements, which she finds intriguing.

"We tend to focus a lot of our work on people and their movement, but with increased population and consumption, the transport system that supports the efficient movement of goods becomes ever more important. We do not manage the freight sector well enough on our roads – although we know that it contributes substantially to traffic congestion and pollution, and to the use of the network and infrastructure, which we know has its limitations," she said.

Maria spent some time as a consultant to the transport regulator on the island and always wondered how much more could be achieved if there were more information, ►►





Prof. Maria Attard

especially in a sector which has changed so dramatically over the decades, from increasing e-commerce to the establishment of supermarket chains.

“We do not know where things are stored and how they get around the island – so we are not in a position to say whether we can manage them more efficiently. When it comes to urban logistics, there is a plethora of things that you can do in terms of managing these deliveries,” she said.

The information she would like to compile would start with the importers, the majority of whom are small operators who import just a few brands and products, out of small warehouses and garages. She also wants to map out delivery methods from the trailers that bring stuff out of the Freeport to micro-deliveries by scooters – which were unheard of before COVID-19.

She has a list of entities that will be approached, as well as local organisations and associations that bring together various stakeholders.

“We want to try to get a basic understanding of the situation, not necessarily to quantify but to put into context how we can better manage logistics. That is the first step!”

Maria has always been very oriented towards using data to come up with solutions, and she believes that commercial operators across the sector would be intrigued by anything that could save them considerable

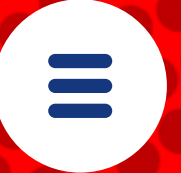
costs: “Think how much time is wasted stuck in traffic jams! Everyone would benefit from better management in the movement of goods and it would be a win/win situation.”

The team is drawing on practices which are now widely accepted across cities in Europe: “Cities have Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans which deal with the movement of people but these are increasingly being complemented by Sustainable Urban Logistics Plans which pay equal attention to the burden of moving goods.”

One of the most important aspects of such sponsorships is that they create a ripple effect. Apart from employing researchers, she is hoping that one will dedicate their Ph.D. to it.

“You do not just end up with a nice report but with people who have spent three years building up knowledge and expertise in the field which they can then tap into.” ■

Prof. Maria Attard’s collaborators are Dr Enrico D’Agostino from the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy – who specialises in logistics – and Prof. Alexander Micallef from the Faculty of Engineering.



Staying ALIVE for Cancer

It is undoubtedly hard to keep up the motivation when you are taking part in the Alive cycling challenge. Raising funds for cancer is not easy, and the stigma surrounding the disease means people prefer to avoid talking about it, but the reality is that research really does matter. This is one of the reasons that the co-founders Elton Barry and Nicky Camilleri are adamant that they will keep Alive going.

“We do it for the community: not only today’s, but also tomorrow’s... We fully appreciate that progress is not always achieved overnight. But there are positive results and scientific papers are published, all of which motivates us to continue,” Nicky said.

In 2023, the Alive Foundation presented RIDT with an astonishing €120,000 – a record – which represents the net amount after all expenses have been paid. The Foundation has always been very clear about its aims and is careful to keep expenses under a tight rein. This means capping expenditure on logistics, food and accommodation, flights etc.

“It is all about costs at the end of the day. Our intentions are to give as much as we can to the University. The more we save, the better it is,” Nicky explained.

And yet, however tempting it might be to recruit more cyclists to increase the amount raised, the maximum is set at around 40 people – who could be any age and nationality – to make the group workable.

And they do not even need to be experienced cyclists! Apart from Elton, there is one cyclist who has done every single one of Alive’s 10

editions, while some have had personal experience of cancer. Some had never cycled before they decided to take part, to the extent that one even bought a bike to get used to the routine.

The edition in June 2024, which will see the group go from Italy through France to Spain, is at an advanced stage of planning and many of the cyclists have already raised their minimum pledges, whether through corporate sponsors, fundraising dinners or even bake sales.

Nicky and Elton are proud of what has been achieved over the years: €820,000 has been donated since the first 2013 edition, with an impressive nine projects currently underway at the University thanks to these funds.

Things have changed over the years, and while the first editions went towards breast cancer research, this is no longer the only target for funds. In fact, the money raised last year is being spent on research into colorectal cancer, skin cancer, breast cancer and improving the quality of life of cancer patients.

Funds are allocated through an open call within the University of Malta, and the submitted proposals are evaluated by an international panel of experts. One thing is sure: as soon as the projects have been approved, the researchers get going.

“Just because we raise the funds this year does not mean that the money will be allocated immediately to a project, but you can be sure that as soon as they get confirmation that their project has been

accepted, they get started as, in many cases, all they are waiting for is the funds!” Elton explained.

“We make it a point to visit the researchers and get an explanation about their projects. We might not understand the technicalities of what they do, but it is always very important for all of us – including the cyclists – to see for ourselves how the money is spent, as that is the motivation to keep going,” he added.

The work continues long after the funds have been handed over. Both the Foundation and the RIDT take pride in following up on the donations to ensure that the funds are being used as per the original proposal. ▶▶▶





One thing that Alive fully appreciates is that research is not a quick win: even if the results are positive – which is by no means a given – it takes a long while for them to be vetted and approved, not only locally but internationally. And even then, there is the testing phase. So it is a while until any outcomes feed their way down to actual patients.

But without the money, the cycle cannot even start, with Nicky lamenting that if Alive could raise more money, more projects could be funded.

“Look, the toughest person is touched by what is being done in the medical labs. No one knows the work they do as it is not visible. But once it is all explained and you see what they want to – and can – achieve, it is very moving!

“And even negative results are important as they are studied carefully and point out the way for future research...” Nicky said.

One aspect that they are very proud of is the attitude to cancer and research. Nicky believes that Alive has come a long way over the past decade when it comes to educating people about the need for research, which is admittedly an abstract concept.

“Before people did not want to hear about cancer at all but every family is affected in one way or another by cancer. In 2013, it used to be one person in four who got cancer, but now in Malta it is one in every two. This is why it is so important for the survival rate to improve!” Nicky said.

Quite apart from the stigma associated with cancer, there is also an element of donation bias, with Elton explaining that corporates

approached for funds often reply that they give a regular donation to a particular charity.

And yet, Alive continues, determined to knock on as many doors as possible no matter how deep they may need to dig for energy.

“If the research manages to lead to something that will make a noise out there, it will help to raise our profile,” Nicky said. ■

The 2023 campaign was a success thanks to Alive’s fundraising partners, particularly TumInvest, La Roche Posay, Garmin Malta, Falzon Group, Empav Engineering and Cisk 0.0



Meeting our Donors - Christopher Busuttil Delbridge, Chief Visionary Officer, Evolve Ltd.

It seems to be quite a leap from creating a working model of a solar-powered lift to sending skin cells to space. But for Christopher Busuttil Delbridge, there is a clear path from one to the other.

Back in the 1990s, at the tender age of 17, the CEO of Evolve was already impassioned by the idea of science popularisation. For his Systems of Knowledge project at school, he and a friend had created the lift model, and it was from there a natural progression to win the local round of the Young Europeans Environmental Research competition and to represent Malta at the international round in Cologne.

“It was such an experience for us, and we were fascinated by the cutting-edge technology, from photovoltaic cells embedded into curtains to fuel cells that could power a submarine,” he said.

In 1995, he went into the University of Malta and did his Bachelors and then Postgraduate Diploma in Science, and continued to use his passion and energy to draw in others to science. He was on the organising committee of Science Week at the Malta Council for Science and Technology, and with colleagues set up the junior section of the Malta Chamber of Scientists.

“I spent two whole years working on my thesis on the neuro-transmitters used for treating multiple sclerosis and some forms of cancer. The side-effects were quite cruel as they caused depression and could even lead to suicidal tendencies. My research, under the supervision of my professor at the time, was to find the right dose which had the required therapeutic effect without the severity of the side-effects.

“It was fascinating – but it was clear that without money you cannot buy equipment or fund researchers! At the time, we wished to do more but we were underfunded. What stuck with me, however, was the impact of planting that seed, that idea,” he recalled.

Once he graduated, Christopher joined Evolve, at the time a department of just two people that formed part of the Attard and Co group, which supplied scientific equipment. Over the past seven years, the group has since grown from 50 to 200 people and Evolve is now a subsidiary of the company, itself employing 40 scientists.

Moving to business from the world of academia was a bit of a shock and Christopher admits that, within a week, he had been brought down to Earth.

“I came out of University thinking that there was one type of microscope! When I went into industry, I realised that each microscope offers a bespoke solution for its particular application.”

It is therefore quite appropriate that one of the company’s first donations – through RIDT – was a €35,000 surgical operating microscope for the Anatomy Department. It was the first of many donations and collaborations with RIDT, amounting to some €500,000 over the years.

“Our first focus was on equipment, but it has ‘evolved’ since then, if you can excuse the pun,” he laughed.

His personal life also brought home the importance of research and innovation: when she was 21, his wife had a rare cancer which meant that she needed a prototype prosthetic bone inserted into her thigh, which has enabled her to lead a near normal life for all these years. ▶▶▶





“there is a pipeline of good ideas coming out of the University”



Mr Christopher Busuttil Delbridge
Chief Visionary Officer Evolve Ltd.

“You have to be grateful! Even here, at Evolve, everything is enhanced each and every day by the knowledge coming out of research,” he stressed. Christopher tapped the table in his office and spoke with pride about the fact that the idea to look into the behaviour of human bacterial flora in space was hatched around it with Prof. Joseph Borg who turned it into a reality – three times already, sending bacteria-infected skin samples into orbit.

“We had been collaborating with him for years. We had originally supported him with a €6,000 donation through RIDT for the study fees of one of his Ph.D. researchers!”

He walked back to his desk to proudly hold up a replica of the engineered box in which the cells had been sent and turned back with a look of determination.

“I think my background helped me appreciate how researchers and their assistants live from project to project, and how it all depends on funding! They spend so much time writing applications for their next project, rather than doing the research itself. If there were a steady stream of funding, their time would be so much better spent!”

Evolve is now dedicated to its mission as a benefactor. The three-year collaboration which ended in 2024 meant that Prof. Charles Sammut of the Electro Magnetic Research Group in the Department of Physics received €25,000 a year to use as he saw fit, whether for researchers’ salaries, or the purchase, maintenance or repair of equipment.

“It is actually a very small contribution compared to what they need. But they always make us feel so welcome, lining up the whole team whenever we visit,” he said.

Apart from what the Evolve money achieves, Christopher is also very proud of the example that they are setting, which is encouraging more and more companies to come forward. Every bit matters, especially in a country where funding is much more limited than in other leading universities and research institutions abroad.

Christopher has already pledged to extend the RIDT sponsorship by a further three years, once again to the EMRG and all the disciplines it supports, and intends to continue Evolve’s 1 percent of company turnover policy to corporate social responsibility (CSR).

“There are so many forms of CSR, from clean-ups to charity. But I decided that as a scientific company we will mostly support researchers,” he said, noting that most of their employees come from the University or MCAST.

He has one other aim: improving what happens once the research is done.

“We are part of the scientific community and are keen to help strengthen the commercial mindset. We need to be aware of the value of our inventions as there is a pipeline of good ideas coming out of the University.

“The challenges I faced at University of Malta are still vivid in my mind. I will never forget where I started.” ■



Meeting our Donors -

Gertrude Abela, President Europa Donna Malta

Gertrude Abela describes it as “the worst moment” of her life, one which reduced her to tears.

It was not when she was diagnosed with cancer, back in 1999, or when she went through the maelstrom of emotions dealing with her hair being shaved off, chemotherapy schedules or radiotherapy for weeks at a stretch. No, it was something far more unexpected that threw her completely off balance.

Gertrude, the current president of Europa Donna Malta, had gone for a follow up at St Luke’s Hospital and asked the doctor about reconstruction surgery, because when she had woken up after the operation she found that a breast had been removed after investigative surgery confirmed the presence of cancer.

“Like most people, you sign your approval for the surgery without really thinking about it. I was only 53. It was such a shock and you really don’t have time for anything to sink in before you are caught up in the whirlwind of treatment...”

“You are dealing with so many emotions and trying so hard to keep putting one foot in front of the other. And at the same time, you know that your family is feeling so helpless,” she recalled.

“My husband was so supportive but I felt like half a woman.”

So when the doctor was assessing whether to do the reconstruction and he asked her how old she was, it was the last straw.

“I remember I just stared at him and said: ‘You are the first person who has made me cry!’” she said.

Gertrude still gets emotional when she remembers what she went through, but she is well aware that one of the main roles for Europa Donna Malta is to support men and women with a breast cancer diagnosis, offering that most important aspect of treatment: hope.

She pointed out that, 24 years later, she is fine and ticks off all that has been achieved since then in terms of treatment and diagnosis.

The amount of radiotherapy required for most treatments is now days rather than weeks, chemotherapy is much more targeted, and reconstitution is done as part of the treatment at Mater Dei. And no, no one asks the patient how old they are...

And it is not just treatment that has changed. Although there were 320 cases of breast cancer being treated at Mater Dei last year, the mortality rate is far lower than it used to be. There is an active nationwide breast screening service offered, for those from the age of 50 to 69 – and there is talk around Europe of bringing the starting age down even lower to cope with the more aggressive types of cancer that affect younger women (and men).

The best way to demonstrate this positive approach is the Look Good, Feel Good fashion show that will this year take place in June. It has been held since 2011 and allows cancer survivors to join professional models – who take part pro bono – on the catwalk.

“When you approach these women, their first reaction is very often a stunned silence... But they realise how important it is not only to themselves but also to others and they sign up. Last year, we had 11 survivors taking part, including modelling swimwear and underwear – and not all of them had had reconstruction surgery!

“When you see them on the red carpet it makes you feel quite emotional, especially when you see them in evening dresses! They look like princesses!” she said.

Europa Donna Malta was originally the Breast Cancer Support Group. It joined the European Breast Cancer Coalition in 2004, giving it a more international platform, as Europa Donna Malta.

The NGO offers a number of services, education being one of the most visible to the public. Representatives give several talks on breast care and the importance of screening and early detection: they have a series of memorable slides showing the signs to look out for – using lemons to make their point about dents, inverted nipples and so on. ▶▶▶



“It is not just about finding lumps; there are many different symptoms,” she warned.

The NGO also provides free counselling, an important service for those who need to reach out for support when they receive their diagnosis, as well as for their families. But the NGO also provides pragmatic assistance, the most recent addition being a taxi service for Gozitan patients from the ferry terminal at Cirkewwa to the hospital and back.

“The nurse at the Gozo General Hospital, Josianne Bicker, sets it all up for them through Europa Donna Malta. You cannot imagine how something like this helps, especially when the patient has so much on her mind. Even if you have your own car, it is very stressful coming to Malta; even having to find parking is tough!” she said.

Indeed, one of her dreams is to extend this service to other locations and she is hoping that following the forthcoming AGM, the new committee for Europa Donna Malta will approve the extension of this service, perhaps using volunteers to pick up and return patients.

Another important role for Europa Donna Malta is undoubtedly raising money for research from corporate and individuals, and a few years ago it donated €36,000 to allow Dr Istvan Mifsud to dedicate his Ph.D. to identifying the biomarkers associated with early (metastatic) breast cancer. He is now in his last year, and Europa Donna, through RIDT, is already preparing to fund another Ph.D. student, this time to look into the regulation of one of the proteins associated with breast cancer.

“Research is very important – none of the work is ever lost, and even negative results could guide people towards the next area to study,” she said.

Gertrude has been involved with Europa Donna and its predecessor since 2004 and is as determined and enthusiastic now as she was then.

“I have always taken everything in my stride – but cancer makes you appreciate life and the way you live it each and every day. Little things

get put into a very different perspective when you are going through something like that.

“I know how hard it can be to get checked, and how endless it can be till you wait for the results – let alone if they are not what you hoped for. That is why I will keep helping for as long as I have the energy...” ■

Europa Donna Malta pledges further support to Breast Cancer Research.



Taking the longer view

Investigating metabolic diseases

Sarah Cuschieri's project identifying the metabolic profile of patients was very clear about its aims: "to explore the frequency of the metabolic diseases and their associated co-determinants that may lead to their development among the adult population in Malta".

The project certainly did that: she and other colleagues found that 4% of the study population had undiagnosed diabetes.

"They would have slipped through otherwise and it could have remained unnoticed. Diabetes is the silent killer and there might not be any signs until the damage is done and they present with complications," she said.

The project, named 'Saħntek' (your health) which was funded through RIDT as well as other entities, was clearly a success.

This is perhaps why – 10 years later – Sarah is repeating the study, once again with the support of RIDT.

The original study a decade ago had a sample of 4,000 – 1 percent of the population (at the time), with a fairly good response rate that resulted in 1,861 respondents, not bad for a study which involved a blood test!

At the time, Sarah was doing her own Ph.D., part of a career journey which took her from being a family doctor trainee to an epidemiologist.

"We had no data on the population in Malta at the time so we did not know how many people had diabetes, hypertension or depression, for example, and what possible links there were – such as whether smoking was related to diabetes. So we tested blood pressure, height and weight, waist circumference and did blood tests," she explained.

It was a huge project but it was always her dream to follow up the respondents through what is known as a longitudinal cohort study, the first time this was being done in Malta by the University of Malta.

Last year, she was approached by a 5th year medical student (at the time) – Dr Elizabeth Grech – who wanted to perform a Ph.D. under her supervision, with Prof. Neville Calleja, the head of the Department of Public Health, as co-supervisor.

"I mentioned this dream I had to follow up my work and she immediately agreed! So we are now taking a sample of my Ph.D. population – who had consented at the time to be contacted for any follow up studies – and we are recalling them," she said, adding that the target was to get around 500 people to take part.

The scope of the "Metabolic Disease Study", being mediated through RIDT using Education Ministry funds, is based on the same basic parameters but complemented by other aspects such as the causes – lifestyle linked or not – and the risk factors which may be causing the high prevalence of diabetes or obesity. ▶▶▶





Dr Sarah Cuschieri

Given the impact over the past few years of the pandemic and Long COVID, the study will also look at whether participants were ever infected by COVID and how the diagnosis was confirmed. Another innovative element of this study is multi-morbidity, which is basically when an individual has more than one chronic disease at any point.

“There is no research in Malta on this either! Although I have done some work on it, we need more information,” she said, adding that given Malta’s size and specific culture what other countries found may not be fully applicable.

Sarah hopes that finding causes can help with everything from education and prevention to diagnosis and treatment.

Tracking down the original participants was not that easy – but she is keen to see what, if anything, has changed.

“We had given them their results 10 years ago, which could have affected their lifestyle choices and we may have expected to see changes a year or two later. However, in a decade, so many other things might have happened! Just consider the surprise when COVID broke out!” she said.

The information will help policymakers to take a more proactive approach but getting messages through to the public is something she is pragmatic about. Although Malta has various dynamic health promotion campaigns – from smoking cessation, to screening programmes and exercise – it is basically all down to people’s motivation.

“The mentality is why should I do anything unless there is a real problem. Still, we put many diseases on the map and kickstart many strategies,” she said. Indeed, a cursory glance through the internet will reveal the huge body of work that this academic has published, and their numerous citations in other studies.

“Education is not enough if you want to change behaviour: you need a multi-sectoral approach, and a life-course approach starting with children and encompassing family support. It is a long process and you have to accept that you cannot change things overnight.

“But one thing is sure: nothing will improve unless we have data. Once it is there, then politicians and public health officials can hopefully use it for the good of our society.” ■



L-Università ta' Malta
Doctoral School



THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
RESEARCH, INNOVATION
& DEVELOPMENT TRUST

RIDT Doctoral Student Overseas Conference Grants

In 2023, the University of Malta's Research, Innovation & Development Trust (RIDT) launched a scheme to offer travel grants to allow doctoral students to present their research overseas. These competitive grants cover expenses related to participation in conferences held abroad during the course of their doctoral programs.

Doctoral students who have transitioned from M.Phil. to Ph.D. are encouraged to apply for these grants. The primary purpose is to support their attendance at international conferences where they can disseminate their research findings through first-author papers or posters. The grants are designed to facilitate collaboration, knowledge exchange, and academic networking.

Calls for applications are published three times a year, in January, May, and October and interested applicants should submit their applications through a dedicated form by the specified deadline. A

board comprising representatives from the Doctoral School, RIDT, and the Pro-Rector for Research and Knowledge Transfer evaluates the applications. Applicants receive notification of the outcome within one month of the application deadline.

Grants cover 75% of eligible expenses, up to a maximum of EUR 1,750. Eligible costs include conference registration fees, economy class travel, and other relevant expenses listed in the General Conditions for Overseas Travel. Payments are made as reimbursements once expenses are claimed using the Reimbursement Form within 15 days after completing the travel.

Registered UM doctoral students are eligible to apply. The application must be approved before the student attends the conference. ■

For further details, including eligibility criteria and selection guidelines, visit the RIDT Overseas Conference Grants page. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to the Doctoral School offices or visit their website.

[Find out more →](#)

This initiative aims to empower UM's doctoral students by facilitating their participation in international academic events, fostering collaboration, and enhancing their research impact. This grant scheme is funded by RIDT through the payroll giving scheme. You too can support this scheme.

[Find out more →](#)



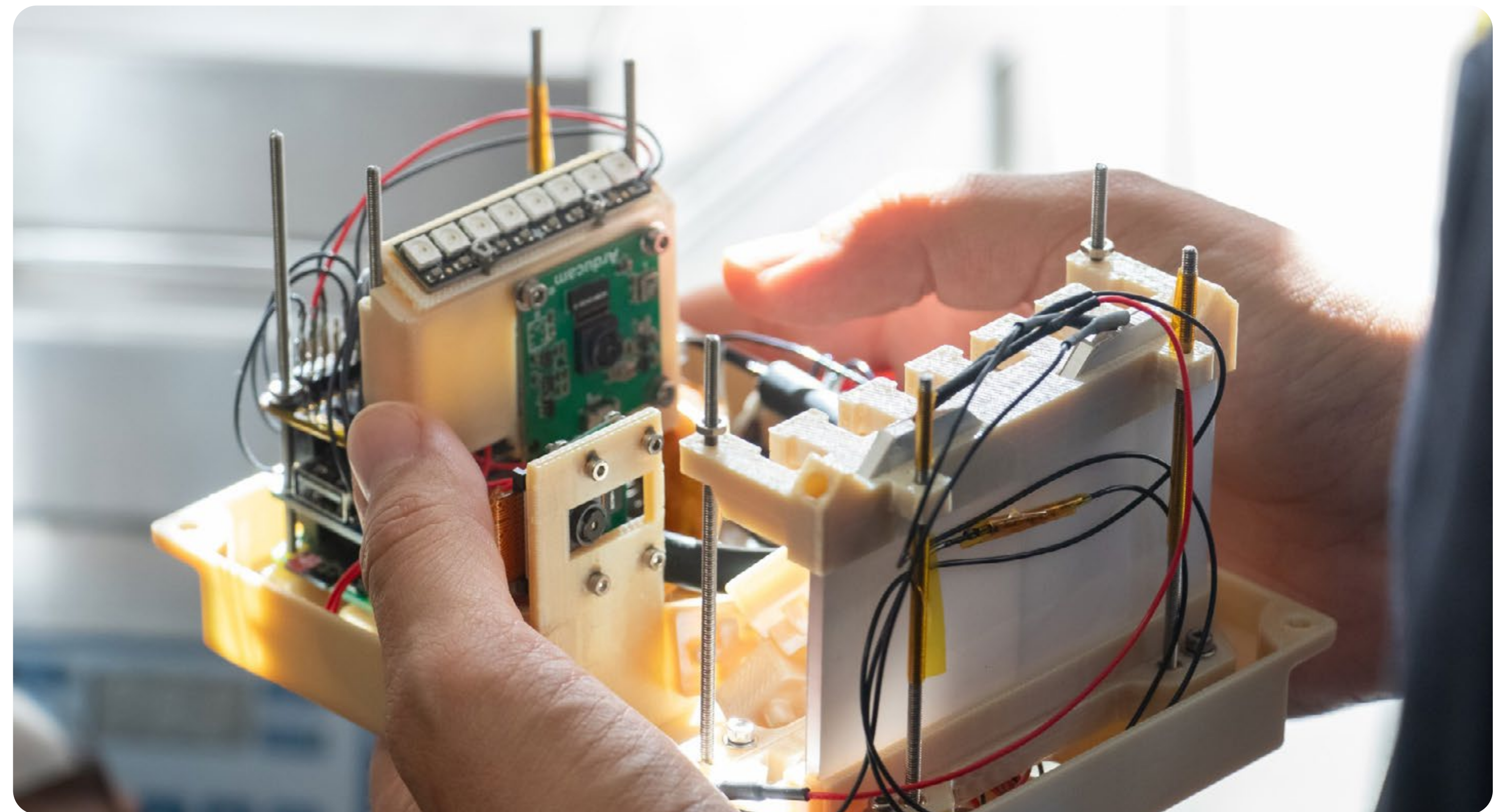
Maleth III – to space and back

What started as a University of Malta experiment on the International Space Station in 2021, has developed into an international, multi-party project that involves the University of Malta, MCAST, Space Applications Services from Brussels, Belgium; Weill Cornell Medicine, New York, USA; King Faisal Specialist Hospital & Research Centre, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; Metavisionaries based in Oxford, UK and the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC).

Maleth III not only contained samples from Malta, but it also hosted samples from Saudi Arabia, specifically, the Saudi hospital King Faisal Specialist Hospital & Research Centre who collected samples from three Type 2 diabetes patients. Along with these samples, Weill Cornell Medicine, based in New York, USA, also contributed with genomes of human DNA and microbes.

The project is being facilitated by Spaceomix and led by Professor Joseph Borg from the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Malta, and has the support of Evolve Ltd, Arkafort Ltd, MeDirect Ltd, Singleron Biotechnologies, the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs of Malta, the Parliamentary Secretary for Youths, Research and Innovation of Malta, and the Research, Innovation and Development Trust (RIDT) of the University of Malta.

Maleth was first launched in 2021 with the aim of understanding the innovative and beneficial effects of microgravity on all biological organization levels, including cells, tissues, organs, and organisms. In some cases, these effects help solve medical, biotechnological, and other issues on Earth. We can produce drugs, materials, and living tissue in microgravity, which is impossible in Earth's 1g gravity setting. ■



Perez D'Aleccio – conclusion of project

In July 2023, the monumental conservation project of the Perez D'Aleccio mural in the throne room of the Grand Master's Palace, came to a conclusion. Under the auspices of President George Vella and in the presence of the Rector of the University of Malta, Prof. Alfred Vella, the research team led by Prof. JoAnn Cassar and Ms Jennifer Porter, presented their findings to the main sponsors of this project. Representatives of the Gasan Foundation, the Melita Foundation and the Planning Authority and members of the RIDT board of trustees were also present. ■



President Metsola visits research projects at University of Malta

On Tuesday 16 May 2023, the President of the European Parliament, Dr Roberta Metsola, visited the University of Malta to meet researchers and learn about their research projects. President Metsola was greeted by the Rector of the University of Malta, Prof. Alfred Vella and received an enthusiastic welcome from researchers, students and staff alike. The visit was facilitated by RIDT and focused on research in the metallurgy labs, cancer research and the fly lab which is focusing on ground-breaking research in ALS. ■





Conserving a jewel at Argotti Gardens

Conservator Jennifer Porter admits that she was bewitched by the interior of the Nymphaeum, tucked away on the left-hand side as you enter the University of Malta's Argotti Botanic Gardens in Floriana.

It is not huge: a square stone building with a domed roof and a large entrance taking up one wall which indicates that it was meant to be left open to entice visitors into its cool and shady interior.

But apart from its location, overlooking the rest of the beautifully laid out garden, it is the interior decoration that she found so charming: the walls and dome are covered with what can best be described as a mosaic.

"The surface was plastered and into that were embedded pieces of stone, marble, shell and coral, all of which protrude from the surface, each having its own colour and texture. And even the plaster was done in different colours – from red to black – to maximise the effect," she enthused.

There are rosettes and swirls, with a rope effect encircling the room, and here and there grotesque faces holding garlands in their mouths with a curling moustache and hair protruding from their ears. Even the floor was paved with hand-painted majolica tiles.

The overall impact – despite advanced deterioration – was remarkable.

On one wall is the coat of arms of the man responsible for this intriguing site: Ignatius Argotte y Gusman, who the gardens are named after.

The original area occupied by the current gardens belonged to Bailiff

de Argotte and Don Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca. When the latter became Grand Master in 1730, Argotte bought his land and merged it with his own, to complement his summer residence. The gardens were eventually used to house the botanical and medicinal plants so beloved by the Knights.

Alas, even though the Nymphaeum was included in the Antiquities Protection List of 1932 and was scheduled as a Grade 1 national monument in 2009, it is deteriorating rapidly. Less than half the mosaics remain in place, and the well-meaning addition of a coat of cement to the exterior in the 1950s has not helped.

Which is where the team of the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage at the University of Malta comes into the story. Headed by Prof. JoAnn Cassar, the Department's academic staff, Jennifer and Dr Roberta De Angelis, who are also trained conservators, will carry out the conservation of the Nymphaeum, thanks to €300,000 in funds from The Malta Tourism Authority through the RIDT.

Jennifer and her colleagues' expertise brings together practical conservation as well as conservation research and they offer Masters-level academic training program for aspiring conservators. The Department has carried out various conservation projects in conjunction with this Masters program, to offer students practical and theoretical training in conservation. The most recent project completed by the Department and its students was the conservation of the Perez d'Aleccio *Great Siege* wall paintings, a project also supported by the RIDT.

"We usually do the work in phases to alternate practical work with their lectures, which stretch across the three-year Masters programme. But the Perez d'Aleccio project was held up by COVID, which set us back by two years," she explained.

She described the positive experience of working with such a big team: apart from her and two colleagues from the Department, there were four Masters students and a small team of professional conservators. It was also the first collaborative conservation project the Department has carried out with Heritage Malta, and the University team worked closely with curators, conservators, architects, archaeologists and many other professionals from that institution to successfully complete the work.

"It was a fantastic experience not just for the students but also for us to be working alongside professionals with different skills and experiences," she explained.

The project to conserve the Argotti Nyphaeum will be organised differently, however, since it will need to move forward more quickly than a typical student training project.

"For the treatments to be successful, one step would need to follow the other without delay," she said, saying that the deterioration had to be stopped – or at least slowed down quite dramatically.

There is very little left of the other structures that would have stood in the original gardens, making the Nymphaeum all the more significant.

It does not help that very little literature has been found about it, ►►



apart from some written in the 1960s. The team did manage to trace Argotte's will and testament in the National Library but there is clearly scope for more research.

"That will be an integral part of the story but we will work with colleagues to advance that part of the research. It is a very different specialisation to puzzle through archival material," she said.

Successful conservation of the Nymphaeum will require an interdisciplinary approach and presents a fantastic opportunity for collaborative research into conservation solutions as well as the history of the site. The project is being developed in close consultation with the Curator of the Argotti Botanical Gardens, Mr Anthony Meli, and the Gardens' Advisory Board, chaired by Prof. Louis Cassar. All members of the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage, which will design and manage the project, will be involved. A team of professional conservators will be hired to carry out most of the site work, under the close supervision of the Department. The first phase will be dedicated to understanding what materials were used in the artwork, as well as any construction methods.

The conservation part of the project will start by stabilising the remaining mosaics and minimising ongoing deterioration.

The cement layer on the exterior of the building – a common technique used all over the world back in the past – is admittedly a headache. Attempts to remove it were made in the past but it proved very difficult to remove without damaging the original stonework. The plan is to see what can be removed without "causing unacceptable amounts of damage".

"We will need to review it at every step of the way," she said.

There are a number of other factors which have contributed to the deterioration, not the least of which is water – unfortunately part and parcel of its location in the centre of a thriving garden.

"We cannot just cut off water to protect the Nymphaeum: some of the water systems date back to the Knights' period. Water was a major part of the development of Floriana and Valletta, remember. There is even the Wignacourt Water Tower outside the entrance to the Garden. So it is quite an interesting overlap of considerations," she mused.

All this means that it is impossible at this stage to say what the final conserved site will look like, once the scaffolding is peeled away.

"There is not a lot we can say at this point but we are aware of the need to balance the conservation needs of the site with its aesthetic function, communicating as much as possible the beauty of these mosaics and what the building would have looked like in its original form," she said.

One thing is for certain, however. She hopes that the conserved Nymphaeum will raise awareness of the importance of this whole area. ■

The conservation of the Nymphaeum is being made possible thanks to a donation by the Malta Tourism Authority through the RIDT and supported by the Ministry for Tourism and the NDSF.





RIDT Funds the conservation of our heritage

Meet Prof. JoAnn Cassar, Head of the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage

For the past four or five years, Prof. JoAnn Cassar, the head of the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage at the University of Malta, has been working to make her dream come true. Her work in the Department, whether teaching or doing research, had made her aware of the richness of expertise and resources in Malta. Could the whole be greater than the sum of its parts?

The answer was clearly 'yes' and when the European Research Infrastructure for Heritage (E-RIHS) started being set up, and an invitation to join was extended to Malta, this catalysed an unprecedented collaboration which brought together the knowledge and expertise of the Ministry of the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, the University of Malta, the Archdiocese of Malta, the St. John's Co-Cathedral Foundation, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, Heritage Malta, the Restoration and Preservation Department, the National Libraries and the National Archives. And within the University of Malta, nine Departments within the Faculties of the Built Environment, Arts, Science, Engineering and Theology, all with a deep interest in heritage, also came together to support this international initiative.

A Memorandum of Understanding signed by all these entities in 2022 will enable them to work together on heritage research, building up a local heritage research infrastructure which will in turn form part of E-RIHS, the European heritage research infrastructure due to be launched at the end of summer, with Malta as a founder member along with 13 other European countries.

After just a year and a half since discussions started, JoAnn can already see the positive impact of networking in action as the nine entities regularly sit around a table to discuss heritage issues.



"We discuss how to set up the research infrastructure and how we are going to contribute to create a national agenda for research into cultural heritage. But an important part of this was to get these entities to speak to each other and solve problems together," she explained. The National Research Agenda for Cultural Heritage (NARCH) is in fact the brainchild of the Ministry, and its development is benefitting from the E-RIHS collaboration.

The most important aspect of the collaboration is the sharing of resources: "We are a small country with limited resources. If one of ►►

these entities needs a piece of equipment, rather than buy it, why not use one belonging to another entity – and spend the money on something different that can then be shared with the others?”

Of course, this also applies to expertise, and she praised the local E-RIHS partners for working towards using existing projects, to then bring together different expertise from the various entities to address existing research questions. For example, someone who knows about AI or about satellites, talking to an archaeologist, a physicist and a person who knows about building behaviour can produce unexpected and far-reaching results.

She gave as a practical example a separate pilot study into the traditional Maltese way to build a roof, using a mortar known as deffun. Variations of this roofing method are used, albeit with different names, across the Middle East, North Africa and even Southern Europe.

The study is using satellite data to understand the impact of this technique, which creates a surface that is breathable unlike modern membranes and – according to preliminary data – also has a cooling effect, something perceived in the past, but not previously quantified.

“With the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, we are hoping to promote the continued maintenance and use of this traditional technology. Initial satellite data have confirmed that they are a better

technology and can be beneficial when it comes to coping with climate change...” she said, noting that the study can be extended once more funding has been sourced.

Which brought the discussion neatly back to RIDT and its collaboration with the Nymphaeum project at Argotti Gardens. This was not the first Departmental project sponsored through the efforts of the RIDT: the Perez d’Aleccio Great Siege wall paintings at the GrandMaster’s Palace in Valletta took several years, and work was finished recently, with the project to be concluded with a seminar at the end of the year.

JoAnn admitted that she had been reluctant to approach RIDT again so soon, but said that as soon as Wilfred Kenely and Claudette Buttigieg heard about the Nymphaeum, they immediately started knocking on doors to get funding.

The Department has quite a wide remit as it has a teaching role on hands-on conservation courses for both wall paintings and canvas paintings. Its seven students spend half the time in class learning theory and the other half in the lab or on site. The Department also actively participates in the Faculty’s other courses, which teach aspiring future architects.

Apart from the Nymphaeum, the Department is working with Din I-Art Helwa at the Fal Millieri Church, while some students are working in the

studios of Heritage Malta with its conservators. Apart from coordinating her staff and the department, JoAnn has also taken a personal interest in a project, already ongoing for five years, which is looking at the behaviour of the shelters over the prehistoric temples, focusing at this stage on Mnajdra.

“The temples are part of us, and the expertise on local archaeology and archives is part of us. This is what we need to promote, obviously working in the international context!” ■



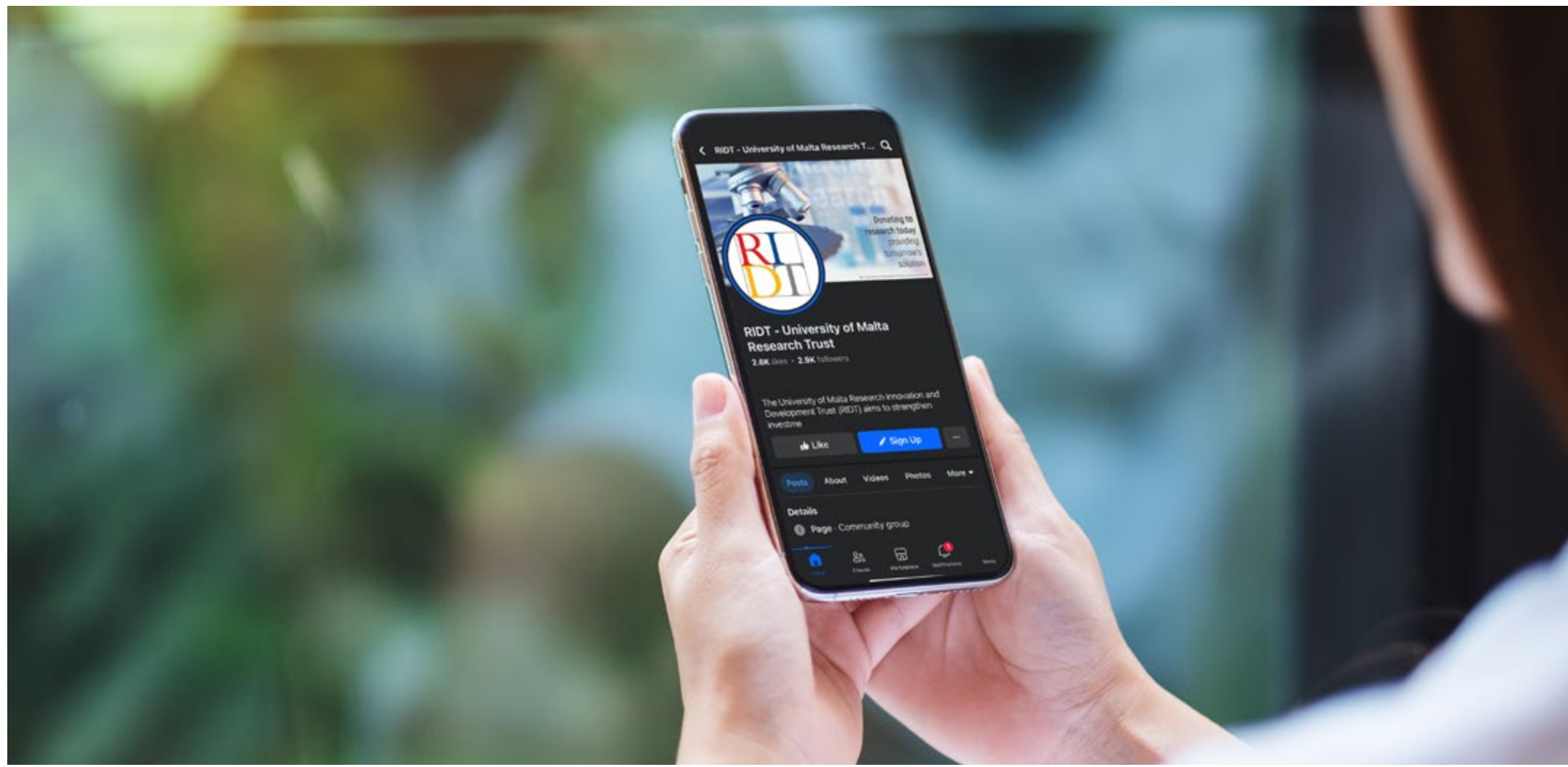


Pink October Initiatives: Fostering Hope and Awareness

Throughout the month of October 2023, the Research, Innovation, and Development Trust (RIDT) orchestrated a number of initiatives under the banner of Pink October. These endeavours blended purpose, compassion, and awareness, resonating with our commitment to advancing cancer research at the University of Malta.

Social Media Campaign: A Digital Call to Action

Through a targeted social media campaign, we rallied donors, urging them to contribute to cancer research. The response was positive, with a dual impact: bolstered donations and heightened awareness about RIDT's work. ■



St. Joseph (Mater Boni Consiglii) School: Empowering Future Advocates

Students and teachers from St. Joseph (Mater Boni Consiglii) School united, collecting funds for Breast Cancer Research. Their efforts led to an awareness event, where Mr. Wilfred Kenely, our CEO, addressed the students, emphasising the pivotal role of research in shaping a healthier future. ■





Radisson Blu Resort and Spa: Cupcakes for a Cause

At the Radisson Blu Resort and Spa, compassion took the form of cupcakes. Staff members and hotel guests joined forces, raising funds in support of Breast Cancer Research. These sweet gestures translated into meaningful contributions, underscoring the power of collective action. ■



Mrs Anne Marie Grech: A Personal Commitment

Mrs Anne Marie Grech, wife of the Leader of the Opposition, Dr Bernard Grech, gave a generous donation to RIDT during Pink October. Mrs Grech visited one of the University of Malta Cancer Research Laboratories, where she engaged with leading researchers—Prof. Godfrey Grech, Dr Laura Grech, and Dr Istvan Mifsud. Her presence underscored the relationship between philanthropy and scientific progress. ■





Art with a purpose

Throughout 2023, a series of cultural initiatives unfolded, each with the dual purpose of raising funds in support of research and fostering awareness across diverse fields at the **University of Malta**. These initiatives blended artistic expression with a resolute commitment to advancing knowledge.

Is-City: A Tribute to Charles 'City' Gatt

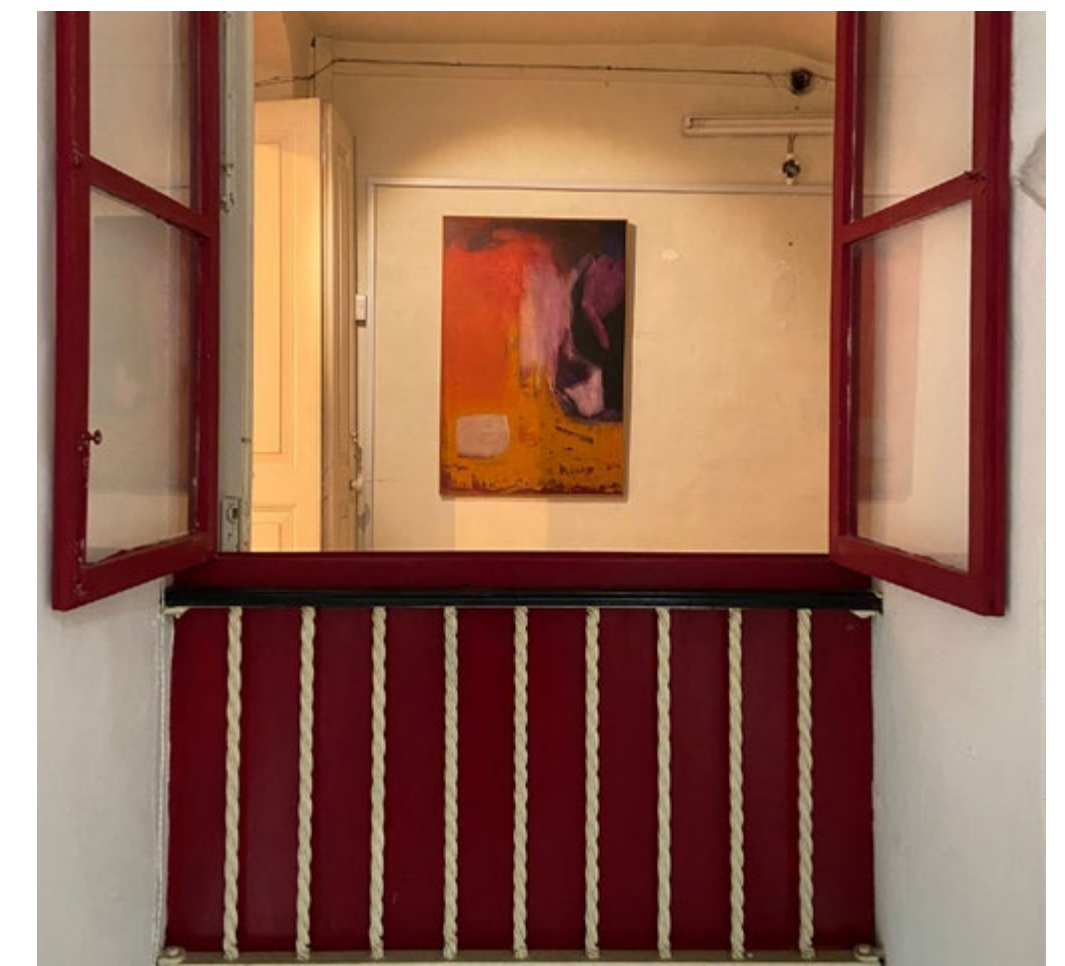
Photos by Joe Smith and David Buttigieg

From February 16 to 26, 2023, the **Research, Innovation, and Development Trust (RIDT)** orchestrated an extraordinary exhibition titled **Is-City**. This poignant showcase celebrated the late works of the esteemed artist **Charles 'City' Gatt**, marking the first anniversary of his passing. Curated by **Austin Camilleri**, the exhibition unveiled a collection of Charles' paintings, including previously unseen works.

The collaborative spirit behind this project was palpable. **RIDT**, in partnership with Charles' daughters—**Carla and Ariana**—and the creative minds of **Austin Camilleri, Sarah Lee Zammit, Anthony Galea** and **Noćemuskata**, and the hands-on support of Joe Smith, Charles Balzan and Jason Masini, breathed life into this tribute.

Gratitude is extended to our generous sponsors—**Farsons Direct, Cisk, Elia Caterers, Transient Ltd.,** and **Wave Music Center**—for making this artistic challenge possible. ■

[Access the catalogue](#)





Stabat Mater: A Harmonious Journey

On April 4, 2023, RIDT embarked on a major fund-raising undertaking: the production of **Mro Christopher Muscat's Stabat Mater** at the historic **St John's Co-Cathedral** in Valletta. This grand event harmoniously united the **Malta Philharmonic Orchestra**, **Kor Malta**, the **Jubilate Deo Choir**, internationally acclaimed soprano **Caroline Bruker**, and cantor **Josef Bugeja**, all under the masterful direction of **Mro Christopher Muscat** himself.

Notably, Muscat's Stabat Mater had previously garnered first prize from an international jury in the **APS Bank National Music Competition for Maltese Composer** back in 2012. The evening unfolded as a symphony of success, with proceeds dedicated to vital medical research at the **University of Malta**.

Our heartfelt appreciation extends to our esteemed supporters: **The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra**, **APS Bank**, the **St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation**, the **Malta Tourism Authority**, **Remax Crown (Sliema)**, **Air Malta**, the **Grand Hotel Excelsior**, the **Manoel Theatre**, and **Net TV**. ■

[Watch the concert](#)

Photos by Joseph Galea





Harmony of Hope: A Melodic Tribute for Cancer Research

On Friday, October 20, 2023, an enthusiastic audience gathered at the Sir Temi Zammit Hall to witness a captivating concert in support of Cancer Research at the University of Malta. Aptly named "Harmony of Hope", this musical soirée resonated with a diverse selection of popular tunes, warmly embraced by the audience present.

The event was the vision of Prof. Christian Scerri, who also served as the concert's producer. Under the baton of Mrs. Mark Spiteri Lucas, the Spiteri Lucas Band—comprising talents like Ivan and Kurt Spiteri Lucas, Jesmond Baldacchino, Joseph Degabriele, Alex Mizzi, Justin Azzopardi, and backing vocalist Marie Claire Cappello—graced the stage.

The lineup of vocalists, curated by Debbie Scerri, featured an array of gifted artists including, Cherylis Camilleri, Christian Arding, Corazon Mizzi, Danica Muscat, Georg Zammit, Glen Vella, Gloriana Arpa Belli, Ivan Spiteri Lucas, Krista Spiteri Lucas, Kurt Anthony, Laura Bruno, Leontine Spiteri, Ludwig Galea, Mark Tonna, Martina Fenech, Nicole Vella and a guest appearance by Claudette Pace.

The charming Stephanie Spiteri skilfully hosted the event.

We extend heartfelt gratitude to our generous supporters—ELC – Environmental Landscapes Consortium Ltd, EJ Busuttil, and Papilio Services—whose unwavering commitment made this musical celebration possible.

Plans are already underway to transform Harmony of Hope into an annual tradition, and we eagerly anticipate announcing the 2024 concert soon! ■



Photos by Aaron Borda

RIDT Christmas Celebration Concert 2023: A Festive Overture

On Wednesday, December 13, 2023, the Basilica of **St Dominic and Porto Salvo** in Merchants Street, Valletta, resonated with the joyous strains of the **RIDT Christmas Celebration Concert**. This cherished annual event serves as our heartfelt expression of gratitude to the supporters and researchers who champion research at the **University of Malta**.

Mro Christopher Muscat conducted this delightful evening, accompanied by the **Jubilate Deo Choir**. The programme featured a medley of a cappella Christmas hymns performed by the full choir and the **Cappella Gregoriana**. Additionally, renowned organist **Ronald Camilleri** lent his artistry to some of the pieces, creating a harmonious blend.

The concert reached its crescendo with the timeless hymns “**Hark! The Herald Angels Sing**” and “**Adeste Fidelis**”, inviting the congregation to join in this festive celebration.

Following the concert, all guests were invited to partake in mulled wine and mince pies at the **University of Malta Valletta Campus**.

Our heartfelt thanks to **AX Hotels** for their generous sponsorship of this cherished event. ■

Photos by Aaron Borda





Participation and Communication

In our commitment to disseminate information about the impactful work of the **Research, Innovation, and Development Trust (RIDT)** in relation to funding and supporting research projects at the **University of Malta**, our dedicated staff actively participated in several initiatives throughout 2023. These endeavours reflect our mission to foster collaboration, engage with the academic community, and create lasting legacies. ■

Riċerkaturi on Campus 103.7

Produced and presented by **Wilfred Kenely**, CEO of RIDT, our weekly radio programme **Riċerkaturi** continues to thrive. Now in its fifth series, the show has expanded to a one-hour format. Listeners tune in on Mondays at 6pm for insightful one-on-one interviews with researchers from the University of Malta. Recently, Campus 103.7 made a slight scheduling adjustment—the repeat programme now airs on Thursdays at 15:00. This platform allows us to delve into a wider spectrum of research topics and engage with experts across various fields. ■



UM Research Expo 2023

One May 17, 2023, the inaugural **Research Expo** took place at the **Valletta Campus** of the University of Malta. The event was a resounding success, providing a dynamic space for researchers to showcase their projects and connect with potential collaborators. Throughout the day, RIDT actively participated, engaging with researchers and learning about projects in need of funding. We also seized the opportunity to raise awareness about our mission. As we look ahead, plans are already underway for our participation in the 2024 Expo, building on the momentum generated during the 2023 event. ■



National Productivity Report

In 2023, RIDT forged a robust collaboration with the **Malta Council for Economic and Social Development**, particularly with the Chairman, **Perit David Xuereb**. In May 2023, we were honoured to participate in the presentation of the **National Productivity Report**. Our CEO, **Wilfred Kenely**, contributed to a panel discussion during the event. His impassioned appeal for increased funding of research initiatives within the context of research and development (R&D) underscored the critical link between innovation and national productivity. This occasion also facilitated the establishment of valuable new contacts, with entities expressing interest in supporting and funding research projects. ■



Fundraising Convention 2023

With the aim of elevating our fundraising efforts to a professional level, RIDT staff is proudly affiliated with the **Chartered Institute of Fundraising** in the UK. In July 2023, **Wilfred Kenely** and **Claudette Buttigieg** participated in a two-day convention in London. The convention featured specialized workshops focusing on fundamental areas of fundraising, including payroll giving, artificial intelligence (AI), and legacy giving.

Armed with newfound knowledge, our team is actively implementing best practices and continues to engage in both online and in-person training provided by the Chartered Institute of Fundraising. ■





Other initiatives

Throughout the year 2023, a number of individuals, organizations, and entities rallied around the **Research, Innovation, and Development Trust (RIDT)**, demonstrating their unwavering commitment to our mission. These collaborative efforts have significantly made a difference by fostering meaningful connections and advancing critical research. ■

Miss Hamrun and Hamrun Hanin

Building upon a collaborative agreement in the previous year, **Hamrun Hanin** and **Miss Hamrun Bethany Ann Grech Spiteri** united their efforts to champion cancer-related research. Their joint initiative raised awareness about the urgent need for advancements in this field and successfully collected funds for this noble cause.

In the initial months of this partnership, a generous donation was presented to **Mr Wilfred Kenely**, CEO of RIDT, at the **University of Malta Research Trust**. The **Hamrun Hanin Committee** members visited our University Campus, where they toured our research facilities. Their interactions with our dedicated staff, who tirelessly contribute to cancer research, underscored the profound impact of their support.

Together, Hamrun Hanin and Miss Hamrun have not only raised funds but also established vital connections between our community and the sphere of cancer research. Their efforts extend beyond financial contributions, as they actively disseminate essential information about cancer prevention, early detection, and available resources.

We eagerly anticipate future collaborations with Hamrun Hanin, as we collectively strive to fortify and elevate the landscape of cancer research within the University of Malta and beyond. ■



The Legacy Continues: Honoring Ing. Anthony Rizzo

In May 2022, the sudden onset of **Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)** tragically claimed the life of **Ing. Anthony Rizzo**. In response, his family and close friends established the **Anthony Rizzo Foundation**, dedicated to supporting ALS research.

In 2023, the legacy of commitment was rekindled. To commemorate the first anniversary of Anthony's passing and celebrate his birthday, the Rizzo family and their friends once again rallied behind ALS research at the **University of Malta**. Their unwavering generosity exemplifies the spirit of legacy giving—a beacon of hope for future endeavours.

As we honor Ing. Anthony Rizzo's memory, we remain steadfast in our pursuit of ground-breaking research. May others follow in his footsteps, leaving lasting legacies that propel us toward a brighter future. ■



Dine for Research: A Culinary Symphony

On Wednesday September 13, 2023, the enchanting **L'Orangerie Bistro** in Naxxar played host to a delightful gathering. **Dine for Research**, organised by **David Buttigieg**, unfolded with a dual purpose: to tantalize taste buds and raise funds in support of the **Research, Innovation, and Development Trust (RIDT)**.

The picturesque terrace provided an idyllic backdrop as over fifty diners convened. The culinary staff at **L'Orangerie** curated an exquisite menu and served the wine supplied by **A&Co**.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who partook in this gastronomic celebration while supporting research at the University of Malta. ■





We thank our supporters. You kept us going over the years.

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Anna Maria and Paul Borg
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 Michelle Gialanze

Nicholas Sammut
 Paul Sant Cassia
 Philip Attard
 RCI Insurance staff
 Robert Arrigo
 Silvio Agius
 St. Francis Secondary school
 St. Martin's College
 Stephanie Kotes
 Stephanie Spiteri
 Tonio Casapinta
 University Futsal Team
 Veronica Grech

Public institutions

Central Bank of Malta
 Malta Enterprise
 Malta Philharmonic Orchestra
 Malta Tourism Authority
 Ministry for Education, Research, Sport
 and Innovation
 Ministry for Energy, Enterprise and
 Sustainable Development
 Ministry for Equality, Research and
 Innovation
 National Development and Social Fund
 Regulator for Water and Energy Services
 Teatru Manoel
 The National Lotteries Good Causes
 Fund
 The Planning Authority
 Development Fund



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RIDT, University of Malta,
Valletta Campus, St Paul's Street,
Valletta VLT1216, Malta

+356 2340 8201
info@ridt.org.mt
ridt.org.mt