

Quality Assurance Committee

Report of its Workings: August 2020 – July 2021

The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) is a committee set up by Senate at its meeting of 11th May 2017. During the period under review, it was composed of the following members:

Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, in the Chair (until 30.06.2021)
Professor Frank Bezzina in the Chair (as from 01.07.2021)
Professor Ing Victor Buttigieg (appointed as Deputy Chair)
Ms Jo-Anne Attard
Professor Maria Attard
Mr Colin Borg (from 01.03.2021)
Dr Maria Cassar
Ms Deborah Duca (on leave of absence)
Professor Ing Simon Fabri
Mr Thomas John Galea (from 21.01.2021)
Ms Veronica Grech (until 28.02.2021)
Dr Peter A. Xuereb
Ms Yasmine Ellul
Ms Elsa Cassar

In attendance: Dr Jonathan Xuereb
Ms Angela Tabone

The QAC met six times in the period under review.

This document is an overview of the work undertaken by, and under the auspices of, the QAC during this fourth year of its operations.

1. END-OF-STUDY UNIT STUDENT EVALUATION

Student Evaluation is a key institutional mechanism of quality assurance at a university. It is available to students-at-large to express an opinion about the quality of the teaching and learning they experience at UM.

The Quality Assurance Committee and the Office of the Pro-Rector for Academic Affairs have continued to review the situation and to suggest potential remedies for raising student engagement with this mechanism. Individual academics have been encouraged to undertake their own 'end of semester evaluation exercise'; however, in such cases, the

outcomes of those exercises – and the remedial action taken, if any, in response to those outcomes – is not always communicated, thus challenging their proper oversight.

Additionally, a meeting with KSU, the Student Union, has suggested that the various student organisations that operate at F/I/C/S level may be involved in supporting such ‘end of semester’ evaluation exercises. Pilot exercises are being considered for the first semester of 2021/22.

2. UM STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2025

The QAC met with three Pro-Rectors – Cacciottolo, Sammut & Zammit – independently to review progress on the implementation of UM’s 2020-25 Strategic Plan, now in its second year of implementation.

3. INTERNAL (MOCK) QUALITY AUDIT

In preparation for the looming 2nd External Quality Audit cycle of the University of Malta, the QAC launched a ‘mock internal quality audit’ (MIQA) during the 2019/20 academic year.

The Faculty of Health Sciences, with whom a number of scoping meetings were undertaken, regretfully had to pull out of the exercise with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early March 2020. However, the exercise was resumed during Spring 2021. The mock audit proper took place on 16th February 2021, and was followed and concluded by both a post-audit and a de-briefing session.

The Centre for Labour Studies, whose IMQA had been undertaken during 2020, held a de-briefing session with the QAC in Spring 2021.

The Faculty of Economics, Management & Accountancy, which had also agreed to undertake such an audit, withdrew from the exercise after realising that most of the required documentation was not available following a change in personnel.

4A. PERIODIC PROGRAMME REVIEW (FACULTIES)

The QSU was tasked by Rector to continue supporting the periodic programme review process with those faculties who had yet to complete the first PPR cycle.

No progress has been reported with the ongoing PPRs of the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of the Built Environment.

A meeting between both the incoming and outgoing QAC Chair, the QSU and the Dean of the Faculty of Science on June 14th 2021 has charted the steps that need to be taken to trigger this review exercise.

4B. PERIODIC PROGRAMME REVIEWS (INSTITUTES, CENTRES and SCHOOLS)

For the first time in UM’s history, its Institutes, Centres and Schools were asked to undertake a periodic programme review, if they had been running a taught programme of studies for at least five years. 14 I/C/S met this criterion. Thirteen of these completed their Self-Evaluation Document, undertook the organisation and holding of a suitable Stakeholders’ Meeting, and reviewed the outcome of this exercise at Board level, all by the end of June 2021. Most I/C/S were enthusiastic to flaunt their quality credentials in this way; as well as to listen carefully to what various stakeholders were signalling, with a view to improve their programme offerings. Most of these PPR exercises have been presented and approved in the May and June 2021 meetings of Senate; and the rest are likely to be presented to Senate in September.

The PPR of the *sui generis* programme for liberal arts and sciences, run by the Centre for Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS), is pending.

Entity	SED	SM	Minutes	Report
Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies	Finalized	Thu 4th March, 2-4pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
Centre for Traditional Chinese Medicine	Finalized	Tue 13th April, 9-12am	Finalized	Approved by Senate
Institute for Physical Education & Sport	Finalized	Wed 24th March, 10-11am	Finalized	Approved by Senate
School of Performing Arts	Finalized	Wed 14th April, 11-1pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
Centre for Entrepreneurship & Business Incubation	Finalized	Thu 15th April, 11-1pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
Centre for English Language Proficiency	Finalized	Fri 23rd April, 2-4pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
Centre for Environmental Education & Research	Finalized	Mon 26th April, 5-7pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
Institute of Linguistics & Language Technology	Finalized	Fri 30th April, 12-2pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
Edward de Bono Institute for Creative Thinking & Innovation	Finalized	Wed 5th May, 3-5pm	Finalized	Ready for submission
Institute for Sustainable Energy	Finalized	Fri 7th May, 10-11:30am	Finalized	Ready for submission

Institute of Digital Games	Finalized	Mon 10th May, 11-1pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
International School for Foundation Studies	Finalized	Wed 19th May, 11-1pm	Finalized	Approved by Senate
International Institute for Baroque Studies	Finalized	Thu 27th May, 2- 3pm	Finalized	<i>Awaiting entity feedback</i>
Centre for the Liberal Arts & Sciences	<i>Pending</i>	<i>Pending</i>	<i>Pending</i>	<i>Pending</i>

Meanwhile, the QAC updated the *Policy and Procedures for the Operation of Teaching Programme Review*, taking stock of the considerable experience gained in monitoring the Periodic Programme Reviews undertaken by I/C/S at UM for the first time ever. This document was approved by Senate at its June 2021 meeting.

5. EXTERNAL QUALITY AUDIT

The QAC took the lead to coordinate the submission of an updated progress report by UM regarding its first *External Quality Audit* to the MFHEA (the former NCFHE) on November 15th 2020.

One item highlighted in the MFHEA progress reports concerned ‘evidence that Boards of Studies decisions are minuted and followed up.’ With the permission of the Registrar, and the respective Dean and Director, the QAC Chair was allowed to peruse the minutes of the boards of studies of the *Faculty of Theology* and the *Institute for Climate Change & Sustainable Development*, as held on UM’s institutional repository. Both the Faculty Dean and the Institute Director were given detailed and constructive feedback by the QAC Chair on the status of their respective minutes. The QAC Chair also addressed the Faculty Board of Theology on this item.

A second item highlighted in the MFHEA progress report dealt with ‘how many F/I/C/S *annual reports* are actually being submitted to the UM Secretary’. Around 50% of the various UM entities submit such an annual progress report (based on 2018 data). The opportunity was taken, in collaboration with the Office of the Secretary, to revise and streamline the guidelines that recommend the content of such annual reports, in order to make them less time-consuming and more streamlined and comparable.

A third item highlighted in the MFHEA progress report concerned the protocol for following up with F/I/C/S when their *external examiner* would have flagged some practice that required action on their part. Pro-Rector for Academic Affairs, Prof. Joseph Cacciottolo explained the manner and method whereby he would follow up with any Dean, Director and/or Programme Coordinator in such circumstances.

Fourthly, an update on the UM *Student Charter* had been requested by the MFHEA as part of their post-EQA monitoring. A specific committee, chaired by Pro-Rector Prof. Carmen Sammut, has now examined and overhauled this Charter, which was subsequently approved both by the KSU as well as at the June 2021 meeting of Senate.

Meanwhile, a team from the NCFHE/MFHEA visited UM on January 7th 2021 and indicated to the QAC Chair and other UM Officials that the institution's 2nd *External Quality Audit* would take place during 2022, giving enough time for the Rectorate of Prof. Vella's second term to settle in.

The latest comments and requests for updates from the QA Committee to the MFHEA were received in late June 2021.

6. BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

The QAC has been monitoring the rolling out of the Business Intelligence (BI) system at UM since its setting up in 2017. The absence of a BI system at UM had been flagged in the first External Quality Audit.

The Finance Director briefed the QAC on this topic at its April 2021 meeting. At that meeting, he confirmed that the intention was for the BI system to start being rolled out at UM at the start of the 2021/22 academic year.

7. SHARING AND CELEBRATING GOOD PRACTICE

For the second year running, the QAC has been identifying good practices at F/I/C/S level. These 'good practices' were used as content to the *Quality Mailshot Initiative*, a series of succinct news flashes, that were shared with the UM community around once every two weeks throughout the 2020/2021 academic year. Fifteen mailshots were sent out and 29 distinct feedback responses were received, and replied to, over the 2020/21 academic year.

The repository for the Quality Mailshot Initiative is at:

https://www.um.edu.mt/about/qualityassurance/qualitymailshots/_nocache

8. GOOGLE SCHOLAR PROFILES

The number of UM academics with a Google Scholar Profile has increased steadily from 196 (July 2016) to 450 (September 2018) to 572 (June 2019) to 660 (July 2020) and to 732 (July 2021).

Google Scholar Profiles are powerful expressions of the visibility of research output by individual scholars and their employing institutions, and of the value of that output as measured by citations.

The power of the metrics made available and public in such profiles was evident when ten academics working in Malta – seven of whom work full-time at UM – featured in a list of *the top 2%* of the world’s scientists. The database was curated by experts at Stanford University, USA, and was published in October 2020 in the academic journal, *PLOS Biology*. The report lists some 100,000 scientists whose published research manuscripts have accelerated progress in their respective fields and influenced the productivity of other researchers. Their exceptional standing is a function of scoring on top after using a composite index that acknowledges scholarship, research leadership and citations (excluding self-citations) from Scopus data made available by Elsevier.¹

9. QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING COVID-19

The QAC congratulated Drs Michelle Camilleri, Maria Cassar and Josef Trapani for developing an *evaluative tool-kit for on-line learning* in the context of the SEA-EU Alliance.

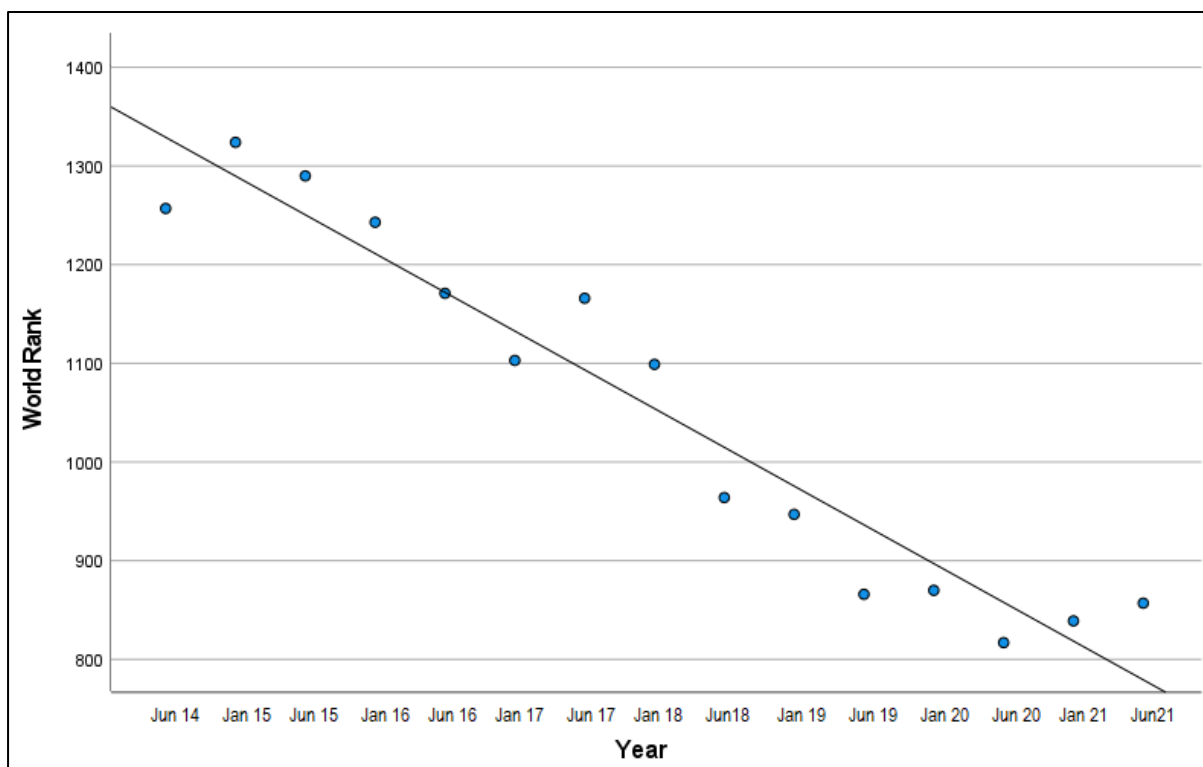
Additionally, a QAC exercise undertaken by and with the initiative of Deputy Chair, Prof. Victor Buttigieg, suggested that, in spite of the transition to on-line learning and assessment, the mean marks secured by UM students following various study-units during the 2019/20 academic year did not depart significantly from those secured in the previous four years (that is, during pre-COVID-19 times). A presentation on this topic was delivered both to the Pro-Rector for Academic Affairs as well as to Senate at its March 2021 meeting.

10. UNIVERSITY RANKING EXERCISES

UM proactively takes part in these ranking exercises by collecting and submitting pertinent statistical data: Webometrics, U-Multirank and (from 2019) the UK’s Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings.

UM’s position on **Webometrics** – a ranking system based in Madrid, Spain – had improved 50 places between July 2019 and July 2020, even as the number of universities and other higher educational institutions that participate in this ranking exercise continues to grow. UM’s position has *improved by almost 500 places in five years*: from 1324th place in January 2015 to 839th in January 2021 and 857th in July 2021. This puts UM in the world’s top 2.5%. UM is also ranked as 364th best in Europe (and 251st within the European Union), according to the same ranking agency.

¹ Ioannidis, J. P. A., Boyack, K. W., and Baas, J. (2020). Updated science-wide author databases of standardized citation indicators. *PLOS Biology*. <https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.3000918>



(Graph courtesy of Prof. Liberato Camilleri)

The Webometric exercise also ranks six other institutions based in Malta. These include MCAST and ITS: - https://www.webometrics.info/en/europe_es/malta

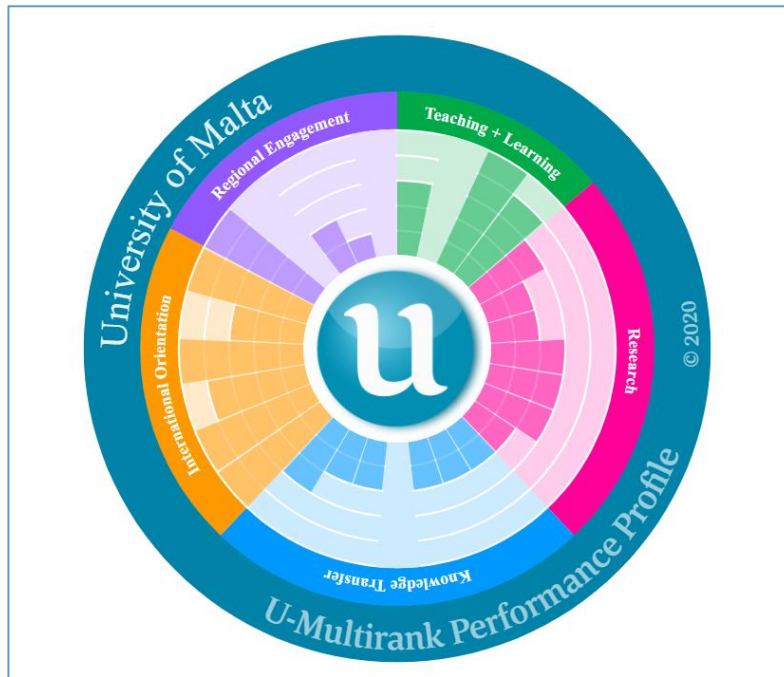
UM's position on the **THE** index has shifted from the '601-800' band – the score secured in 2019 and 2020 – to the '801-1000' band in 2021, while the number of universities covered by the exercise continues to grow.

THE also undertakes rankings by subject. Here are UM's scores for 2020:

Education:	301-400 band of best universities
Clinical, Pre-Clinical & Health / Computer Science / Arts & Humanities:	401-500 band
Social Sciences:	501-600 band
Physical Sciences / Engineering & Technology:	601-800 band

UM's performance on **U-Multirank** – an initiative of the European Commission - is measured by means of a 'sunburst' graphic, organised in terms of five dimensions. UM consistently scores very highly on the international dimension (orange); highly on teaching and learning

(green); and below average in terms of regional engagement (purple), research (red) and knowledge transfer (blue).



Starting from 2019, UM is also being ranked by the **Centre for World University Rankings**, headquartered in the United Arab Emirates. In this case, UM does not proactively submit data to the ranker. UM placed 1659th with a score of 67.1 out of 20,000 institutions in 2019 and placed 1762nd in 2020 with a score of 66.7 - <https://cwur.org/2020-21.php>
