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## Libraries and Librarianship in Malta



*The Maltese archipelago has around 400 libraries, the bulk of which are school and public libraries. There is also one National library, one University library, and a number of special libraries of varying sizes. There are two professional bodies, the Malta Library and Information Association and the Malta School Library Association, which both organise short professional development courses for workers in the field. Locally available professional library education takes the form of a part-time Diploma course offered by the University of Malta. While libraries have undoubtedly been given a boost thanks to an improved telecoms infrastructure, increased local council involvement and their use in the delivery of e-government services, many are still held back from reaching their full potential by inadequate budgets, lack of professional status for qualified staff, and very little inter-library collaboration. New legislation in the pipeline may address some of these problems.*

### Bibliotheken und das Bibliothekswesen in Malta

*Auf der maltesischen Inselgruppe gibt es ungefähr 400 Bibliotheken, die meisten davon sind Schulbibliotheken und Öffentliche Bibliotheken. Es gibt auch eine Nationalbibliothek, eine Universitätsbibliothek, und eine Reihe von Spezialbibliotheken unterschiedlicher Größe. Es gibt zwei Berufsverbände, die Malta Library and Information Association und die Malta School Library Association, die beide kurze Aus- und Fortbildungskurse für Bibliotheksmitarbeiter organisieren. Die vor Ort angebotene Bibliotheksausbildung wird in Form von Teilzeit-Diplomkursen an der Universität von Malta durchgeführt. Obwohl die Bibliotheken zweifellos einen Aufschwung genommen haben dank der verbesserten Telekommunikationsinfrastruktur, verbesserter örtlicher Gemeinderatsmitwirkung und der Nutzung der elektronischen Angebote der öffentlichen Verwaltung, so erreichen doch viele nicht ihr volles Leistungsvermögen wegen unzulänglicher Budgets, Mangel an Professionalität bei ausgebildetem Personal und sehr wenig Zusammenarbeit zwischen den Bibliotheken. In Vorbereitung ist eine neue Gesetzgebung, die einige dieser Probleme richten mag.*

### Bibliothèques et la lecture publique à Malte

*L'archipel de Malte dispose d'environ 400 bibliothèques, principalement des bibliothèques d'école et publiques. Il y a de plus une bibliothèque universitaire, une Nationale et un certain nombre de bibliothèques spécialisées de taille différente. Deux associations professionnelles, la Malta Library and Information Association et la Malta School Library Association, organisent des cours de formation continue pour les bibliothécaires. La formation professionnelle qu'on peut obtenir localement sont des cours de diplôme à temps partiel offerts par l'université de Malte. Bien que les bibliothèques aient profité d'une poussée grâce à l'amélioration de l'infrastructure de la télécommunication, l'engagement accru des conseils locaux et leur utilisation dans la prestation de services électroniques gouvernementaux, beaucoup d'entr'eux n'arrivent pas à réaliser leur potentiel à cause de budgets inadéquats, le manque d'un statut professionnel de l'équipe qualifié, et la coopération très insuffisante entre les bibliothèques. La nouvelle législation en cours de préparation peut aborder certains des problèmes.*

### The Maltese Islands

The Maltese archipelago is situated in the Mediterranean Sea 93 km south of Sicily and 288 km east of Tunisia. The two main islands, Malta and Gozo, together have a population of around 399 000<sup>1</sup> while the total area is 316 square kilometres. The national language is Maltese, of Semitic origin, with Maltese and English jointly having the status of official languages. About 96 % of the population is Roman Catholic. With few natural resources, the Maltese economy is mainly based on tourism, manufacture for export, and promoting the island as an international financial centre. The unemployment rate stood at 7,9 % as at December 2003 (latest available statistics)<sup>2</sup>. Malta has been inhabited since prehistoric times, its strategic geographic position rendering it highly desirable to

various seafaring peoples through the ages until, in 1530 it passed into the hands of the Knights of the Sovereign Order of St. John of Jerusalem. These ruled Malta until 1798, effecting major transformations in all aspects of Maltese life and culture. After a brief, but turbulent two-year period under Napoleonic rule Malta became a British colony, a situation which lasted from 1800 to 1964 when it

<sup>1</sup> News Release no. 155/2003, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2003. Valletta 2003. Available at: <<http://www.nso.gov.mt/newsreleases/2003/news15503.pdf>>. Accessed on: 25 February 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Labour Force Survey 2003. Valletta 2004. Available at: <<http://www.nso.gov.mt/newsreleases/2004/news05304.xls>>. Accessed on: 4 April 2004.

peacefully gained independence to become a sovereign state within the Commonwealth under a Nationalist government. In 1974, following a change of government, Malta became a Republic under the Malta Labour Party.

Malta is highly polarised politically, with approximately half the population supporting each of the two major political parties and a general election voter turnout which regularly exceeds 96 %. Malta formally applied for full EC membership in July 1990 under the leadership of the Nationalist party; this application was frozen in 1996 when a Labour government was elected. However, early elections in 1998 saw the re-election of the Nationalist party which promptly reactivated Malta's application to join the EU, an event which took place on 1 May, 2004.

### Library education

Library education in Malta takes two main forms: short in-service courses offered to staff, and a Diploma in Library and Information Studies (DLIS) offered by the University of Malta. Short courses in basic library and information skills are regularly organised by the Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA) as well as the Malta School Library Association (MSLA). The DLIS is a two-year part-time course which has been offered since 1986. To date, it has been the only professional qualification available locally, meaning that graduate and post-graduate studies have had to be undertaken with universities abroad. Prior to 1986, therefore, information units in Malta suffered from a dearth of professionally trained staff, a situation which is slowly being redressed thanks to the DLIS but which still has repercussions today. In addition, a large proportion of librarians holding or in the process of completing professional qualifications at or above degree level are employed by the University library rather than by the public sector, a far from desirable situation.

### Libraries in Malta

The latest available statistics show that Malta has over 400 libraries. These include, amongst others: one National, two central public, seven regional and 52 branch public libraries, one main academic library at the university, around 300 school libraries, and 49 special libraries<sup>3</sup>.

#### *National and Public Libraries*

Tracing its origin as far back as 1555, the National Library started life during the rule of the Order of St. John when a decree was passed requiring all books in the estate of deceased Knights to be deposited in the Common Treasury of the Order. A public library was founded in 1776, which, over the next half-century, was enriched by various bequests of valuable and extensive private collections<sup>4</sup>. Under British rule the Malta Public Library continued to grow, a process aided when it became a legal deposit library in 1925.

The collections of the National Library include 60 incunabula and a manuscript collection of 1 600 volumes, in addition to the most extensive Melitensia (works about Malta, published in Malta or by Maltese authors) holdings worldwide in the form of books, pamphlets, newspapers and journals, and non-book material. Besides these, it also curates 6 575 volumes of the Order's archives spanning the years 1211-1798. In recent years the National Library

has embarked upon a microfilming programme designed to preserve the more fragile items it holds as well as all local newspapers. It is also responsible for the production of the Malta National Bibliography, first published in 1983 and giving a comprehensive description of all works published locally, a select listing of articles in local periodicals, and listings of works related to the Maltese Islands and published abroad. 1998 saw the start of automation of state library services with the introduction of GEAC software in the National and Public libraries.

There is one Central Public Library in Malta and another in Gozo. These are complemented by seven regional libraries and an additional 52 branch libraries which are managed by local councils. Automation of library services, the delivery of e-government via public libraries, an increase in services such as audio-visual libraries and services to people with special needs, together with increased local council involvement have all contributed to a marked increase in the use of public libraries in recent years.

#### *School libraries*

Schools in Malta fall into three categories: state schools and schools run by the Church which offer free education, and a small number of fee-charging private schools. All state secondary schools and many primary schools have a library which is usually run by teacher-librarians and is open for part of the day. Most Church schools operate on the same principle while private schools usually have a full-time librarian. All school libraries are supported by the Schools Library Service (SLS) which acquires and processes material on their behalf as well as supporting professional development, in spite of suffering from chronic staff shortages as well as a lack of qualified staff. Over all, the ratio of books in school libraries stands at 8,6 per head<sup>5</sup>, a figure which has increased in recent years but which still falls short of the official target of 13 books per head.

School libraries are hindered by the fact that most of them do not have a full-time librarian. In state schools the appointment of teacher-librarians is renewable every two years, leading to a lack of stability which does not encourage staff to invest in their own professional development. Having said that, however, the possession of a professional qualification is recognised in that it greatly aids the chances of being appointed. The budget allotted to school libraries varies quite widely and can range from a total dependence on fund-raising to the allocation of an adequate annual budget.

#### *Academic libraries*

The University of Malta, established in 1769, is an independent institution which is allocated state funding out of the vote for tertiary education. Tuition is free to local students. The University library and its branches support an undergraduate student population of around 8 000, with

<sup>3</sup> *News Release no. 31/2001, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2001*. Valletta 2001. Available at: <<http://www.nso.gov.mt/archives/General/table31b.htm>>. Accessed on: 22 February 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Abela, Albert E. and William Zammit: *Guide to the National Library of Malta*. Valletta 2000. P. 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Annual reports of government departments, 2003*. Valletta 2003. P. 136.

Country: Malta

	<b>Holdings (media items )</b>	<b>Staff positions</b>	<b>Total funds</b>	<b>Acquisitions budget (Operational and maintenance ex- penses)</b>
National library	500 000 books 10 000 mss	39 full-time	Lm447 400	Lm72 500
University library	500 000 items	45 full-time	Lm700 000	Lm370 000
Public libraries (total)			Lm252 600	Lm42 500
Central Public Library	249 000 items	41 full-time	not available	not available
Gozo Public Library	79 000 items	13 full-time	not available	not available
<b>Special libraries</b>				
Central Bank Library	18 500 items	6 full-time 2 part-time	Lm30 000	Lm30 000
Malta Enterprise Library	3 000 books + 200 periodical titles	n/a*	n/a*	n/a*
Library associations				
– Malta Library and Information Association		Voluntary		
– Malta School Library Association		Voluntary		

### Education

- Diploma in Library and Information Studies, offered by University of Malta
- Short professional development courses organised by MaLIA and MSLA

### Networks

None

### Current developments and problems

#### *Developments*

Ongoing automation, strengthening of digital collections, strengthening of telecoms infrastructure  
Bringing Malta National Bibliography up to date  
Updated legislation due in the near future

#### *Problems*

No graduate professional education available  
Serious shortage of funds in public and academic sector  
Low job status for librarians  
Lack of official recognition for national library association  
Lack of coordination between different sectors  
Difficulties in forming cooperative agreements/consortia due to geographic isolation

\* This library is in the process of merging the holdings of three libraries therefore precise statistics are not presently available.

an additional 1 000 postgraduate students and approximately 600 academic staff, as well as offering free reference access to anyone who needs it. Holdings of around half a million items – including around 1 500 periodical subscriptions – and a full-time staff of 45 persons make the University library the largest on the island. It has run an automated system since 1992, with an online catalogue in the public domain. It boasts a number of resources and services unique to the island, including print and electronic indexing and abstracting services, inter-library loans facilities as well as an extensive and unique collection of University of Malta dissertations and a Melitensia collection second only to that of the National Library in size and importance.

In recent years the University library, in common with academic libraries worldwide, has had to face a number of challenges which have been exacerbated by locally-influenced factors. Tertiary education in Malta has expanded exponentially over the past 15 years, with student numbers rising from around 800 in 1988 to 9 000 in 2003. In contrast the library budget over the past few years has merely allowed the barest maintenance of the library's collections in spite of the University's expanding teaching programme, spiralling inflation in the book trade and academic publishing, and a shift in many current awareness tools from print to electronic formats with a corresponding increase in cost. The fact that Malta is an island, and the relatively small size of the University's student populati-

on, create unique difficulties in any attempt to establish consortia or participate in international projects which might alleviate some of the financial difficulties currently faced by the library.

Other academic libraries include those attached to specialised institutes of post-secondary education such as the Malta College of Arts, Sciences and Technology and the Institute of Tourism Studies.

#### *Special libraries*

This category includes a diverse range of libraries attached to various public, commercial, religious and political institutions, and ranging in size from a few hundred books to significant specialised collections. Many are available to the public, even if only by appointment, and an increasing number are developing and maintaining a web presence. Among the more important libraries are those attached to the Central Bank, the Chamber of Commerce, the House of Representatives and the Law Courts, as well as the Malta Enterprise Business Information library and the Informa Current Affairs Research Agency.

#### *Professional bodies*

The Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA), which was established in 1969, is the main body representing the library profession in the Maltese Islands and is a member of IFLA, COMLA and EBLIDA. Its aims include working to improve librarians' status and qualifications, advocating and advising regarding legislation related to libraries, encouraging the establishment, promotion and use of libraries, and organising professional development courses for librarians<sup>6</sup>. For 30 years this was the only professional association linked to librarianship, with an annual membership of around 100; however, in 2001 the Malta School Library Association was set up. This has inevitably drawn some members away from the MaLIA over the past three years.

### **Conclusion**

The library and information scene in the Maltese Islands has made great progress in recent years. Undoubtedly, one of the major contributing factors was the setting up of a professional qualification available locally. This has encouraged library workers to continue their professional development, while its recognition by employers is helping to raise the professional status of librarians. Libraries have also benefited from the government drive to strengthen telecoms infrastructure and increase and facilitate public access to IT, with most branch libraries now offering free internet access and the availability of online public library services.

However, a downturn in the economy in the recent past has resulted in cuts to library budgets across the board to the detriment of many important collections. Qualified librarians are badly paid and do not yet enjoy officially recognised professional status. The MaLIA is similarly not recognised as a professional body, in spite of being the national library association. Cooperation and collaboration, which should be particularly easy in a country the size of Malta, are almost non-existent. The most glaring example is perhaps the fact that the National and University libraries operate using mutually incompatible software and each carries out its own cataloguing, thus duplicating all the work which is carried out on Melitensia items and

rendering the creation of a union catalogue problematic. Amongst school libraries the situation is better, with the SLS coordinating a number of collaborative efforts within state school libraries. In addition, in such a small country it is surely unnecessary to have two professional bodies – it would make sense for these to merge and share members and resources.

The Ministry of Education, which has overall responsibility for libraries and archives, has shown some commitment to library development in recent years, not least in drafting new libraries and archives legislation (which is still to be presented to Parliament). However, the overriding problem remains that of funding, and here all libraries repeatedly report that their budgets do not realistically reflect their needs. Along with all its other praiseworthy initiatives, the government needs to make a solid financial commitment to library acquisition and staffing budgets both in the public and the academic sectors in order to enable libraries to consolidate the very real gains they have made to date and to continue to be cutting-edge leaders in the business of information.

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<sup>6</sup> Ghaqda Bibljotekarji. *Statut/Constitution*. Msida 1992.