

**Closing Remarks of H.E. George Vella, President of Malta,
during the Faculty Seminar, Faculty for the Well-Being of Society
Tuesday 13 April 2021**

I have to thank the Faculty Dean, Professor Andrew Azzopardi for the invitation to address you on this very relevant theme during this Faculty seminar. And also, as I said, for making my day when calling me a nice person to be around, considering I have been au naturel for the last 79 years, compared to the few months that Ruth was complaining about.

But on a more serious note, I have to say that I have listened very carefully to the very interesting presentations that were delivered as well as to the points made during the discussion.

The notes I have prepared in anticipation for this seminar, are completely in sync with the results of the scientific research presented to us this morning. I would say it's more of a summary of what has been said, obviously with the addition of extra considerations.

I think that in this morning's session, there have emerged detailed insights which I believe will need to form part of a holistic policy of national recovery, attention for some onboard share, that covers all stages of our lives.

During this pandemic, whenever I addressed the Covid pandemic during my meetings or in my messages of support and encouragement to the general public, I have always tried to cover as many angles and strata of society as possible, and also to apply to as many different stages of our lives as possible.

Let me start with children. We all heard how children have been greatly affected as their schooling routines were disrupted. This certainly comes with repercussions, not only in the academic sphere, but perhaps

most importantly in the loss of social interaction, which is quite natural to children, their interaction with classmates.

While online schooling was a welcome solution to keep the curriculum going, it is a far cry from the in-class level of understanding and interaction with both the educators and classmates.

Even within their own families, children have had to sacrifice time spent with their possibly vulnerable grandparents or give up on family gatherings, which obviously we all know are part and parcel of our quality of life.

The pandemic also exposed children to some unprecedented sense of fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of losing a relative, of getting sick themselves, of being stuck in a gloomy routine for months on end.

Again, we all know that children absorb a lot, and they must have absorbed the sense of uncertainty that their parents or guardians have been going through for more than a year now – over the loss of a job, over reduced incomes for the family, and the inability to plan for their families: for holidays and outings and the other normal activities.

I find it imperative that a narrative for children is given more space, as has already been said, in information campaigns. And to explain to them in plain simple language what the virus entails, and why the measures to prevent its spread are being taken, and also how they too have a role in overcoming the pandemic. So this will give them a sense of belonging, a sense of being part and parcel of the problem and not feeling helpless and sidelined.

Another aspect that might need to be addressed is the unavoidable reliance on technology, which has made up, to some extent, for children not attending school, but this has kept our children active, both in receiving online teaching, lectures, but at the same time also could have increased, unfortunately, the already too dangerous levels of time spent

by children with their tablets and their smart phones. And this must have come at a cost when compared to the time they usually engage or interact with family and friends.

Again, children must be made to understand why the restrictions. Not just ordering them to stay in, or do this and do that, but we owe them explanations as to why they have to change habits. Why we cannot go out for a pizza, why there is no sport and no games. Why not sleeping at friends. These are things which children, at different ages, definitely ask and we owe them explanations.

When it comes to adolescents, there has been also the same sense of uncertainty, which they must have experienced while they are at the height of their energy and enthusiasm, and somehow, figuratively, they had to press the ‘pause-button’ on their lives.

We all know about the dramatic effects of a lockdown on their mental health, and this should not be underestimated. And we’ve heard some indications from the scientific presentations that we’ve heard this morning. I think it was the first presentation, which has shown that there has been, and I underline “has been”, a lot of mental health complications in our young people. I am not going to go through the reasons why – that has been covered, as I said, in the first presentation – but there has been feelings of anxiety that were not familiar with, or rather associated with, young people in the pre-Covid days. We know that many young people are feeling confused, some have felt alone, some have lost their bearings and sometimes they are also registering depression.

At the same time, we have noted that creativity and motivation did appear among certain age groups who found themselves isolated, to a certain extent, with a lot of time on their hands and obviously tried to mitigate the situation by trying to do something to ‘survive’, to make life much more important.

Some found solace in their family, giving more attention to the parents, some in playing music, some in the arts and creativity. I hope that most or some will find a lot of solace in the serenity of our natural environment.

Among many other lessons, Covid has taught us that there is a clear and evident need to preserve our natural environment for our own well-being. This is amply clear and the environment itself has shown us how quickly it responded to changes in our habits and customs. We need to better familiarise our youth on the benefits brought about by the natural environment and open spaces, not only physical but also benefits that are both mental and psychological.

Very importantly, it is crucial for our children and adolescents, like us adults, to feel that they too can safely ask for help through counsellors or mental health professionals before symptoms get worse. And this is something which we have to, you know... the message that we have to convey and not make it feel as if they are doing something out of the ordinary, if they feel that they need help, and they keep back from asking help. We have to be proactive and offer all explanations and help that our young people could be sort of craving for.

Because we have to realise that the restrictions on socialisation, for young people, is very traumatic. They have done away with clubbing, they have done away with bars, they have done away with discotheques. And this is the social life of our young people.

Apart from that, we all know that many of them could also have problems with job prospects.

We have to realise, for example, after years of studying, many of our graduates have had to put the graduation ceremony off.

We have witnessed a lot of wedding receptions being postponed.

And this has had also an effect on the family and on parenthood itself. We listened about how women in labour are being treated, but I think that we have also to realise that this pandemic had also an effect on parenthood. And I am saying this because, first of all, because of what has been told to us this morning about fathers and partners not having full access to their newborn babies and mothers at childbirth, but also, about the evident physical sacrifice entailed and the effects on the mental health of all involved who had to postpone their wedding receptions, their wedding plans. This is something which we have to also take into consideration.

And there are also other parenthood challenges that COVID has brought to our families.

First of all, there has been the parents' immediate increase in responsibility to keep children healthy by observing strict hygienic and cleanliness regulations. This is the basic thing, that immediately had to come from parents.

Other pressures concern inventing or engaging in home-based hobbies, telling the children and our adolescents what to do during the long hours of free time. And we have seen parents becoming at the same time teachers, becoming educators, entertainers at the same time, while also probably working online through the day.

One can easily relate to the levels of stress encountered by these working parents as soon as announcements of school closures were made. This made the situation and their life much more difficult. In some cases, the automatic 'safety-valve' of grandparents could not be resorted to, for obvious reasons, because of their own vulnerability. They could not be referred to as we normally do when things ask for that because they have been completely ruled out.

I cannot but make a reference to the role of women in all of this. I suspect that in a majority of cases it was the wife and the mother who,

despite being a working woman, was taking charge of home-schooling, extra-curricular activities at home, and the adaptation to the new routine at home. I feel we need to work much harder, towards balance, on this front.

In some cases, as I already pointed, parenthood was not only affected, but also delayed. And I am referring again to, not for medical reasons, but delayed weddings, the economic factors, the job uncertainty, and a general hampered ability to plan ahead. And these have led to a reluctant postponement of parenthood.

Then there are also the tensions and hardships faced by workers in certain sectors of employment, some more than others, like for example, the tourist sector with the drastic loss of custom.

Same with self-employed who saw their business slowly disappear.

When it comes to the elderly, I believe COVID has deeply shaken their lives. I have often reached out first of all to those confined in residential homes, at the beginning of the pandemic and when things were starting to go awry with the numbers of infected elderly persons in old people's homes, actually reaching panic levels. The fact that they were detached from their families, for months on end, I'm sure that this must have had a terrible effect on their mental well-being, and resulted in added solitude, in some cases, even a sense of desolation.

Others would have definitely felt the impact of restricted access to their son and daughters, and grandchildren, even if they were still at home. Of course, this was done in their best medical interests, yet the effect on their mental well-being was a negative one.

Then there is an element of deep-rooted fear – of going out, of getting sick, of being hospitalised without the possibility of visits, and of dying alone. I know of cases, where the elderly simply, up to this very day,

even though vaccinated, refuse to leave their houses not to take any risks, because they are still afraid of what could happen.

Solitude, and this is something I referred to on more than one occasion in my appeals, was and still is one of the worst of fears.

I have often called on our community, to the general public, to extend gestures of solidarity with our elderly in these very difficult circumstances. Talking about sending a card, making a phone call, a knock on the door to see that everything is ok, an offer to run errands. I cannot but emphasise the need for solidarity with everyone around us – but most of all – with the old and vulnerable.

So, to wind up, we have all seen that the pandemic has shown us where our priorities in life should lie.

It has taught us to rearrange our traditional concepts of the hierarchy of the professions and of the service providers.

It has shown us the danger and the fragility of our almost complete dependence on the internationalisation of supplies. We've seen that when we were eager to have our supplies of medical protective equipment, our ventilators, and other medicines.

On the human side, it has shown us what mettle our frontliners are made of. They have been put to the test and they proved to be really 100% efficient.

It has shown us the high level of our medical services. Thank God we have managed to cope, even at the height of the pandemic.

It has shown us also how by being professional, open, and clear as well as consistent in their instructions, the Health Authorities have earned for themselves the trust of the Maltese people.

Besides, we should not avoid reflecting on what would have been the scenario and the situation in general, had subsidies and financial supports not been available.

What has been shared today, in my opinion, is of enormous value not only to the University of Malta and its students, but also to our society more broadly.

I very much welcome the presence of Professor Simone Borg, who in her capacity as Coordinator of the National Covid Strategy is very well placed to take note of these recommendations and transform them into actions.

So once again, I congratulate you for participating in this initiative and welcome the level and depth of the discussion.

My thanks once again go to the Dean, Professor Andrew Azzopardi, who actively supports my Presidency's social vision. I assure you of our willingness to see that this cooperation continues to develop in the coming months.

Thank you all.