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*Message by the Minister of Education, Dr. Louis Galea, on the inauguration of the first Masters Degree course of the Institute of Conservation and Restoration Studies at the Malta Centre for Restoration, Bighi on Thursday October 30<sup>th</sup> at 12H30.*

Hon. Minister for Youth and the Arts, Chancellor and Registrar of the University, Chairman and Members of the Board of Governors of the Malta Centre for Restoration, MCR staff, colleagues from the IKONOS consortium from Greece, Jordan and Morocco who are watching us live by satellite-link, dear students, it is a great pleasure for me to have this opportunity, together with my colleague Minister Jesmond Mugliett, to inaugurate the first Masters Degree Course of the Institute of Restoration Studies at the Malta Centre for Restoration.

It was only four short years ago, in October 1999, that I was here in this very same building, just down the corridor, to inaugurate the B.Cons, ie the 4-year full-time undergraduate degree course leading to the Bachelor in Conservation and Restoration Studies. More than 40 students have commenced that course since then and, in less than four weeks from today, the first thirteen B.Cons graduates are now due to don their robes on Graduation Day together with hundreds of students from other courses run by the University of Malta.

The pleasure is a double pleasure, because four years ago in my inauguration speech then, I announced that I was pleased that five of the B.Cons students were employees of the Ministry of Education. These have done so well that, today, two of them are now commencing this new Masters degree in Applied Conservation. My personal congratulations and warmest wishes must go to these students who have continued to make the best of the new opportunities being offered to them through the creation of MCR and its Institute for Conservation and Restoration Studies.

For this is what the new M.Cons degree is all about. It is an opportunity to go deeper into a subject of one's own choosing, to continue to specialise in a field of knowledge while deepening and strengthening the academic rigour with which the conservator-restorer approaches the preservation of cultural heritage. Let us not lose sight that this new degree, the M.Cons, is very clearly woven into the new framework for cultural heritage in Malta heralded by the Cultural Heritage Act of 2002 which reformed the sector after more than 75 years.

For the M.Cons continues to reflect the commitment of MCR and the Government to a true graduate profession in the cultural-heritage sector. The Cultural Heritage Act 2002 contains over four pages of very detailed provisions about the new profession being legislated into being ie that of the conservator-restorer. The standards set in the new law is that, as a rule, one can only be granted the warrant of conservator-restorer after six years of having commenced one's studies at B.Cons level. The law is specifically and deliberately written to permit B.Cons graduates to obtain at least two further years of supervised practice after they graduate before they are given the warrant which enables them to exercise the profession of conservator-restorer independently.

The law also was clearly written with the M.Cons course in mind. In order to encourage B.Cons graduates to further deepen their knowledge, the law is structured in such a way so as to permit them to spend the last two years before qualifying for the professional warrant as post-graduate students within the M.Cons course. The international dimension that Government and MCR wish to encourage in such studies is also specifically provided for in the law: I remember clearly MCR's Chairman, Dr. Joe Cannataci, explaining at drafting stage why it was so important to have the legal provisions written in such a way as to clearly permit some of the students qualify for the warrant if part of their time was spent in supervised training outside Malta.

This is one of the truly exciting things about the new M.Cons course we are launching today. MCR's Management and the Course Co-ordinator in particular have made special efforts to make tailor-made arrangements for each M.Cons student to spend some time, often several months at a stretch, gaining experience in museums and training institutions outside Malta. MCR has worked very hard at building up very good relationships with over 30 institutions in 20 countries outside Malta and this hard work is now bearing fruit, enabling MCR to find placements for its Masters students with relative ease.

This international dimension is one which we greatly encourage in order to ensure that students broaden their dimensions and appreciation of the world of cultural heritage for, although Malta is very rich in cultural heritage and there are more than enough sites and artefacts to keep us busy locally, we must not lose sight of the fact that our heritage is an integral part of a European and Mediterranean whole.

The importance of the international dimension should not distract us from the fact that the M.Cons also provides us with a unique opportunity to go further and much deeper into the great riches of Malta's cultural heritage. Much of Malta's heritage is terra incognita from the point of view of specialists and techniques in the field of conservation. The areas of specialisation chosen by the first M.Cons students who are here with us today bear evidence to the diversity and richness of those areas of Maltese heritage the students will be researching. One Masters student in the Paintings and Polychrome Sculpture Department will be researching "Paintings in Oil on stone during the Baroque period", a technique which was particularly prevalent in Malta. (May I add my particular delight that this student is also one of MCR's own employees and indeed one of more than 20 MCR employees who are undergoing or who have benefited from MCR's continuing professional development programme).

Another Masters student in the Paintings Department intends studying materials and applications of backing boards in uncontrolled museum environments, which is a condition common not only in Malta but throughout many countries in the Mediterranean region.

An M.Cons student in the Metals and Stone Department is researching Deffun techniques in Maltese cupolas, going back into time to when deffun was the universal composite material containing broken ceramics compacted into a water-proof mixture which covered the roofs of nearly all buildings in Malta until very recently. Deffun is not a peculiarly Maltese phenomenon and I am sure that many parallels will be drawn with similar techniques used by our Mediterranean neighbours.

Another Masters student is launching studies in MCR's wood conservation department. Some very exciting research is being proposed on the subject of Maltese furniture including an element of comparative analysis of liturgical and domestic wooden artefacts.

I am highlighting these examples of the areas of studies chosen as part of this new M.Cons degree to illustrate the extent to which these new students will also provide an original contribution to knowledge about Malta's very rich past. This is a very Mediterranean past and especially in this room today it is impossible to forget MCR's vocation as a regional centre in the Mediterranean. For as I speak, I am being watched and heard live by friends and colleagues in Morocco, Jordan and Greece and next time, I am assured there will also be staff and students from Algeria, Tunisia and other countries. Thanks to the IKONOS project, it has now become normal for MCR staff and students to work hand in hand with the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, with Yarmouk University in Jordan and with the Sidi Mohammed University in Fez, Morocco, to name but a few of more than a dozen partners within the IKONOS consortium.

I am informed that only yesterday, during an IKONOS Steering Committee Meeting also held via video-conference, the partners are so encouraged by the success of the project that they are now exploring the possibilities of a new joint Masters degree in the field of conservation science. This venture, which comes close on the heels of the University of Malta's Senate approving not only the M.Cons degree which is being launched today but also the M.Sc degree which is scheduled to be launched next year, is yet another sign of the benefits of close co-operation between our countries.

The strong tradition of Maltese hospitality is equally applicable to the MCR's staff who are present this afternoon and whom I look forward to getting to know better. As usual, the M.Cons students will benefit from a rich mix in their lecturers. In-house expertise from MCR together with lecturers from other faculties of the University of Malta as well as specially invited lecturers who will travel to Malta specifically for the M.Cons will all contribute to providing a very rich experience for the M.Cons students, one which MCR's B.Cons students have also become accustomed to. It is worth remembering that not only does MCR today count some ten (10) different nationalities on its full-time staff but soon the number of nations and lecturers will continue to increase thanks to the the

IKONOS project. Many of the IKONOS partners who are watching us have been examining the catalogue of study units approved by the University Senate for MCR's degree courses and are busy co-ordinating with MCR as to how they can contribute their expertise to new and existing course modules.

I wish to conclude by adding my thanks to all those persons indicated by the Chairman of the Malta Centre for Restoration during his introductory speech this afternoon. Today's milestone date, the opening of the M.Cons, MCR's first graduate degree course, has been achieved thanks to the efforts of dozens of people who together have worked very hard for the best part of four years.