



## SOCIAL POLICY COMMISSION 18/19

### Meeting #3

University of Malta, Take Off  
4<sup>th</sup> September 2018, 18:30

### MINUTES

#### **Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):**

- 1) Approval of the agenda - *Approved nem con*
- 2) Approval of minutes – *Approved nem con*

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** We would like to inform you about the importance of your vote. Once you vote, you cannot take your vote back. Moreover, no votes will be accepted via email and anything of the sort.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** As for upcoming events, KSU will be organising an Adventure Trek on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September and Campus Fest on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** With regards to immigration, the focus group is going to take place next Friday. If anyone would like to take part, kindly advise us. We also attended a round table discussion where we discussed the issues dealt with in last month's KPS meeting and the stakeholders congratulated us on the initiative we took. After, our plan is to meet up with the stakeholders and entities concerned.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** With regards to the radio programme, slots have been made available on the following dates:

8<sup>th</sup> October from 09:00-10:30 and 13:00-14:30  
18<sup>th</sup> October from 09:00-10:30 and 13:00-14:30

Those who still need a slot, kindly contact us.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** As we are currently painting the doors of Students' House, we would like to apologise for the hassle. Kindly note that this process will be done very soon.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** When it comes to today's KPS meeting, we are going to delve into the Gozitan rental issue. What will stem from this issue is the Social Policy Commission's stand when it comes to the Gozitan rental issue. Once Gozitan students pursue their tertiary or post-secondary studies, the majority of them have to leave Gozo and move to Malta to attend the University of Malta, MCAST or any other educational institution. With particular reference to Gozitan students attending the University of Malta, the majority of them



rent out flats close to University, particularly in Msida and Swatar. The closer to University the apartments are situated, the higher rent that is to be paid. The government provides Gozitan students with a grant of €500 (five hundred euro) per three months. This sum definitely does not even cover a month's rent, let alone that of three months together with the water and electricity bills, which need to be paid. The problem is that the monthly rent is increasing year by year and the Gozitan students are struggling to make ends meet. Just as a recap, I shall be speaking about what His Grace Mgr. Mario Grech has proposed as a solution. The solution which he came up with was to open up two hostels for students; one in Gwardamangia (targeting males) and one in Gzira (targeting females). Gozitan students interested in making use of such facilities are encouraged to write to the administrative secretary of the Gozo Diocese. Anyone is eligible to apply for such service. However, preference shall be given to those truly in need whereby such applications shall be vetted by a specifically designated board. Due to the fact that many flat owners are increasing the monthly rent due, many Gozitans are struggling to find the ideal property to rent out. Thus, they are finding themselves in a situation whereby they have to catch the Gozo ferry on a daily basis. Another additional issue that Gozitan students are facing is the fact that the flats are not always adequately maintained and thus, there are students living in not-so-ideal conditions. As a final remark, KSU shall be doing its utmost to work on measures which will help combat the issue. We have prepared the following questions to discuss within a focus group set up. Each group shall have a leader to head the discussion and then, during the actual discussion, the leader shall speak on behalf of the team. Further comments shall be welcomed as well. You have 15 minutes to discuss these questions.

*Members present were split up into 5 groups*

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** We can start with the first question. The group who discussed the question are to present the fruits of their discussion and then the other groups are free to comment on the points raised by the former group. The first question is:

*“Do you think that the rental issue is a pressing one for the Gozitan students and to what extent? Is the grant offered enough (500 EUR/3 months)?”*

**Julian Chircop (We Are):** Our group agreed on the fact that the issue is a pressing one. The €500 (five hundred euro) grant per three months is helpful but we have to keep in mind that it was decided upon 3 years ago. The said amount is to be amended as per the present economic situation in Malta.

**Marcus Ciantar (Wolves):** We felt that, since the amount was calculated years ago, it has now probably increased. They should re-evaluate the rate and amend accordingly. They must adapt them to the current situation. Many Gozitan students are trying to find places as close as possible in Msida. Resultantly, the apartments in Msida are more expensive than in other localities because those renting them out raise the prices thereof because of the high demand, hence taking advantage of the situation. Why don't Gozitans find alternative accommodation in another locality?



**Russell Debono (SHS):** I have tried to rent a house, but when you work for 30 hours a week and you do not receive any stipend, the situation gets harder to deal with. With this being said, I am currently in contact with the stipends office. €500 (five hundred euro) is much less than what a Gozitan needs. I do not pay rent. Imagine if I had to pay for rent as well.

**Martina Dimech (SDM):** Speaking from the perspective of a Gozitan student, €500 (five hundred euro) is not enough for three months. If your parents do not give you money, then you have to use them to pay for other things. You end up buying food, drinks, and the like, apart from paying for your monthly rent.

**Rachel Galea (GUG):** It is impossible to find a bed for €150 (one hundred fifty euro) per month. The €150 (one hundred fifty euro) per month does not even include electricity.

**Marcus Ciantar (Wolves):** The government does not need to pay for everything.

**Martina Dimech (SDM):** He can invest in our educational system in Gozo. As Gozitans, the government gives us grants, but we have to live away from our families and from our home. We have to pay for everything and we cannot ask our parents to lend us money for every single thing we do.

**Julian Chircop (We Are):** Even though I am not Gozitan, you have to consider each and every person's way of living, which is why I agree with what Martina Dimech has stated. Since my parents do not give me money, I find it challenging to get by financially. Let alone the situation Gozitans have to face giving the present rental issue. €500 (five hundred euro) is not enough. Back in the 1970s, people were told that we are not meant to work part time and study at the same time. If one's time is being taken away due to travelling, finding accommodation that is adequate, and the like, it is only going to make life harder.

**Jessica Darmanin (MMSA):** I believe that, given the fact you are taking an initiative in attending University, you should be provided with financial help. Since rent is being increased, the government should increase the grant accordingly.

**Benjamin Charles Cassar (JEF Malta):** In Malta, apart from the fact that University is free, university students are also given a stipend. I am talking about more than simply Gozitans. When it comes to the Gozitan rental issue, however, €500 (five hundred euro) is not enough. With this being said, if you were to go further away from University, rental prices will be much cheaper.

**Rachel Galea (GUG):** The further away we go from University, the more Gozitans believe that they should have stayed in Gozo.

**Julian Chircop (We Are):** With that being said, if the ferry stops working then Gozitans are stranded in Gozo.



**Rachel Galea (GUG):** The solution is not to increase the grants. We believe that even hostels can be a feasible alternative to the issue at hand. Receiving more money is an option but it is not the ideal solution to solve such issue.

**Martina Aquilina (Betapsi):** From a psychological point of view, having to find an apartment, pay bills, buy food, and the like are an added burden to the normal stress University students face on a daily basis. Furthermore, Gozitans do not have the comfort of going back home after they attend lectures. Apart from this, not all families can afford to financially help their children, which is why I agree with hostels as a temporary solution.

**Christian Cagliari (UOM Racing):** The term “grant” refers to a form of support, in this case for the rent. Hence, since the scope behind a grant is to support and not to cover everything, the ideal solution would be to raise the stipends for Gozitan students so that they can financially sustain themselves on a daily basis.

**Carly Zarb (TDM):** It is quite clear that a common issue that many have referred to relates to food. There are so many services in Malta which provide food for people who have a low income. I am not saying that Gozitan students have a low income or that they are poor, but we should explore the idea of food vouchers for instance. There are many people who find it difficult to buy food on a daily basis. Hence, this form of money in kind would be of great financial help for Gozitan students.

**Julian Chircop (We Are):** In Dublin, in trinity college, the rate of rent is much higher. In fact, what is done is basically that student organisations have cards that give a discounted price or free entrance to certain locations. I agree that this will be a good solution.

**Marcus Ciantar (Wolves):** Another possible solution would be a shuttle ferry from Gozo to Msida and back.

**John Ebejer (Siera):** We have to keep in mind the difference between people who have to rent and those who choose to rent. People are not renting as much as they possibly can. The people who are having problems have to rent and have no other option.

**Luanne Grima (Betapsi):** Education is free because the government tries to encourage more people to work for their career. If you still have a part time job, then you might be more stressed and you will not get the best grades you can possibly get.

**Benjamin Charles Cassar (JEF Malta):** Abroad, they have to pay for their tuition and they still do well. Yes, you are less stressed, and your grades will be better. But personally, I think that everyone is different, so it depends on the person; it's very subjective.

**Julian Chircop (We Are):** Everyone is different. But when it costs your physical and mental health, then that is a priority. When you need to go to hospital, and certain things are not free, you need to fork it out of your pocket (ex: counsellors, psychiatrists, and the like). At times, you will have to pay a private person for medical purposes. I know of people who faced such



an issue. People who are bipolar or have ADHD find it very difficult for them to deal with such situations. Maltese students with mental health issues find it difficult to cope with the situation as it stands at University, let alone what Gozitan students with mental health issues must go through.

**Russell Debono (SHS):** There are many people who suffer with mental health illnesses. They still manage to do well in their exams. The main issue is that there is the lack of support. When you work more than you should, the University does not help as much as they should as they cut your stipend when you work more than a certain number of hours. However, keep in mind that mental health does not limit your amount of work.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** We will now move on to the next question:

*“What do you think are the greatest problems attributable to the issue?”*

**Martina Dimech (SDM):** I am sure that you are all aware of the problems Gozitans have to face on a daily basis. These problems have been going on for a number of years. Increasing the grant will not work as the owners will find out and increase the rent. What should be done, is something such as hostels. They should accommodate us with the right accommodation. If the Bishop is providing Gozitans with such alternative accommodation, then the government should follow suit. I would also like to point out that we do rent apartments outside Msida, such as in Swatar for instance.

**Naomi Deguara (MHSA):** Nursing students also have placements in Summer so if they kick you out, you have more problems to deal with.

**Martina Dimech (SDM):** Another problem Gozitans face in that regard is that, if four people are usually renting an apartment, the owner who is renting out his apartment will not keep renting it for only one person, unless they raise the price of such rent.

**Luca Arrigo (ESN):** We are all students of the University of Malta. Hence, we can all agree that the University of Malta has a problem as it does not have any facilities for student housing. We are very lucky that Gozitan students get subsidised. Due to the fact that prices have gone up, Gozitans are not coping financially. Moreover, it is a bit difficult to find a budget for these kinds of things, so it is not fair to ask the government for more funds. Another solution was that there is opportunity for private businesses to create housing for students and students alone.

**Sam Sciberras (MUSC):** Given the way the situation is at the moment, it is definitely something that has to be subsidised by the government. If a Gozitan student does not want to take an apartment for a certain amount, then the owner of the apartment will just tell them that they will find someone else.

**Luca Arrigo (ESN):** I think that the University of Malta should consider investing in student housing. It is one of the best solutions available. I do not know why it is not popular in Malta.



**Eman Borg (KNZ):** In the 1990s, Gozitans were more connected to Malta than they are today. There was a helicopter, ferry, and many more services available. The mistake Gozitans make is that we compare ourselves to our counterparts. Foreigners do what Gozitans do at the age of 18.

**Luca Arrigo (ESN):** In fact, that is something I feel I miss out on.

**Eman Borg (KNZ):** I think that these pressing matters should be dealt with by the government by adding hostels.

**Sam Sciberras (MUSC):** The issue is not one directed only to Gozitan students. As the situation stands, in Malta there is a lack of presence of student housing. With this being said, its presence will help the housing problem in Malta as well as Gozitan students. Hostels will help them, but in my opinion, you are not tackling the full problem, hence being inefficient.

**Luca Arrigo (ESN):** Lija residence is not close to the University of Malta but Lija residents have a frequent service offered to them. Hence, a shuttle service might be a solution.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** We will now move on to the next question:

*“What is your intake on the solution that Mgr. Mario Grech has proposed?”*

**Sam Sciberras (MUSC):** In my opinion it is a good solution. I strongly believe that it has to be privately owned but subsidised by the government. In this case, you are solving solely a part of the problem rather than solving the whole problem. They are not being efficient as you are leaving out a huge percentage of people. You are tackling a part of the problem, but in my opinion it is only a small part. I do not think that catering for low income families will solve the problem. I think it will have a backlash.

**Corinne ... (GUG):** The Bishop came up with this idea which makes a lot of sense, but he is still going to be tackling a small part of it. As Gozitans, it is natural that we ask a number of questions with regards to the rent of such residences, such as: How many Gozitans will be able to have this facility provided to them? If you are not Catholic, will you be able to apply? Will there be a common kitchen? When will it be done? How much will the rent be? And many more questions. These are all questions that we need to ask as Gozitan students.

**Luanne Grima (Betapsi):** I want to raise the issue that boys and girls will not be able to sleep in the same residencies. We respect the Church's decision and the Church's principles, but I would like to raise this concern.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** Do you agree with the solution put forward by the Bishop?

**Luanne Grima (Betapsi):** I think that it needs to be amended.



**Russell Debono (SHS):** I think that alternative choices are needed to that offered by the Church.

**Rachel Galea (GUG):** I do not think that this is the main issue we are facing because it is normal for boys and girls to be separated in the apartments rented by Gozitans.

**Julian Chircop (We Are):** It is problematic for certain genders, especially if you identify as transgender. If you are a woman who identifies as a man and feel uncomfortable around women, when you are still in transition, it will be problematic for them. As regards to sexuality, I am concerned about sexual health. This happens a lot in dormitories abroad. It is the case where a lot of men live within the same area and you would have homosexual men that will find it more accessible to engage in sexual intercourse, which will in turn be a cause to have more STDs.

**Eman Borg (KNZ):** I would not feel comfortable to rent a place from the Church, but it is better than nothing. If there is an alternative option, I would prefer choosing the latter option.

**John Ebejer (Siera):** I am more concerned with the reason why such a choice was made. Is it coming from scriptures? Will it be open to homosexuals? If it is not, are we still going to maintain the position that they are a private entity or not?

**Edward Attard Selvagi (S-cubed):** I think that it is just a matter of clarity with regards to the vetting process that is needed.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** Do you agree with the fact that the Church took this decision?

**Rachel Galea (GUG):** We think that the Church should handle the situation like a privately-owned organisation would. The Church will want to impose its religion, but at the end of the day, I do not think that the Church should offer such residencies under certain limitations and conditions.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** We are going to take a vote on this. Do you agree with this temporary solution?

*Against – N/A*  
*Abstention – S-cubed*  
*Approved*

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** We will now move on to the final question:

*“Can you propose any alternative solutions to this rental issue and do you think that the government should intervene on the matter?”*



**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** This has already been tackled a lot, but we would still like to hear what group 4 have come up with as suggestions.

Edward Attard Selvagi (S-cubed): These are the main solutions that we came up with:

- 1) Increase subsidies for those who need it and decrease for those who do not need it; AND
- 2) Minimise people that need to come down to Malta in the case of online courses, so that Gozitan students who have no other option but to come to Malta for their lectures find it easier to find housing;

On a personal note, I do not think that one solution will fix everything. I believe that the government should intervene, but it depends on the course of action.

**Marcus Ciantar (Wolves):** Tuition at the University of Malta is free, so it is unreasonable to expect housing offered from University of Malta as well. Moreover, the government could buy housing next to each other, build apartments, and rent them out. After a number of years, students will have cheaper housing.

**Benjamin Charles Cassar (JEF Malta):** Another solution tackled in the group was that stipends are to be removed and, in its stead, a proper maintenance grant is provided for those who need it. The money would go to student housing and the like.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** Do you think that the government should continue working on this with particular reference to the Church?

*Against – N/A*  
*Abstention - CSA*  
*Approved*

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** Taking into consideration what was dealt with in today's meeting, do you think that we should focus on a particular solution or on all of them?

**John Ebejer (Siera):** Increasing the amount of property should definitely not be done. With regards to the rest, I believe that the rest of the solutions are to be dealt with.

**Edward Attard Selvagi (S-cubed):** We cannot forget that we need to work within our means if we are going to find a solution. We need to implement them properly.

**Petra Grech (KPS Commissioner):** I think it would be ideal for us to take a vote on each and every proposal:

- 1) Increase in grants – *Approved nem con*
- 2) Specialised housing / specialised hostels – *Approved nem con*
- 3) More benefits given in kind such as vouchers – *Approved nem con*
- 4) Improvement of any existent facilities – *Approved nem con*





We will be coming up with a stand that will be sent to you via email, which will then be posted as a press release after being approved by the Social Policy Commission. We would also like to add a gentle reminder that on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, we will be holding the RAR results publication meeting at 10am.

Meeting adjourned – 20:30

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