

MCAST SPORTS
SYMPOSIUM 2023

REPORT

#LETSINSPIRECHANGE

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Inspiring a Legacy Beyond
the 2023 Major Sports Events



MCAST
Institute of Community
Services



MCAST
SPORTS
SYMPOSIUM
2023



ORGANISING TEAM



JOSEF MIFSUD

PROJECT COORDINATOR

Josef Mifsud is a Senior Sports Lecturer, and has served at MCAST since 2016. Currently, he is also the Institute Vocational Coordinator for the MCAST Level 1, 2 and 3 sports courses. He is the Secretary of the Malta Football Association's Referees Committee and a member of the Ethics and Compliance Committee. Mifsud is a former local semi-professional footballer, having formed part of the Maltese senior national team. He holds a B. Ed. (Hons.) degree in PE & Italian from the University of Malta and a M.A. in Sport Business from Leeds Beckett University. More recently he completed the UEFA Certificate in Football Management organised by the UEFA Academy. Before joining MCAST, Mifsud spent ten years teaching PE in Maltese secondary schools. He is particularly interested in the areas of sports management, business and marketing, as well as sport events management.



MAURO D'AMATO

MARKETING COORDINATOR

Mauro D'Amato is a Senior Sports Lecturer, and has served at MCAST since 2015. His career in education spans over a decade, during which he also taught physical education in Maltese secondary state schools for six years between 2009 and 2015. D'Amato obtained his B. Ed. (Hons.) degree in Physical Education from the University of Malta in 2009, followed by a M.A. in Sports Business from Leeds Beckett University in 2020. His commitment to the development of sports in Malta extends beyond the classroom. He currently also serves as the Regional Football Hubs Team Manager within the Malta Football Association. His main areas of interest are sports business and management, sports administration and marketing.



ANNA MARIA GATT

PROGRAMME COORDINATOR

Anna Maria Gatt joined MCAST as a Senior Sports Lecturer in 2019 and lectures different units at Level 4 within the sports department. Before joining MCAST, Anna Maria taught Physical Education both at primary and at secondary level and was one of the founding teachers at the National Sports School in 2012. Since 2013, Anna Maria has been a guest lecturer at the Institute of Physical Education and Sport at the University of Malta. In 2001, Anna Maria obtained a Bachelor of Education in Physical Education from the University of Malta, followed by a Master of Research from the University of Birmingham in 2017. Currently, Anna Maria is reading for a PhD in Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy at the University of Birmingham.



MATTHEW MUSCAT INGLOTT

RAPPORTEUR

Matthew Muscat-Inglott is a Senior Sports Lecturer at the Institute of Community Services, and has served at MCAST since 2012. He lectures undergraduate and postgraduate research methodology, and is involved in various research projects and initiatives at the college. He was co-editor-in-chief of the MCAST Journal of Applied Research & Practice (JARP), Special Issue for Sport, Exercise & Health in 2022. Muscat-Inglott obtained his Ph.D. in Educational Research at the University of Lincoln, and currently focuses his own research on vocational education, pedagogy and exercise for health. He has contributed to various local and international peer-reviewed and media publications.

WE CAN SAFELY SAY THAT MOST PEOPLE GET INTO SPORT IN MALTA NOT FOR FAME OR FORTUNE, BUT BECAUSE THE PURSUITS TO WHICH THEY CHOOSE TO DEDICATE THEMSELVES, ARE TRULY THEIR PASSION.



DR MATTHEW MUSCAT INGLOTT
RAPPORTEUR / SENIOR SPORTS LECTURER

FOREWORD

I thank my esteemed colleagues and symposium organisers for entrusting me with the role of rapporteur for this unique event. What a responsibility, I thought, to report on such important issues and diverse viewpoints, from a community as impassioned as this, knowing my own fingerprint would be indelibly impressed on the final word.

Maltese sport and Physical Activity (PA), collectively, is all-too-often a labour of love. We can safely say that most people get into sport in Malta not for fame or fortune, but because the pursuits to which they choose to dedicate themselves, are truly their passion. Uppermost in my thoughts while writing the final word captured in this report, somewhat paradoxically, has been a crystal clear awareness that local stakeholders are, in fact, tired of words. The symposium itself was brought about at least in part by the desire not for more talk, but for action. More specifically, it sought to maximise opportunities to build and innovate through the momentum generated by the major sporting events hosted in Malta this year. Much work has been, and is still being, done. So why not make those crucial adaptations now, to yield a longer-lasting pay-off in the interests of Maltese sport and PA?

The symposium has offered much insight in this regard. It was successful at bringing together

some of the major players on the local scene, whose perspectives, arguments and insights I only hope I have faithfully captured in the pages that follow. I acknowledge, in this sense, an inevitable hermeneutic quality to the text, particularly with respect to the emergent themes I propose following each segment. These were eventually collated and translated into a set of recommendations I present in the final section of the report, based on some memorable and thought-provoking discussions with the symposium organisers. Incidentally, the mythological Hermes, to whom the contemporary academic tradition of hermeneutics owes its name, was by most accounts not only the messenger of the Olympian gods, but himself god of the Olympic games and of all athletes. Fittingly therefore, in the Olympic spirit, and in my entrusted capacity as messenger and advocate for Maltese sport and all those whose lives are touched by it, here follows my report on the proceedings of the 2023 MCAST Sports Symposium, "Challenging the Status Quo".

23 / 24 FEBRUARY 2023

THE CORE OBJECTIVE OF THIS SYMPOSIUM WAS TO INSPIRE A RENEWED MINDSET AND FOSTER COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH VARIOUS SPORTS ORGANISATIONS. THE UNDERLYING INTENT WAS TO ESTABLISH A LASTING LEGACY, FACILITATE VALUABLE NETWORKING AVENUES, AND EXHIBIT NOTEWORTHY DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL EXEMPLARS OF BEST PRACTICES WITHIN THE SPORTS DOMAIN.

THIS WAS AN EVENT ORGANISED BY THE INSTITUTE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES WITHIN MCAST.



150+
PARTICIPANTS



40+
SPORTS
ORGANISATIONS
REPRESENTED



20+
SPORTS
DISCIPLINES
REPRESENTED

10

PRESENTATIONS

8

PANEL
DISCUSSIONS

3

INTERNATIONAL
SPEAKERS

2

DAY
EVENT

1

AIM
TO CHALLENGE
THE STATUS
QUO



THEME 1

DEBATING SPORTS HIGHER EDUCATION

THEME 1

OPENING REMARKS

JOSEF MIFSUD

Mr. Josef Mifsud, Project Manager of the MCAST Sports Symposium 2023, delivered the opening address, outlining the original underlying inspiration, which was to capitalise on the major sporting events set to take place in Malta throughout the year 2023. These include the Games for the Small States of Europe (GSSE), and the UEFA under-19 football championships. Hosting such events, seemed like a clear and valuable opportunity to challenge the status quo of sports and management and administration cultures in Malta. The idea for the symposium was ultimately based on a quest for legacy, and the attainment of lasting positive change for Maltese sport and PA.

Mifsud thanked key parties involved in bringing the symposium to life. Inspiring cooperation was a key underpinning aim of the event, and was suitably punctuated by representation from over 40 sports organisations in attendance. Administrators, parents and athletes themselves, as well as lecturers, researchers, physical education (PE) teachers, journalists, and entrepreneurs responded to the invitation and contributed overall to what turned out to be an excellent turnout. Mifsud introduced some of the main themes of the symposium. These included the interaction between sport and higher education in terms of the availability and relevance of existing and planned courses, sports opportunities at the grassroots through to elite levels, better development of infrastructure and athlete development pathways, and most importantly, innovation and challenging the status quo more broadly.



ANN MARIE CASSAR

Director of ICS, Ms. Ann Marie Cassar, also made her opening address. She spoke of sport as a unifier in a multiplicity of community-based contexts. Sports courses now account for among the largest student bodies in the college, with a student population of approximately 500. A good deal of students in the Sport and Exercise for Health Bachelor's programme were, at that very moment, serving placements in facilities for care of older people, increasing PA and improving fitness and associated health outcomes in this segment of the population. Other cohorts were making similar contributions in schools, completing the promotion of PA and exercise across the entire life span. Cassar thanked the symposium organisers, and the international guests in attendance set to participate in the various presentations and panel discussions.

DR. MARIO CARDONA

Deputy Principal Dr. Mario Cardona, also gave his opening remarks. He thanked representatives from the sports, exercise and health sectors for their attendance. Industry representatives, he affirmed, are always welcome at MCAST. The pursuit of mutual benefits for learners and broader economic and social development remains a key guiding principle at the college.

DR. CLIFTON GRIMA

Minister for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation Dr. Clifton Grima officially opened the symposium proceedings by congratulating MCAST staff for taking the initiative, and expressed satisfaction with the sectoral representation in attendance. He also noted the importance of phasing out outdated practices, and embracing change.



STATE OF THE MALTESE SPORTS LABOUR MARKET



ANNA MARIA GATT

Following the opening remarks, Ms. Anna Maria Gatt, Programme Coordinator for the symposium and Senior Sports Lecturer at MCAST presented various Eurobarometer statistics to initiate the proceedings. As a share of the total labour market, employment in sport in Malta was just below the European average, with approximately 1.5k (0.6%) workers having been employed in Maltese sport in 2020. Despite the effects of the COVID19 pandemic, an increase in employment in sport and exercise in Malta was noted. Males have traditionally outnumbered females in sports work, however the gap has closed to near parity. Cohorts pursuing studies in the fields of sport and PA are also on the rise. Further establishing an empirical tone for the start of the symposium, research itself became the first item on the agenda.

EMERGING THEMES

Importance of empirical data, research, and evidence-based practice in the furtherance of Maltese sport and PA.

Inclusion as a key strategy in the promotion of sport and PA.

THE MCAST JOURNAL OF APPLIED RESEARCH & PRACTICE, SPECIAL ISSUE IN SPORT, EXERCISE & HEALTH

DR. MATTHEW MUSCAT-INGLOTT

Dr. Matthew Muscat-Inglott, ICS senior lecturer and researcher, gave a brief presentation on the recent Special Issue of the MCAST Journal of Applied Research & Practice (JARP), dedicated exclusively to sport, exercise and health released in October 2022, of which he was co-editor-in-chief. While sport and PA in Malta pose a set of unique challenges, scientific and academic research presents a viable solution for genuine progress. More specifically, he highlighted the importance of locally contextualised research as a means of informing effective evidence-based practice in managing local sport. The first of its kind, the Special Issue, he explained, was intended as a lasting platform for showcasing the work of local experts in sport and physical activity, incentivising them to apply themselves to local issues that matter the most to Maltese stakeholders. Muscat-Inglott stressed the point that we have talented and knowledgeable experts in the field of sport and PA, who can deliver more. As things stand, Maltese sports scientists seeking an audience for their work must apply themselves to those problems editors of foreign academic journals decide are relevant. With a regular release of a local journal, perhaps a more meaningful understanding of local problems can be achieved, and more importantly, bespoke solutions devised, tested and implemented, as a viable alternative to imported, off-the-shelf internationally-sourced fixes.

EMERGING THEMES

Importance of empirical data, research, and evidence-based practice in the furtherance of Maltese sport and PA.

Locally contextualised solutions, no more off-the-shelf, internationally-sourced fixes.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND OCCUPATION: THEIR INTERACTION IN THE MALTESE CONTEXT

PIERRE CASSAR

Hosted by Mr. Pierre Cassar, Director of Marketing, Communications and Alumni at University of Malta, the first panel discussion posed the question about availability of workers and careers in the sports and PA sectors. Questions from the audience in this segment included the issue of similarity of courses across the major further and higher education institutions offering programmes in sport and PA, a gap in qualification provision with regard to coaching education, and the need to consider PA from a public health perspective via closer cooperation with the health care sector.

ANN MARIE
CASSAR

Ms. Ann Marie Cassar, director of ICS, MCAST, explained how MCAST are currently working on solutions for addressing local gaps in coaching education. Unqualified practitioners in sport coaching and indeed other forms of instruction pose a risk to service users. Industry input is needed for the design of effective course programmes, and cooperation is already taking place between organisations and institutes with a view to offering more relevant qualifications. Cassar emphasised, however, that education is not just a currency for getting a job, and that challenging the status quo also means challenging such assumptions. Students generally tend to choose sport out of passion, without necessarily looking too far into the future in terms of job prospects. This tends to contrast starkly with the view of many parents, who sometimes dissuade their children from pursuing sport academically. Sport tends to be, in this sense, undervalued in Maltese culture. Recent meetings with the Ministry of Health, meanwhile, have indicated improving receptivity to the idea of exercise professionals working in health contexts, showing improving scope for local employment under the broader umbrella of sport, physical activity and health, facilitated by gradual passion-infused culture change.

DR. DORIANNE
CARUANA BONNICI

Dr. Dorianne Caruana Bonnici, senior lecturer at ICS, MCAST and Sports Courses Coordinator explained how the MCAST context enabled teaching staff to observe the growth of students as they progress from (MQF/EQF) Level 2, sometimes all the way up to Levels 6 or 7, given the new Master's programme in Sport and Exercise Science available at the institute. The process involves visible maturation, and a good deal of satisfaction among lecturing and administrative staff. While many students do not necessarily see sports as a career when they first start, they tend to fit in and consider the environment one in which they feel settled and comfortable. Employment has not, despite much consideration, on balance constituted a significant issue, and the sports courses have continued to expand. A lack of importance attributed to sport in broader society remains the more pertinent issue, and could be a major contributing factor to the current relative scarcity of viable careers and job opportunities in the sector. Nevertheless, critical thinking and resourcefulness have been highly valued in the delivery of the course, and Caruana Bonnici noted how successful graduates were often those who started their own businesses and "found their own ground". Students are provided with the tools they need to develop their own success.



Caruana Bonnici added that the programmes are not carved in stone, and undergo regular cyclical reviews to ensure their content is kept up to date and relevant. Feedback from lecturers teaching the various units comprising the courses are often the driving force behind such updates. Furthermore, the process is typically carried out in collaboration with industry and evolving needs. For instance, she referenced the work being done on placement by students in the area of active aging in the broader socioeconomic context of the aging population. These efforts tied in with a concerted effort to combat the “take a pill” mentality, and promote more widespread appreciation for the benefits of PA and exercise, as well as their role in reducing prevalence of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). Difficulties among students engaged in dual-career approaches to study and sport participation were also acknowledged, although having a team of sports lecturers involved in competitive sports as athletes, former athletes and administrators, helped to informally foster a supportive environment for students.

PROF. ANDREW
DECELIS

Prof. Andrew Decelis, Director of the Institute of Physical Education and Sport (IPES) at the University of Malta (UM) agreed that passion was the major driver behind most students’ choices to pursue sport and PA academically. Many students already have a good deal of experience either as athletes, grassroots coaches or sports administrators. Regarding opportunities for employment upon completion of programmes in sports and PA, Decelis pointed out that all sectors face similar challenges, and lack of formal employment opportunities was not by any means unique to the sport and PA context. There was a shared concern among the panelists for coaches and instructors in the sector giving the wrong advice, a long-standing issue IPES has sought to address, particularly in the coaching education area. With regard to active aging and the role of PA in the health care sector, Decelis pointed out that UM has been pushing to influence policy at the highest levels, and has not waited for Ministerial collaboration to materialise by other means. He noted the importance of research in these efforts, to show how sports and PA graduates might assist in broader efforts to improve public health outcomes. A high degree of transferability has been noted in this regard between UM and MCAST, with students sometimes attending both institutions throughout their educational journey. In terms of legacy, Decelis stressed that the interest generated by major events like the GSSE and UEFA under-19 championships demonstrates a heightening interest in work opportunities in sport and PA locally.

DR. IVAN RIOLO

Dr. Ivan Riolo, lecturer at IPES, UM, also agreed that despite the need to reconcile increasing student populations with decreasing job opportunities, passion remains the most important driver for students’ decisions to choose sport as a main field of study. One should focus on what one loves, and follow it through, maximising opportunities along the way. Riolo stressed that differences in sports courses across institutions should be guided by clear institutional mission statements. To ensure relevance and efficiency, collaboration between the institutions is essential, together with the input of all major stakeholders. There is a demand among the broader population related to sport and PA, meanwhile, which should be considered and addressed by education providers. Riolo emphasised the key point that in view of multiple available paths towards various sports qualifications, there should be no easier pathway or weak link. It is essential that all pathways represent the same level of rigour, with common quality assurance processes implemented across all educational institutions.

STEPHEN GRIMA

Mr. Stephen Grima, lecturer at the Institute for Education (IfE) noted an increasing trend of selecting higher education pathways in sport, among students previously uninvolved in sport. From the perspective of serving the community, Grima considers all the institutes to be delivering a valuable service. He discussed the unpredictability of real-world environments, and the importance for students to be adaptable once they graduate. It is the role of educational institutions to prepare graduates for work environments that are not necessarily optimal. Resourcefulness, productivity and a desire to make a difference should be essential features of students’ approaches to their work, and the educational programmes supporting them.

ROBERT MICALLEF

Mr. Robert Micallef Head of the Avanza training academy raised the issue of dual career pathways as an important motivation for athletes to pursue studies in sports. Turning a passion into a career requires skills, and it is the duty of educational providers to help students develop such skills. Micallef highlighted the growth of the private exercise and fitness sector, and increasing interest by students to qualify for work in that field, particularly with regard to management. Educational institutions play a key role in combating the culture of volunteerism in Maltese sport and PA, by preparing qualified people to manage organisations and facilitate the shift towards professionalisation of the sector. With regard to local job markets, Micallef also raised the point that educational institutions have a duty to prepare graduates to work in sport and PA contexts outside of Malta. Globalisation entails that some Maltese sports and PA professionals will inevitably be interested in seeking employment abroad, and foreign students studying in Malta will similarly pursue careers outside the Maltese context. Shortages of employment opportunities in sport could also be addressed by educational institutions if they help shape the leaders and job providers of the future. In setting up new initiatives in sport and PA, today’s students represent the employers of tomorrow. Finally, Micallef commented on existing plans at his institute, to contribute towards coaching education in Malta and the preparation of more effective sports coaches.

EMERGING
THEMES

Importance of passion in the pursuit of sport studies.

Collective devaluation of sport and PA in Maltese society as a barrier to development and progress.

Further integration with health care sector in the promotion of PA for public health.

Lifelong participation in PA and exercise throughout the entire life span.

Voluntarism and systemic lack of administrative human resources.

Realities of making it in the context of increasingly neoliberal socioeconomic policies - Students cannot expect jobs, they must create them.

Struggles of dual-career athletes – Students must balance studying and competing, but are these necessarily antagonistic?

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORTS INDUSTRY EDUCATION: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE UEFA ACADEMY

ALEXANDRA DONCILA

Ms. Alexandra Doncila, UEFA Academy programme coordinator, delivered a presentation on the role of UEFA with a special focus on its education and training initiatives. She discussed a number of formal qualifications offered by the academy which has helped qualify over 3,000 graduates since 2010 across a wide range of programmes. These have included representatives from the Maltese sports and PA community. Notable programme content includes management, specialist player education, knowledge sharing and research, as well as on-demand education. Doncila explained that educational initiatives at UEFA were not football-specific, and were accessible to stakeholders in any sport. A key value, and one shared with the scope of the symposium, was a commitment to innovation. At no point, however good systems appear to be, should stakeholders stop pushing for further improvement through innovation.

EMERGING
THEMES

Education and the provision of substantive qualifications as a foundation of better professional practice.

A genuine commitment to innovation is key.



THEME 2

SPORTS FOR ALL
LEADING TO SPORTS
PERFORMANCE

A STUDY ON THE PURSUIT OF SPORTING EXCELLENCE IN MALTA, USING AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS LENSE

ROBERTA ARGENTO

Ms. Roberta Argento, PhD candidate and head of St Benedict College network, presented some of her own research, which was published in the MCAST JARP, Special Issue for sport, exercise and health. Using ecological systems theory, Argento, together with her co-authors Dr. Mark J. G. Holland and Prof. Tony Myers of Newman University Birmingham, as well as Dr Stefan Lawrence of Leeds Beckett University, explored the qualitative experiences of various local athletes participating in major sporting events. They included athletes from Special Olympics (SO) Malta in their sample, thereby assuming a holistic approach to the experiential nature of competition. Locally contextualised systems and individuated approaches were among the recommendations discussed, which became persistent themes throughout the remaining panel discussions.

EMERGING THEMES

Inclusion as a key strategy in the promotion of sport and Physical Activity.

Integrative approach to competitive sport, exercise, leisure and general Physical Activity – The lines must be blurred.

Locally contextualised solutions, no more off-the-shelf internationally-sourced fixes.

SPORTING PARTICIPATION AND PERFORMANCE IN THE SMALL NATIONS OF EUROPE – HOW DOES MALTA MEASURE UP?

ANNA MARIA GATT

Ms. Anna Maria Gatt, Programme Coordinator for the symposium and Senior Sports Lecturer at MCAST, presented some of the latest statistics on PA and international sports performance across Europe. The period between 2017 and 2022, saw a 6% increase in overall participation in sport and PA across Europe, with lack of time still representing the most commonly cited barrier by members of the Maltese population. Her presentation was concluded by exhibiting the medal tables from former editions of the GSSE and Mediterranean Games. A clear trend was evident, in the inability of the Maltese team to establish itself among the leading spots in the medals tables among other small nations, which were typically occupied by the likes of Cyprus, Iceland, and Luxembourg.

EMERGING THEMES

Importance of empirical data, research, and evidence-based practice in the furtherance of Maltese sport and PA.

Perennial under-performance problem in Maltese international sports performance.

FROM GRASSROOTS TO HIGH PERFORMANCE IN LUXEMBOURG: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

RAYMOND
CONZEMIUS

Mr. Raymond Conzemius, Sports Director at the Luxembourg Olympic and Sports Committee delivered a presentation on some of the latest developments in the field of Luxembourgish sports development. He gave some key facts about Luxembourg to establish context, and went on to explain similar struggles concerning low PA engagement as those in Malta. He referenced the LTAD (Long-term Athlete Development) model but criticised its triangular shape. Maximal participation at all levels combined with an amalgamation or interconnectedness of PA and sport was the preferable strategy. There is no need for comparison between elite and other levels, given that these all ultimately form part of the same society. Small nation status can be a challenge, but also an opportunity in terms of inclusive social measures.

He described aspirations for the development of a dedicated sports university in Luxembourg. Two features of the the existing sports development structure that were relevant for discussion also in the Maltese context were the idea of dual career, as well as centralisation and pooling of resources. He described the Sports Movement Laboratory used for research and high performance support for athletes from a range of different sports competing at elite levels in Luxembourg. The facility has been described as among the most avant garde in Europe, which is a remarkable feat for a small nation. This was essentially an argument in favour of the centralisation strategy, particularly in the case of small nations given ease of travel to central, well-equipped facilities. Such a system was presented as a viable alternative to coordinating multiple, more poorly equipped entities. Small nations also present the opportunity for well-coordinated nationwide testing and talent identification, and other whole-system approaches. These points were poignant in the context of Malta, which tends to exhibit a laissez-faire, decentralised approach with multiple clubs and entities adopting liberal and varied approaches to organising their respective disciplines, promoting their sports, and raising/applying for funds, among others.

EMERGING
THEMES

Whole-system approaches for maximising testing and talent identification in small nations.

Centralisation and pooling of resources within small nations.

Inclusion as a key strategy in the promotion of sport and PA.

Integrative approach to competitive sport, exercise, leisure and general PA – The lines must be blurred.



PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS: PARTICIPATION, SPORT FOR ALL, PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER GREAT EXPECTATIONS

JOANNA CAMILLERI

Hosted by Ms. Joanna Camilleri, PE Teacher and TVM (Television Malta) sports journalist, the second panel discussion of the day explored participation and sport for all, with a special focus on Maltese schools. The discussion was initiated from the perspective of PE as a mode of increasing sports participation, but developed to encompass the broader scope of healthy and more active living in Maltese society as a whole. Issues surrounding satisfaction with the general quality and quantity of PE provision in the context of school realities were also raised. Questions from the audience centred around equal access to quality PE for all Maltese children, regardless of their familial socioeconomic status.

KEVIN AZZOPARDI

Mr. Kevin Azzopardi, Education Officer for PE, had faith in the status of PE as a means of bolstering sports participation and eventual performance. From the triangular LTAD perspective, the base of the pyramid depends on effective provision of PE lessons in schools. However, competition should not be the primary focus, with national health being a major motivation for increasing the status of PE. The long-term aim should be the promotion of active healthy living and sport participation throughout the lifespan, beyond the schooling years. Sedentary leisure and screen time pose particular threats to this goal, and have increased pressure to make PE more fun and engaging for students. Azzopardi noted that the COVID19 pandemic had a particularly destructive effect on PE provision in schools, although PE teachers did a sterling job in the adaptations they made given the circumstances. While we are often critical, there is much good practice going on, and such adaptations stood testament to this. They should be celebrated and shared in the interest of promoting further good practice. Azzopardi expressed optimism about the future of PE, citing the 2022 Labour Party electoral promise for daily PE in schools as a highly positive development. The use of “replacement lessons” to increase structured PA/PE was a particularly promising facet of the initiative.

MARVIN SPITERI

Mr. Marvin Spiteri, Education Officer for PE, expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with the current quantity of PE provision going on in Maltese primary schools. Unfortunately, scheduled PE lessons do not always take place. This is reflective of a generally poor attitude towards PE and the value of PA among the general population, which needs to be addressed. Nevertheless, he was optimistic about on-going initiatives and pilot projects designed to increase the volume of PE in schools. Spiteri challenged the idea that PE should “lead” to anything. Indeed, PE should assume more of a central status on its own merits, and not be conceptualised in terms of other initiatives and agendas it may serve. He spoke highly of current momentum towards increasingly cross-curricular activities, with PE representing an ideal platform for facilitating such an approach. Also, he stressed that PA should not just be limited to PE, and that there are plenty of occasions throughout the school day, where activities can be made more physically active, and more links could be made with external organisations able to provide various forms of active learning.

NATASHA GALEA

Ms. Natasha Galea, Head of Department (PE) at the Secretariat for Catholic Education, explained how Church schools typically vary in terms of scheduling, and faced different challenges to state schools. She stressed the importance that every child gets their entitled quota of PA, which should be at least one session per day for primary school children. To this end, increasing responsibility is being placed on individual educators, given on-going promotion of more autonomous, creative and emergent approaches to curriculum. There is a degree of pressure to carry out a certain minimum amount of PE lessons, which creates some conflict with other subjects, all vying for their own delivery time. Some of the challenges to increased provision of PE are the availability and costs associated with facilities, as well as broader cultural attitudes surrounding sport and PA. PE teachers are typically in demand, and need more support, including facilitating stronger communities of practice among educators.

ROBERTO PISANI

Mr. Roberto Pisani, Head of Department (PE) at San Anton School, spoke from the unique perspective of private schools. Independent/private schools enjoy a degree of autonomy, although they are still subject to review. He explained that throughout the educational pathway, the entitlement for PE is consistently twice per week. Assembly in his school was removed and the break shortened in order to create more time for PE. Implementing what is being done in state schools can sometimes be problematic in the context of the independent school's accountability to parents. This means that the school often adapts to become a reflection of the values and mentalities of parents. Such parents form part of a broader culture with its existing problem of devalued PE and PA. Ultimately, Pisani argued, parents prioritise getting good marks. Parents need to reinforce the message provided by the school, and conflicts in this regard can represent significant challenges. The best way to create legacy surrounding major sporting events, in this sense, is to take the children to experience it directly.

EMERGING
THEMES

Struggles of dual-career athletes – Students must balance studying and competing, but are these necessarily antagonistic?

Lifelong participation in Physical Activity and exercise throughout the entire life span.

Integrative approach to competitive sport, exercise, leisure and general Physical Activity – The lines must be blurred.

Collective devaluation of sport and Physical Activity in Maltese society as a barrier to development and progress.

SPORTMALTA’S #BEACTIVE CAMPAIGN: A CATALYST FOR INCREASING ENGAGEMENT

ROSE ANN MERCIECA

Ms. Rose Ann Mercieca, Director of Events and Human Resources at SportMalta, delivered a presentation on some of the current initiatives and projects underway by SportMalta to increase engagement in sport and PA in the Maltese population. These initiatives, Mercieca stressed, do not stop at sport and PA, but also incorporate healthier living more broadly, including educational campaigns about healthy eating and general lifestyle habits across all age groups. Eurobarometer statistics drawing comparisons between Maltese and EU averages provided valuable context to the formulation of SportMalta’s goals, as they strive to act on evidence in pursuit of real-world solutions. One of the organisation’s primary aims remains to reduce the amount of Maltese people who are classified as inactive. Environment and infrastructure represent important aspects of this goal. She presented a holistic view of exercise by emphasising the importance of PA outside the scope of competitive sport. Educational campaigns designed to help people maximise every day opportunities to be more active. A concerted effort to encourage people to join fitness centres was also mentioned.



EMERGING
THEMES

Promotion and support for the private exercise and fitness sector.

Importance of empirical data, research, and evidence-based practice in the furtherance of Maltese sport and PA.

Integrative approach to competitive sport, exercise, leisure and general PA – The lines must be blurred.

Lifelong participation in PA and exercise throughout the entire life span.

Inclusion as a key strategy in the promotion of sport and PA.

ESCAPE PLAN: DUAL CAREER AND OTHER PATHWAYS TO ELITE SPORTING SUCCESS FOR OUR YOUNG AND ASPIRING CHAMPIONS

PIERRE CASSAR

Hosted by Mr. Pierre Cassar, Director of Marketing, Communications and Alumni at University of Malta, the third panel discussion saw a marked increase in engagement from the audience, as the topic shifted towards dual career, or more specifically, the challenges faced by Maltese sports performers to balance their competitive and academic aspirations.

ROBERT MAGRO

Mr. Robert Magro, Head of School at the National Sports School (NSS), explained some of the latest developments at the NSS. These included less dependence on associations with a view to sharing responsibility and carrying out more comprehensive and reliable testing internally, including assessment of fitness components in student athletes. He also explained how more work was being done with education officers and other organisations with the aim of improving talent identification systems serving the NSS. Such programmes should not discriminate, and should ideally engage with as much of the total available population as possible.

CHARLENE ATTARD

Ms. Charlene Attard, Director of Sport at the Maltese Olympic Committee (MOC), explained how up to Year 11, students typically receive relatively high levels of support in their development both as students and sports performers. It is the post-secondary level where things typically go awry. She explained how the MOC strives to support athletes at this level by negotiating with employers, as well as providing services for psychological support, nutrition, and other essential pillars of performance at the senior level. Attard cited mindset as a significant barrier among Maltese athletes, accounting for failure to obtain consistently positive results on the international stage. One of the aims of the MOC has also been to assist in sending athletes abroad, allowing them to train, compete and generally gain exposure to higher caliber athletes.

GEORGE MICALLEF

Mr. George Micallef, Director of Sport Development, Strategy and Recruitment at the Mediterranean College of Sport, agreed that mindset was a key factor. The onus, however, should be on systems to more faithfully address the needs of individual athletes. He emphasised the notion of individualism arguing that systems are not ends in themselves, and should ultimately be organised with a view to serving those individuals who show potential. Talent identification, however, is no straightforward task, and needs to take into account the possibility of late-developers, who may be initially missed. Further to Mr. Magro's focus on the idea that talent identification should not discriminate on any grounds, including socioeconomic status, the aim of focusing on promising individual athletes (who likely emerge from backgrounds where certain opportunities are actually provided) emerged as a contentious topic, given that potential champions may very well exist, yet find themselves in situations without opportunities to ever show their potential.

PROF. JOSEPH N. GRIMA

Prof. Joseph N. Grima, Professor at UM and President of the Malta Paralympic Committee, was similarly in favour of promoting more focus on mindset, specifically the winner's mentality. Performance in sport and academia, however, need not be mutually exclusive. Grima made the argument that high-achievers tend to push themselves in all arenas when they are provided the opportunity to meaningfully engage, and this should be encouraged. Early specialisation in sport may result in denied opportunities to excel in other areas, so a whole-package approach should be promoted; high achievement on the sports field, and high achievement in the classroom, combined, should be the goal. Grima suggested that making a name for oneself internationally typically brings substantial rewards, and young people in Malta should be encouraged to think, and get excited, about such possibilities. He also made the argument that sports systems in Malta are not necessarily failing systemically, and it is too often the case that individuals can and do throw major spanners into the works.

EMERGING
THEMES

Systems supporting promising individuals, or individuals supporting promising systems?

Dangers of not maximising the whole talent pool, by excluding youngsters from low socioeconomic backgrounds who lack opportunities or means to participate.

EMERGING
THEMES

Cultivation of mindset as a key strategy.

Whole-system approaches for maximising testing and talent identification in small nations.

Inclusion as a key strategy in the promotion of sport and PA.

Struggles of dual-career athletes – Students must balance studying and competing, but are these necessarily antagonistic?



CLOSING THE INCLUSION GAP: LESSONS LEARNED FROM DISABILITY SPORTS

A dedicated panel discussion explored current issues in disability sports, namely the Special Olympics movement in Malta. Ms. Amanda Dimech, Senior Sports Lecturer at MCAST, and Athletics Head Coach at Special Olympics Malta, hosted Ms. Christabel D'Amato, Special Olympics Malta Sports Director, and Sam Micallef, Special Olympics Malta Athlete.

CHRISTABEL D'AMATO

D'Amato gave some background on Special Olympics Malta, emphasising that it mainly adopts an athlete-centred philosophy. Support is provided to athletes, who are guided into the sports to which they are most suited. Awareness about the Special Olympics movement is on the rise. Questions remain, however, about whether athletes are really being included. Stakeholders continuously challenge themselves about the ability of the organisation to really cater for athletes with different abilities. Using the party metaphor, there is a difference between simply being invited to a party on the one hand, and actually being asked to dance on the other. Better still, more meaningful inclusion would involve due consideration in the organisation of the party itself. D'Amato explained how the aim was to cater for athletes holistically in terms of education, nutrition, building mindset, and nurturing communication skills. Special Olympics athletes are given the opportunity to advocate and assist in communicating on behalf of their peers, providing an important social aspect to the Special Olympics movement. She summarised her goal as that of building legacy, and helping athletes be the best versions of themselves, as well as advocates for both themselves and others.

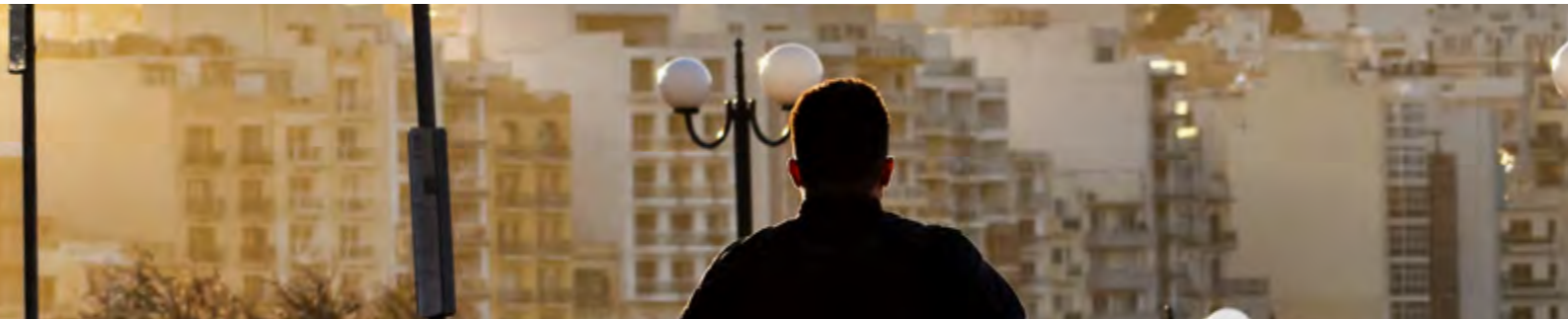
SAM MICALLEF

Micallef described some of his experiences in mainstream sports, compared to those in the Special Olympics context. In mainstream sports, he would often get stuck and overall saw limited improvement. In the Special Olympics setting, the coaches were more inclusive and more autonomy supportive, resulting in improved morale. Yet, he did not feel like the coach was going easy on him, which he considered a key aspect. Micallef particularly valued the opportunities provided within Special Olympics settings to also contribute and help other athletes. His experiences with inclusion in PE in an independent school had been mostly positive, but he described some of the challenges surrounding true inclusion in the specific context of the involvement of Learning Support Educators (LSEs), which needs to be explored further.

EMERGING THEMES

Inclusion as a key strategy in the promotion of sport and PA.

Cultivation of mindset as a key strategy.



NATIONAL GOVERNING BODIES AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT: GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT ADDRESSING LIMITATIONS AND RENEWING SPORTS CULTURE

CHARLES CAMENZULI

Mr. Charles Camenzuli, President of the International Sports Press Association Europe, hosted what turned out to be a lively debate on the general status of Maltese sports. Representatives from disparate associations gave their unique perspectives on the challenges faced in Maltese sports, given the diversity of their different practical realities.

DRANGELOCHETCUTI

Dr. Angelo Chetcuti, General Secretary of the Malta Football Association (MFA), argued that while children will naturally flock to football, this does not give the organisation a free pass, and only increases the responsibility of the MFA to create effective structures for development of footballers from grassroots to elite levels. Similarly, while the MFA compares favourably with other local organisations in terms of its influence and resources, comparisons with larger foreign countries typically represent the same gulfs in performance levels as those experienced by smaller local associations in their own respective sports. Chetcuti described the current set-up in terms of clubs and talent identification, stressing the importance of maximising the available pool of potential talent. The state could be spared, in this sense, by MFA initiatives to engage more meaningfully with the public school sector, providing exposure to sport and PA among as wide a segment of the young population as possible. All links in the chain need to be addressed, and poor participation rates at grassroots level currently represent a weak link.

ANDY GRECH

Mr. Andy Grech, President of Athletics Malta, explained how his association was primarily focused on the GSSE, and busy assisting the best athletes with their preparations. In terms of goals, strategies tend to centre around short to medium-term, given insufficient resources to plan any further ahead or create strong long-term development infrastructures. Grech then delivered an impassioned talk about the general challenges facing small to medium size associations, particularly in the context of limited human resources and volunteerism. There is a high risk of burnout not only among administrators but also among athletes themselves. Grech posed the highly relevant question, about how such associations are supposed to be able to keep up with all the work required to keep their sport alive, while also producing elite performers who can compete at the international level.

ENVIC GALEA

Mr. Envic Galea, President of the Malta Judo Federation, described the philosophy of Judo particularly in relation to the central role of education. The federation tends to enjoy good engagement and participation among children and youths. Galea described some of the history of the sport in Malta, including the early ties that existed with the Italian federation which were instrumental in setting high standards that have influenced, and continue to influence, Maltese coaches. The federation currently offers accreditation courses for coaches, helping to maintain good standards of instruction. Commenting on the Luxembourgish approach to centralised resource use, Galea expressed agreement that better facilities accessible to all local sports in a centralised manner would be beneficial for judo and Maltese sport more broadly.

KARL IZZO

Mr. Karl Izzo, President of the Aquatic Sports Association, described current programmes and initiatives underway in his association, and was optimistic about the future of aquatic sports in Malta. He presented some planned changes

EMERGING THEMES

underway, and suggested new developments will help alleviate some of the pressures resulting from current shortages of pool space. Nevertheless, in water polo specifically, good results are currently being obtained at international level. He attributed some of this success to the ability of individual water polo players putting in the effort to train around existing work commitments, given their amateur status, and still register positive performances against foreign players from professional leagues.

- Voluntarism and systemic lack of administrative human resources.
- Perennial under-performance problem in Maltese international sports performance.
- Whole-system approaches for maximising testing and talent identification in small nations.
- Dangers of not maximising the whole talent pool, by excluding youngsters from low socioeconomic backgrounds who lack opportunities or means to participate.
- Whole-system approaches for maximising testing and talent identification in small nations.
- Centralisation and pooling of resources within small nations.
- Cultivation of mindset as a key strategy.





THEME 3

INSPIRING A RENEWED MINDSET

THEME 3

OPENING REMARKS

DR. MATTHEW
MUSCAT-INGLOTT

Dr. Matthew Muscat-Inglott, co-editor-in-chief of the MCAST JARP Special Issue in sport, exercise and health, and Senior Lecturer and Researcher at ICS MCAST, delivered a brief summary of the salient points from the previous day, urging continued momentum for Day Two, particularly in terms of audience engagement stimulated by the panel discussions. Citing the editorial for the Special Issue in the context of the previous day’s talking points, he spoke about the under-discussed possibility of fostering an indigenous approach to sports development in Malta. He argued that the biggest and most popular sports in post-colonial Malta are not necessarily those that would have developed organically based on the geography, natural resources, genuine interests and true values of the Maltese people. The relative lack of interest among the majority of Maltese people in sea-based sports and leisure activities (as well as competitive disciplines) like canoeing, kayaking or sailing, for instance, remains a mystery. Rock-climbing similarly has remained relatively underdeveloped despite ideal natural conditions. Muscat-Inglott cited sport shooting as an apt example of a sport that is, “in the blood”, and has represented Malta’s best “shot” so far at an Olympic medal. By parlaying a controversial local pass-time into the more humane practice of clay shooting, Maltese shooters are a prime example of good practice in terms of adopting an indigenous approach to sport. Let us play, he argued, to our home advantages, the games we want to play, on our terms and not those given by others. Like any avenue to increasing sporting success and more engagement in active leisure, such an approach relies on a culture change, and the cultivation of radically different approaches to sports development strategies and policies.

EMERGING
THEMES

- Indigenous approaches to sport development – Let’s play on our terms.
- Locally contextualised solutions, no more off-the-shelf internationally-sourced fixes.
- Maximising local natural and freely-available resources for a more active population and better sports performance.



SOCIAL MEDIA AND LOCAL SPORT



MAURO D'AMATO

Mr. Mauro D'Amato, Senior Sports Lecturer at MCAST, and Marketing Coordinator of the MCAST Sports Symposium 2023, delivered a presentation on his study of social media use by local sports clubs, which was published in the MCAST JARP special issue on sport, exercise and health. The research focused more specifically on social media use in local premier league football clubs. D'Amato explained some of the benefits of effective use of social media, which include opportunities for clubs to increase fan-bases, incorporate such fans more fully as important stakeholders in key decisions and processes, attract sponsorships, and generate revenue in its own right. Barriers to effective use of social media included current tendencies to use such platforms as modes of one-way communication, and a lack of consistency in engagement patterns. He argued for more formal training of club representatives and administrators in the effective use of social media, with a view to producing more engaging, interactive channels of communication, as well as more funding and investment for future development.

EMERGING THEMES

- Importance of empirical data, research, and evidence-based practice in the furtherance of Maltese sport and PA.
- Education and the provision of substantive qualifications as a foundation of better professional practice.
- A genuine commitment to innovation is key.

AIMS – A REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR MALTESE SPORTS ASSOCIATIONS

DR. LUCIANO BUSUTTIL

Dr. Luciano Busuttil, CEO of the Authority for Integrity in Maltese Sport (AIMS) delivered an informative presentation on AIMS and various important upcoming developments for Maltese sport. The organisation deals with, among other things, what Busuttil described as the “dark side” of Maltese sport, including doping, match-fixing and money laundering. A more rigorous legal framework is currently being designed to include provisions for the dark side of Maltese sport, as well as recognition and licensing of sports facilities, and the introduction of a sports court of arbitration. Local sports organisations will be subject to good governance requirements, centred around the core principles of accountability, transparency and democracy.

Questions from the audience stimulated debate on issues including jurisdiction and the actions of Maltese athletes while abroad, expectations from coaches in terms of doping, as well as cases of physical and sexual abuse in contexts unique to sports environments. The issue of status of the private exercise and fitness industry was raised, and Busuttil confirmed that fitness centres and associated fitness professionals are to be included under the new laws. The focus however, at least initially, would be on coaching education and accreditation across all sports. Busuttil explained that a key component of AIMS is education, given that administrators, coaches, athletes, medical professionals, and all stakeholders ultimately need to understand what is required of them, particularly in areas like anti-doping, where existing regulations are extensive and particularly detailed.

EMERGING THEMES

- Need for accountability, transparency and democracy in the management and administration of local sport and PA.
- Accreditation and standards among sport, exercise and PA professionals, facilities and services.
- Promotion and support for the private exercise and fitness sector.

OVERCOMING PERENNIAL BARRIERS BY CREATING, INNOVATING AND FOSTERING A RENEWED MINDSET

BEPPE MUSCAT

Hosted by Mr. Beppe Muscat, CEO of NM Group and former football player, hosted an animated and impassioned panel discussion that explored some of the barriers restricting Maltese performance in international sport, and how we might go about finding effective solutions. At this stage, audience engagement was climactic.

MIKE CURMI

Mr. Mike Curmi, parent of elite tennis player Francesca Curmi, raised some important points from the parents' perspective. He spoke about some of the challenges faced personally and by his family, in their total investment in Francesca's progress as a professional tennis player. He argued that for individuals and families ready to make the sacrifices needed to produce elite sports performers, there should be financial support from the state. He was able to describe the unique personal experiences involved in attaining success, including the challenges, of which there are many, and for which there is no "textbook". Doubts always remain, about whether the right choices are being made, and the right strategies pursued. It is a "one shot deal", there are no others to "experiment" on. For instance, Curmi explained how even from a psychological point of view, there is a fine line between being present and interfering. It is never easy knowing how to handle certain situations that invariably crop up and threaten to compromise the mood state and motivation of athletes.

YAZMIN ZAMMIT STEVENS

Ms. Yazmin Zammit Stevens, elite weightlifter, described some of her own experiences challenging the status quo as a woman in the sport of weightlifting. She explained, adding to Curmi's points, how her parents were a crucial part of her success. The Malta Weightlifting Association was also crucial, lending support in every way possible, and representing an example of good practice that made it difficult for her to empathise with some of the difficulties and complaints reported by fellow athletes in other sports under other associations. Zammit Stevens made the argument that while individuals are important, it is ultimately the support systems that make it all possible. She also noted how the tone of critics tends to change once one actually achieves success, so caution must also be exercised in the face of overly critical or negative mindsets of others.



DR. DAWN AQUILINA

Dr. Dawn Aquilina, Strategy Officer at the Malta Football Association, spoke about her experiences as a former competitive basketball player achieving success at the 2003 GSSE and the 2006 Commonwealth Games. She highlighted some of the differences between team and individual sports, and the difficulties associated with supporting whole teams as opposed to individual athletes. While socioeconomic status is a significant barrier for certain families being able to support talented young athletes, support can still be given in terms of mere presence and interest, the availability of which, however, boils down to culture. Aquilina also urged caution, in that short-term success in international sport does not guarantee long-term progress, implying an extant state of decline in women's basketball today.



DR. RENZO KERR-CUMBO

Dr. Renzo Kerr-Cumbo, Senior Sports Lecturer at MCAST and International Coordinator for the CoachEd6 European project, redefined what it means to challenge the status quo not just as an athlete, but in other key areas of sport organisation and promotion. He raised the important point that challenging the status quo with an innovative approach often involves being, as he had often found from personal experience, a “headache” for one’s leaders. He explained how he had often worked best with leaders who were comfortable with challenging and being challenged. In a system where most seem afraid of losing their seat, unfortunately, few are prepared to rock the boat. While the narrative of innovation and change is too often embraced at the superficial level, few appear to be prepared to genuinely see it through. Despite popular rhetoric surrounding the importance of learning and innovating, he challenged the tendency for leaders to come and say their piece, and leave. “Where are our leaders?” he fomented, to a rousing and impassioned response from the audience. Leaders cannot be scared, he maintained. A bottom-to-top approach still needs an effective top. He finally reiterated, “We do have good people, but were not using them well. We need to use them and trust them.”

Questions from the audience included, further to discussions on individual and systemic investment into sporting success, whether children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are really getting the same chances to excel as those lucky enough to come from families with financial and other means to lend support. This of course, remains an open question.

EMERGING THEMES

- Systems supporting promising individuals, or individuals supporting promising systems?
- Short-term versus long-term success.
- A genuine commitment to innovation is key.
- Perennial under-performance problem in Maltese international sports performance.
- Cultivation of mindset as a key strategy.
- Dangers of not maximising the whole talent pool, by excluding youngsters from low socioeconomic backgrounds who lack opportunities or means to participate.

BIRMINGHAM 2022 – A GAME-CHANGING LEGACY



TOM CLIFT

Mr. Tom Clift, Head of Commonwealth Games Project Delivery, at the University of Birmingham, gave a presentation on legacy surrounding the 2022 commonwealth games, from the perspective of the University of Birmingham, which was a main partner in the organisation of the games. The games were a challenge for the university, but one rife with opportunity, given the scale of the event. University facilities also played host to some of the competitions, including hockey and squash, as well as the principal athletes village location among several others that were used around the city. Clift stressed the importance of defining one's expectations surrounding legacy, which must be specific and depend on the nature of the event and priorities of organisations involved. Among the benefits and impact of the 2022 commonwealth games were generation of revenue, new infrastructure and facilities, international exposure for the city, as well as new connections and global partnerships.

EMERGING
THEMES

Legacy must be carefully and specifically defined by each organisation's potential to maximise benefit.

A genuine commitment to innovation is key.

CREATING LEGACY AND CHANGING THE GAME FOR MALTESE SPORTS

RICCARDO FLASK

Hosted by Mr. Riccardo Flask, Senior Lecturer at D. F. Abela Junior College, University of Malta, and TVM Sports Journalist, the final panel discussion led straight into what such specific benefits and impact might be in the case of the 2023 international events in Malta. The discussion focused on the particularities surrounding local sports organisations and how they maximise opportunities arising from hosting large events. Questions from the audience included the viability of more centralised facilities, including sports labs, for use by multiple associations and clubs on the islands.

MARK CUTAJAR

Mr. Mark Cutajar, CEO of SportMalta portrayed legacy as more than just infrastructure, but rather, as a potential to change the way we look at sport more generally. Important opportunities include the recruitment of volunteers who eventually decide to stay in sport, thereby strengthening sports administrative human resources infrastructure. Naturally, a central goal should always be to increase participation of new, young athletes. The events to be held in Malta involve many smaller organisations, and it is up to these organisations to decide how to maximise legacy. Cutajar discussed the point that there is a difference between issues and obstacles. Obstacles are challenges to be overcome, and it is important for local sports stakeholders to face challenges with a proactive mindset of overcoming them.

RODERICK VELLA

Mr. Roderick Vella, Member of the UEFA U19 European Championships Malta 2023 Local Organising Committee, described some of the lasting impact stemming from the U17 championships hosted by the MFA in 2014. There has been a technical legacy, whereby the players who formed the core of the 2014 U17 Malta squad are now valued members of the senior national team. Legacy in terms of infrastructure was minimal, since the pitches were already operating, however the stadium in Gozo did benefit from significant upgrades. The MFA, therefore, has been considering the U19 championships mainly as an opportunity to improve the junior section of players. Regardless of how the national U19 squad performs, there is optimism about an on-going trend of closing the gap on international competitors, introducing local players to ever higher levels of competition. Some improvements in facilities are also expected in the lead up to the event.

PAUL SULTANA

Mr. Paul Sultana, President of the Malta Basketball Association, continued to clarify what is meant by the term legacy. In basketball, big events have previously resulted in benefits to the youth sections, as well as political legacy. Sultana explained that the association gained traction with local politicians when it proved itself in international competitions, particularly at previous editions of the Commonwealth Games. Funding increased in direct response to positive results. In this sense, Sultana posited that the onus is on associations and athletes to perform and prove themselves, before they can expect substantial external financial investment. Similar patterns have been noted in the funding of the Maltese Olympic Committee, he argued. Sultana stressed the importance of associations being proactive. Also, as a cautionary note, infrastructures should be able to contend with the influx of new players resulting from improved performances by national teams. Basketball has, in the past, sometimes struggled to keep up with sharp increases in participation rates.

GEORGE BONELLO
DUPUIS

Mr. George Bonello DuPuis, Rear Commodore, Special Events for the Rolex Middle Sea Race, gave a brief history of the Rolex Middlesea Race, and the Royal Malta Yacht Club itself. He discussed the favourable image of the event in the international sailing community, and some of the financial aspects of sponsorship and revenue generation surrounding the event, in particular the partnership with Rolex. Entry fees also represent a significant proportion of income. While the circumstances in sailing may be significantly different from most other local organisations, the sailing event nonetheless stands as an exemplar for hosting large international events on the islands from a technical point of view.

EMERGING
THEMES

Maximising local natural and freely-available resources for a more active population and better sports performance.

Centralisation and pooling of resources within small nations.

Cultivation of mindset as a key strategy.



DEMOCRACY AND SPORTS GOVERNANCE – A CASE FOR INCREASING COLLABORATION, COMMUNICATION AND MUTUAL SUPPORT IN MALTESE SPORTING CULTURE

A final debate was held, between two political leaders in the sport and PA sector. The main political parties were represented by Mr. Jude Zammit, Director General of Curriculum, Lifelong Learning & Employability at the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, and Hon. Graham Bencini, MP, Shadow Minister for Sport and Public Broadcasting. The debate was moderated by Mr. Pierre Cassar, Director of Marketing, Communications and Alumni at University of Malta.

JUDE ZAMMIT

In-keeping with his role, Zammit focused on the integration of sports in schools, and established himself as a firm believer of the power of sport to promote diversity and unity in education. Part of his work includes overseeing which sports are able to access schools formally. He spoke about on-going formal initiatives to increase PE, sports, and PA in schools over the coming years, with a primary goal of providing access for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Currently, coaches are delivering sessions in primary schools with a view to exposing students to various diverse disciplines, and not necessarily just to produce elite sports performers.

Zammit refused to distinguish between Maltese nationals residing in Malta or abroad, emphasising that they are both equally entitled to participate. He argued that short-term success will stimulate more long-term success, which benefits all athletes. Challenges from the audience included that if other small nations exploit regulations surrounding nationality, then why should Malta not do the same? Bencini countered that the issue needs to be addressed collectively at the small nations level, such that all nations agree on participation rules that are more conducive with fostering home-grown talent, and longer-term internal sports development. He cited preference for more medals resulting from systemic change, rather than from the exploits of the odd “foreign” athlete.



HON. GRAHAM BENCINI

Bencini expressed optimism about the tendency for sport to be a locus of unity at the political and national levels. He emphasised the importance of sport as a means of developing key values like discipline and perseverance. Bencini raised the contentious issue of small nations fielding athletes who are not products of their own sports development systems. Fielding athletes from larger countries because they technically fulfill nationality requirements, he argued, is destructive for the long-term development of homegrown athletes. Bencini spoke passionately on the issue, stating that he wants to win, but not at that price.

In response to audience questions, and concerns about excessive infrastructure development and construction as a barrier to safe and freely-accessible PA participation, Zammit stated that existing natural resources for engaging in PA exist, but are seldom used. A change in culture, ideally through education, is needed to promote maximal use of available space.

The importance of promoting sport and PA as parallel routes was also discussed, as well as the drive to increase more PE lessons in schools. PE was discussed as a means of combating the childhood obesity problem, however members from the audience rightly pointed out that the relationship between PE and obesity at population levels are complex. PE must form part of broader more holistic health-promotion initiatives with regard to the obesity problem, and in the meantime, pursued as a goal in its own right. The variability of health outcomes across socioeconomic levels remains a key problem, so maximising access to health and PA initiatives to include children from low socioeconomic backgrounds must remain a priority.

EMERGING
THEMES

Maximising local natural and freely-available resources for a more active population and better sports performance.

Whole-system approaches for maximising testing and talent identification in small nations.

Dangers of not maximising the whole talent pool, by excluding youngsters from low socioeconomic backgrounds who lack opportunities or means to participate.



CLOSING REMARKS

Prof. Joachim James Calleja, Principal and CEO of MCAST, delivered his closing remarks. He showed enthusiasm for the themes discussed throughout the event and expressed interest in not only seeing the recommendations arising from the event, but also acting on them. The outcome, in this sense, must be, more than a report. It should be a road map capable of taking MCAST and national interests forwards.

GAMEPLAN: A WAY FORWARD

RECOMMENDATIONS
& CONCLUSIONS

RAPPORTEUR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

01

KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The widespread collection and analysis of empirical data is a relatively new phenomenon locally, having risen sharply with the introduction of dedicated sport and PA Bachelor's and Master's programmes at the major local higher education and research institutions in recent years. Such knowledge creation, including that by local academics studying at foreign universities, needs to be collated and catalogued for further analysis and implementation. Furthermore, a conduit is needed to transform such knowledge into practical use. Athletes, parents, coaches, administrators and other stakeholders should benefit from new knowledge without having to attend time-intensive courses, or read technical reports and research papers. More community outreach by academics and sports scientists, combined with effective use of media and communication channels will help transform important discoveries into practical, ready-to-use information.

02

A STRONGER BACKBONE FOR SPORTS AND PA ORGANISATION WITH A VIEW TO CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING A CLEAR AND COHERENT LONG-TERM STRATEGY, IS OVERDUE

Stronger, more dedicated infrastructure with sufficient legislative power and technical expertise is needed to devise long-term strategy, and aim for systemic change as an alternative to prevailing short-term plans. It is clear that the local community is tired of hollow, ineffective and superficial initiatives that consistently fail to bring about lasting positive change. Stakeholders want a dedicated public entity staffed with democratically elected experts (elected by those within the sports community who understand local realities most intimately), that is ultimately guided by the fundamental principles of transparency and accountability. Apart from the design and implementation of strategy, coordination with all existing departments including educational institutions in the interests of dual-career athletes is needed to help promote sport competition and participation, as well as PA for better public health. Strategy should entertain the possibility of implementing radically different approaches to sport and PA development, like centralisation and a more indigenous approach to sports development, among others. What sports and PA children are exposed to in schools at the national scale should also fit inside such a framework. Such decisions must align with an overarching strategy, and not be left to the idiosyncrasies of independently operating clubs and associations.

03 SMALL COUNTRIES CAN AND SHOULD DRAW STRENGTH FROM UNITY

We must accept that fragmentation and atomisation due to a high number of clubs and organisations per capita, has not provided satisfactory results. At this stage of development of and through Maltese sport and PA, it is clear that the laissez-faire approach to sport and PA policy has failed. Limited resources and smallness dictate that a properly planned centralised system is worthy of genuine consideration. By concentrating on the provision of shared national high-quality coaching and support facilities that include sports therapy, strength and conditioning, and also sports science testing and research, all athletes can potentially gain access to the highest caliber of support. Rather than being siphoned off through a complex web of clubs and associations enacting disparate visions, public money invested in sport should be more strategically and decisively channeled into initiatives that primarily serve the public good, and address a coherent, carefully thought-out (by democratically elected experts), overarching strategy.

04 PROFESSIONALISATION OF SPORTS ADMINISTRATION

Current sport administration appears mainly predicated on the assumption that sports administrators in disparate clubs and associations, intuitively know what is best for their sport, and that such decisions will somehow invariably cohere within a functioning integrated whole. Apart from centralisation, more freely-available and accessible formal training for sports and PA administrators is needed. Short, applied, basic, and regular training courses for club and association administrators will help individuals maximise their existing strengths, and effectively parlay their life and alternative professional experiences from other sectors to meet the unique challenges and realities of Maltese sport and PA. Such courses should be built on locally contextualised knowledge, cater to local issues, and ultimately promote the ideals of democracy, transparency and accountability. Volunteerism and part-time-ism, need not equate amateurism. Even though some positions in sport and PA promotion and delivery are necessarily part-time in terms of job status, this should not foster acceptance of low standards. Professionals should be knowledgeable, motivated and possess the right mindset to strive for the highest possible standards. Updated organisational structures, supported by better on-going education and training, in this sense, can help support long-term culture change in Maltese sport and PA.

05 THE DEVELOPMENT OF MINDSET; LET US BE CAREFUL WHO THE ONUS IS PLACED ON

While a dedicated mindset is essential, the mindset of individual athletes cannot be exclusively relied upon at the expense of strong support systems and good management. The efficacy of improved mindset should be considered contingent strictly on the mindsets of others. Cultivation of individual mindset, in this sense, works best when applied across the board, among all stakeholders. Culture change initiatives should be directed at athletes, coaches, administrators, parents, and all involved in the implementation of sport and PA strategy.



06 INTEGRATION OF THE PRIVATE EXERCISE AND FITNESS SECTOR

Accreditation and regulation of fitness professionals, services and facilities is a valuable first step, but we should aim further, for full and genuine integration. A culture of cooperation between exercise and fitness providers, and public health entities may be facilitated through further recognition of exercise professionals' qualifications and scope of practice, more widespread promotion of PA and exercise as a means of improving general health, facilitation of stronger more clearly defined referral networks as well as more sharing of knowledge and resources among medical, health care and exercise professionals. Such integration may help increase PA across the board, and address serious public health issues related to inactivity and the prevalence of sedentary living.

07 MORE HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

We need to stop distinguishing between competitive sport and non-competitive active living, and instead seek to develop both simultaneously. The lines between competitive and non-competitive forms of sport and active living, in this sense, must be blurred. Inclusive practice and bolstering participation more broadly, as well as valuing alternative forms of PA beyond those that are most prominent, benefits all spheres, including competitive standards and public health outcomes associated with a more physically active population. More investment is needed in promoting participation more broadly, including all forms of active leisure, outdoor activities, and active living more generally. Inclusive policies should aim at promoting participation in any activity by any person on the islands, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, or level of ability.



NOTES

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MCAST