



MCAST



BRIDGING DISCIPLINES: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ACROSS FIELDS

MCAST 4TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

ABSTRACT BOOK

BRIDGING DISCIPLINES: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ACROSS FIELDS



MCAST



THE R&I EXPO ORGANISING COMMITTEE



Dr Tatjana Chircop

MCAST Deputy Principal for Research and Student Academic Management

Dr Tatjana Chircop is the Deputy Principal for Research and Innovation at MCAST. Her main areas of expertise are youth and community studies, vocational education (VET) and performing arts. Leading a team of researchers at the college, she has worked on researching challenges that students find in their educational journeys as well as innovative pedagogical tools which enhance learning, such as gamification. She has also led the initiative to introduce the role of student mentors at MCAST with the student mentoring service now having become an integral part of the services the college offers. In her role as Deputy Principal for Research and Innovation, she leads the Applied Research and Innovation Centre (ARIC) and the MCAST Library. Within ARIC, a number of Master's programmes are delivered, including the Master in Research Methods and the Master by Research, as well as the professional Doctorate programme. Over the years, she has also been involved in teacher training at MCAST, most recently through the innovative Master's degree in Vocational Education Applied Research 4.0. Prior to joining MCAST, Dr Chircop was a professional musician with the Manoel Theatre Orchestra and the National Orchestra and taught violin and pianoforte performance at the Johann Strauss School of Music. Subsequent roles included those of learning support assistant and community development worker. Within MCAST, Dr Chircop was a lecturer and later a Director of the Institute of Community Services, Head of the Foundation College and Deputy Principal for Arts and Social Sciences. Dr Chircop graduated with a BA Hons in English (University of London), a BA Hons in Youth and Community Studies (University of Malta), a MA in Youth and Community Studies (Brunel University), a Master in Intercultural EcoManagement of Schools (Università Ca Foscari), a Post-Graduate Certificate in Vocational and Educational and Training (MCAST) and a PhD (Brunel University).



Dr Lorna Bonnici West

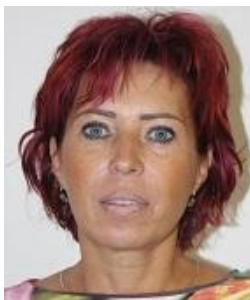
*MCAST Director for Research and Innovation
Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)*

Dr Lorna Bonnici West is the Director for Research & Innovation at MCAST, instigating scientific research excellence initiatives across the organisation, in collaboration with a group of highly professional and proficient colleagues at ARIC. Dr Bonnici West, together with the ARIC colleagues, has been instrumental in steering research groups and themes, driving and supporting the adoption of research initiatives by institute academic staff and has been highly active in supporting research teams in the writing of research proposals for different funds.



Prior to her engagement at MCAST, Lorna worked as a principal clinical pharmacist at Mater Dei Hospital. Since January 2020 she joined MCAST as a Senior Research Officer supporting the Institute of Applied Sciences. Dr Bonnici West also holds the post of Visiting Senior Lecturer with the Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics at the University of Malta.

Dr Bonnici West graduated in Pharmacy from the University of Malta in 2000. She read for a Master of Science degree in Clinical Pharmacy at the Robert Gordon University, Scotland, graduating in 2006, and was awarded a scholarship by the Malta Government Scholarship Scheme to read for a PhD at the Robert Gordon University, Scotland, graduating in 2015. In 2016, she was awarded a post-doctoral grant under the Reach-High Scholars Programme Scheme, part-financed by the European Union, European Social Fund.



Dr Judita Tomaskinova

*MCAST Deputy Director for Research and Innovation
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Dr Tomaskinova graduated in Environmental Management from the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia). Her associate professorship thesis, which was submitted within the sphere of applied and landscape ecology (at Mendel University in Brno, Czechia), dealt with the integrated management and supply of cultural ecosystem services in selected protected areas in the Maltese Islands. Her Ph. D. dissertation was in environmental management, specifically about the assessment of integrated protected area management and environmental education, and was written in collaboration with Dr Sean Prendergast (Peak District National Park, UK). As a background, she has more than 25 years' experience in the field of education, research management and project management. Judita has worked at the Slovak Museum of Nature Protection and Speleology for over fifteen years, and went on to hold a senior academic position at Matej Bel University in the Slovak Republic for over ten years. She subsequently moved to the Maltese Islands and worked as a Senior Researcher for the ReNature project within the MCAST Institute of Applied Sciences, and as a Research Project Manager within the Research Support Services Directorate at the University of Malta.

Her areas of research interest are broadly focused on the management of protected areas around Europe; ecosystem services; soil respiration in the context of climate change; phytoremediation; life-cycle assessment (LCA); environmental education, and education for sustainable development.



The ARIC Senior Research Officers Team



Dr Maria Cardona

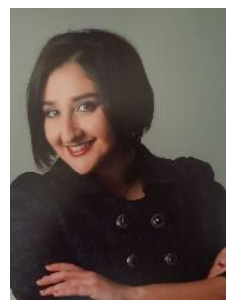
MCAST Senior Research Officer
Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)

Dr Maria Cardona graduated from the University of Malta with a BSc (Hons) in Chemistry and Biology, an MSc in Chemistry and a PGCE in Science. She earned her PhD at the University of Padova, Italy, researching chemical systems that mimic natural cellular processes, and was later awarded a prestigious Marie Curie Individual Fellowship for postdoctoral research at the University of Malta on unconventional materials that expand when stretched. She has experience in the pharmaceutical industry and has taught at secondary, post-secondary and undergraduate levels. Beyond her professional life, Maria is actively involved in voluntary work in areas related to social justice and in bridging science and faith, and in her leisure time, she enjoys hiking and spending time with her family. Since 2019, she has served as Senior Research Officer at the Applied Research and Innovation Centre, where she is currently supporting research within the Institute of Applied Sciences. Research at the Institute of Applied Sciences spans nursing, chemical technology, environmental analysis, agriculture, and aquaculture, reflecting its multidisciplinary focus.

Dr Clara Chetcuti

MCAST Senior Research Officer
Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)

Clara is an English-language teacher by profession, and by passion, she is an avid reader, dancer, and painter. She has been awarded a General Bachelor's in English and International Relations and has read for a Master in Contemporary English Literature and Criticism, both with the





University of Malta, which in turn led to her interest in avant-garde literature and art forms as precursors of Electronic Literature. Her PhD thesis, also carried out with the University of Malta and tracing the genealogies of Electronic English Literature, has brought her into contact with programming as a viable mode of literary expression, and led to her subsequent theoretical interest in Python and a short Professional Diploma in Digital Marketing. Clara also holds a Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Adult Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) as well as a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Throughout her career, she has been privileged to exchange knowledge with a truly global student body in the ELT classroom for 14 years. She has competed in over 9 Model United Nations simulations, winning personal and team awards at each one. Co-founding and managing the voluntary organisation, the Malta Model United Nations Society (MaltMUN) for 6 years is considered one of her proudest achievements, together with publishing scholarly papers with CounterText (Edinburgh University Publishers), the Electronic Book Review (online) and the Electronic Literature Directory (online). Clara has also served for 2 years as Director of Studies for a start-up English Language School, and is now looking forward to fostering the spirit of collegiality she has already found in her MCAST colleagues as Senior Research Officer.



Dr Alfonso Siciliano

MCAST Senior Research Officer
Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)

Dr Alfonso Siciliano is a marine scientist with over 10 years of multidisciplinary experience in research, consultancy, and commercial projects across academic institutions, government, and private companies. He holds a BSc in Biological Sciences and an MSc in Marine Biology and Ecology from Italy, and a PhD in Marine Biology from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. His research focuses on applying cutting-edge technologies and modelling to marine biology and ecology, utilising tools such as GIS, drones, 3D modelling, and programming to advance ecological understanding. He investigates ecosystem functioning and species interactions



using experimental multi-factorial designs for surveys, monitoring, and experiments, complemented by morphometric and fractal analyses. Dr. Siciliano is skilled in statistical analysis, quantitative ecology, and ecological modelling, and has practical experience in scientific diving and underwater photography.

Dr Marco Montalto

*MCAST Senior Research Officer
Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)*

Dr Marco Montalto is a senior research officer at the Applied Research and Innovation Centre (ARIC), supporting research within the Institute for the Creative Arts (ICA). He holds a Master's degree in the Science of Performative Creativity (M.S.P.C.; UM) and a Ph. D. in Cognitive Science (UM). For his Master's thesis he revisited the unfairly neglected topic of 'centricity' and use of 'the centre' in the context of human performativity. His PhD thesis was the first local study investigating human mirror neuron system (MNS) behaviour and gave original contributions to the nascent field of dance neuroscience. Employing tools such as near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS) and electroencephalography (EEG), expert and novice human participants were monitored during expert and novice action observation. Although not joining the human-MNS sceptics' bandwagon, results did indicate that such a potential system in the human seemingly can only be triggered by prior effective training. When he is not conducting research, he is usually occupied with photography or busy reading.





Dr Francis Delicata

MCAST Senior Research Officer

Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)

Dr Francis Delicata holds a PhD in Neuroscience from Aston University, UK, with over 9 years of academic research experience. His work has focused on brain physiology in various states of health and disease, particularly on conditions such as addiction, epilepsy, and dementia, investigating their underlying mechanisms. Utilising his experience in securing research funding and participating in European and international projects, he supports research initiatives at the Institute of Engineering and Transport (IET). IET projects target a wide-range of topics, including aerospace and aviation, AI in industry, wireless communication, renewable energy, autonomous technologies, and additive manufacturing



Dr Massimo Pierucci

MCAST Senior Research Officer

Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)



Dr Massimo Pierucci holds a degree in Biological Sciences and more than fifteen years of research experience in the field of neuropharmacology and neurophysiology. During this period, he had the opportunity to supervise and co-supervise Undergraduate, Master and PhD students, offering both experimental and theoretical guidance, as well as gaining lecturing experience while teaching biological subjects at the Department of Psychology of the University of Malta. This experience has enabled Massimo to promote, support and structure research endeavours through the Institute of Community Services, thereby fulfilling his role of Senior Research Officer. The Institute has recently seen an uptake of different research activities, with projects spanning from sport, social and education research and taking into consideration the vocational education mission of the Institute.



THE ARIC DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT TEAM

Ms Lisa Theuma

MCAST Researcher

Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)

Ms Lisa Theuma, with a passion for learning and exploration, has consistently involved herself in investigating the various fields within the vast world of game art and design throughout her education and aspires to cultivate her knowledge through her work. Lisa acquired her Bachelor's in Game Art & Visual Design from MCAST's Institute for the Creative Arts, and has set her sights on strengthening her skills and building innovative learning experiences, thus taking on the role of Ed-Tech Researcher. Lisa aims to apply her creativity to future research projects and support their development within the Applied Research & Innovation Centre, ultimately providing entertaining and educational experiences for others.



Ms Krista Buhagiar

MCAST Senior Administrative Officer

Office of the Deputy Principal for Research and Academic Management

Krista Buhagiar is a Senior Administrative Officer and Personal Assistant to the Deputy Principal for Research and Student Academic Management at MCAST. She has been part of the institution for eight years, beginning her career in Human Resources before transitioning to the Deputy Principal's office. Her role has enabled her to develop strong administrative and organisational skills, while working closely with leadership has strengthened her adaptability, problem-solving abilities, and collaborative approach. Krista is





committed to continuous learning and is eager to apply new knowledge to her day-to-day responsibilities.



Mark Titley

*MCAST Administrative Officer
Applied Research & Innovation Centre (ARIC)*

Mark Titley has been an administrative officer at MCAST for the past seven years, serving in the Applied Research and Innovation Department. Collaborating with senior management and senior research officers has greatly contributed to his professional growth. Mark has previously worked in the aviation sector as a cabin crew member for 22 years, and he has a deep passion for all things related to aviation.

ABSTRACTS

Exploring Middle Leadership Landscapes: Perceived Roles and Responsibilities of Assistant Heads in Gozitan Secondary Schools

Robert Vella¹, Anabelle Mercieca²

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BACKGROUND

This study explores the leadership experiences, professional development, and challenges faced by assistant heads in middle/secondary state and secondary church schools in Gozo. It focuses on the support and training available to them, their influence on school culture and climate, and the obstacles they encounter in carrying out their responsibilities. A qualitative methodology was employed, using semi-structured interviews with assistant heads. Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns and insights within the data. The findings reveal that while some formal training is provided, much of the assistant heads' learning occurs informally through practical, on-the-job experience. Access to professional development varies significantly between institutions, and many participants reported the absence of structured mentoring. Common challenges include limited time, heavy administrative workloads, crisis management, and addressing students' behavioural and emotional needs. Despite these difficulties, assistant heads contribute significantly to fostering a positive school climate, supporting staff, and ensuring policy implementation. Notable differences between church and state schools were identified, especially in relation to decision-making power and access to resources. This research contributes to the field of educational leadership by underscoring the importance of targeted professional development and stronger support structures for assistant heads. The study recommends the introduction of formal mentoring programs, enhanced training in student well-being and crisis management, and clearer role definition within school hierarchies. These measures could greatly improve assistant heads' effectiveness. The study offers practical recommendations for policymakers and school leaders to better support assistant heads in their leadership roles.

OVERALL AIM

This study investigates how assistant heads understand and experience their leadership roles, administrative duties, and interactions with various stakeholders. The concept of 'Middle Leadership Landscapes' reflects the dynamic and evolving responsibilities of assistant heads in secondary education. Adopting a qualitative

study methodology, the research delves into how assistant heads perceive and manage their roles, uncovering both explicit tasks and more nuanced, implicit aspects of their work.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The main outcomes were explored through three main themes:- Theme 1: Lack of Awareness and Challenges in Leadership and Policy- Theme 2: Leadership Styles and Decision-Making- Theme 3: Impact on School Culture and Climate. The themes outlined the varied roles and responsibilities of assistant heads in Gozo's middle and secondary schools, highlighting the discrepancies between their formal duties and actual daily practices.

RESULTS

The findings revealed that assistant heads often took on tasks beyond their official roles, resulting in an excessive workload that limited their capacity to prioritise instructional leadership. To navigate these demands, participants adopted reflective practices and collaborative strategies, underlining the importance of emotional intelligence in managing leadership effectively. Moreover, the recurring call for clerical support pointed to the need for redistributing administrative tasks, which could help assistant heads focus on core leadership responsibilities while contributing to a more positive school culture and climate.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for consideration:

Clarification of Roles: Educational authorities should establish clear definitions of the roles and responsibilities assigned to assistant heads to reduce ambiguity and minimise the risk of role overload. While improved clarity can greatly enhance both efficiency and effectiveness, it remains challenging to create entirely fixed definitions due to the dynamic and context-specific nature of school leadership. Nonetheless, greater role clarity is essential for preventing burnout, supporting assistant heads' effectiveness, and improving overall organisational performance.- **Administrative Support:** Providing clerical support to assistant heads could substantially alleviate their administrative workload, allowing them to focus more on instructional leadership and student engagement. This strategic reallocation of responsibilities would strengthen school leadership, improve overall effectiveness, and contribute to a more supportive and efficient educational setting.- **Professional Development:** Targeted professional development, induction courses, and mentoring programs that focus on building emotional intelligence and encouraging reflective practices can equip assistant

heads with the critical skills needed to manage the diverse demands of their roles effectively.

Recommendations for Future Research: Future research should explore the long-term impact of clearly defined roles and improved administrative support on assistant heads' effectiveness and well-being. A longitudinal mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and focus groups with quantitative surveys measuring job satisfaction and stress levels, would offer a comprehensive perspective on how these factors influence leadership over time. This integrated approach would provide both the depth and breadth needed to fully understand the enduring effects of role clarity and support structures. The ability to reflect on past decisions and leadership styles enhances a leader's emotional intelligence and fosters self-awareness, contributing positively to the broader school community. To capture these emotional and experiential dimensions of leadership, a qualitative approach—such as phenomenological research or in-depth case studies—would be especially effective in revealing the lived experiences of assistant heads and offering meaningful insights into the emotional complexities of educational leadership.

KEYWORDS

assistant heads, roles and responsibilities, school culture and climate, professional development training, middle leadership challenges

AI and new technologies in local journalism in Poland and Germany: Qualitative approach

Krzysztof Wasilewski, Hanna Tsesta, Yvonne Zajontz

BACKGROUND

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging digital technologies into local journalism is reshaping both media practices and social participation. The paper will investigate the role of AI in enhancing or diminishing civic engagement in local communities in Poland and Germany. Although the two countries represent different media systems, as well as readiness for technological advancements, they provide an interesting case study into local media ecosystems, influenced by their historical, political, and cultural contexts. In Poland, the decline of traditional local media (printed press, radio, and television) and the growing dependence on social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) have raised concerns about the quality of information and the inclusivity of civic participation. Conversely, Germany seems to demonstrate a more structured integration of AI tools in local journalism, with initiatives aimed at improving transparency, combating misinformation, and fostering citizen engagement through interactive digital platforms.

OVERALL AIM

The research investigates how AI-driven tools – ranging from automated news generation to sentiment analysis and participatory platforms – impact local journalistic practices and public trust. Drawing on interviews with journalists and media experts, the study will use qualitative methods to evaluate the role of AI and new technologies in the work of local journalists.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Understanding of journalists' perception of AI catalogue of AI tools used by journalists in Poland and Germany

RESULTS

The result of the research will be an academic paper and educational materials for journalists.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The research will analyze one of the key challenges faced by journalists, namely AI and new technologies. It will allow to understand how AI is perceived by journalists as well as by news consumers.

KEYWORDS

AI, local journalism, local media, Poland, Germany, interviews

Qualitative Crossroads: Exploring Work, Policy, and People in Public Institutions

Stefanie Vella Cortis¹

¹ Global College Malta

BACKGROUND

Qualitative research has become essential in public sector studies, providing detailed insights into employee perspectives, institutional cultural dynamics, and the intricacies of policy execution. Conventional metrics and quantitative methods, however useful, frequently neglect the relational, contextual, and interpretive aspects that are fundamental to public service settings. This is especially apparent in sectors like education, health, and social care, where employee wellness, organisational culture, and policy objectives are intricately connected. Public administration transcends mere procedures and outcomes; it is a domain where human values, bureaucratic norms, and institutional constraints converge.

This session addresses the increasing demand for methodologically rigorous and contextually aware qualitative research in the public sector. This work utilises my doctoral research on flexible work practices within Malta's Ministry for Education to illustrate how cross-disciplinary qualitative methods, rooted in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, can elucidate intricate social phenomena spanning policy, management, and lived experience. The presentation promotes qualitative research as a conduit between academic fields and practitioner issues, adept at uncovering both human agency and institutional limitations. Special emphasis is placed on the difficulties of undertaking research in politicised, hierarchical, or risk-averse contexts where access, ethics, and trust require meticulous negotiation.

OVERALL AIM

The session seeks to illustrate how qualitative research can produce multidisciplinary insights into public sector operations by connecting policy, institutional culture, and human experience. It aims to provide researchers with reflexive, theoretically grounded ways to adeptly navigate complicated, real-world environments with methodological precision.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Participants will acquire a more profound comprehension of how to formulate and justify qualitative research inside public institutions, particularly with issues of flexibility, work-life balance, and organisational change. The session will provide practical recommendations on handling ethics, access, and stakeholder dynamics in interdisciplinary qualitative research.

RESULTS

Initial findings from a qualitative study, participants convey varied experiences influenced by grade, gender, and unit culture, illustrating the reinterpretation of formal policies within micro-organizational contexts. Reflexive thematic analysis has revealed themes including “negotiated autonomy,” “institutional ambivalence,” and “managerial gatekeeping,” demonstrating how internal dynamics both facilitate and restrict freedom. The statistics underscore the significance of trust, digital infrastructure, and leadership style in maintaining flexible work habits.

The preliminary findings substantiate the broader assertion that qualitative methodologies are crucial for comprehending the implementation of public policy in practice. Instead of providing binary assessments of success or failure, qualitative investigation reveals the underlying tensions and adaptive strategies that influence policy translation in actual workplaces. This research contributes to discussions on public sector reform, administrative justice, and employee well-being by offering an empirically based, human-centric viewpoint.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This research significantly influences scientific, societal, educational, and policy spheres. This study utilises a qualitative, multidisciplinary method to examine flexible labour arrangements in Malta’s Ministry for Education, yielding theoretical, empirical, and practical insights that transcend national boundaries and academic confines.

The project enhances the methodological rigour of qualitative research in public administration. This presents a reflexively applied theme analysis based on constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, utilising the Resource-Fit Equilibrium (RFE) Model (Authors, 2025) to integrate five occupational theories. This integrative paradigm facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the interactions of policy, organisational culture, and individual agency within actual public sector contexts. The research further promotes the application of qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA®) in policy studies, enhancing current scholarly discussions regarding rigour, reflexivity, and trustworthiness in qualitative methodologies.

The societal impact arises from its emphasis on employee welfare, organisational equity, and work-life integration within the public sector. The research offers a human-centric perspective on policy implementation by elucidating how flexible work policies are influenced and shaped by elements such as managerial discretion, gender, and employee grade. The results can guide future frameworks for advancing fairness, inclusion, and sustainable work practices within the civil

service. The project amplifies the perspectives of public officials, providing a counter-narrative to hierarchical policy discourse and emphasising the lived experiences underlying institutional improvements.

This study influences the development of university modules and professional training in public management, organisational psychology, and qualitative methods at the curriculum level. Its interdisciplinary perspective renders it pertinent to postgraduate programs in human resource management, education policy, and governance. The study exemplifies rigorous, reflexive qualitative research, providing a teaching case for navigating complicated institutional contexts, ethical dilemmas, and theoretical integration.

The research corresponds with the Maltese government's strategic objectives for modernising public service, improving employee happiness, and advancing gender equality on both national and global scales. It contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals globally; specifically SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), by examining how flexible work policies foster inclusive and resilient institutions. The acquired insights can be utilised in different public sector contexts aiming to reconcile operational efficiency with human-centered flexibility.

This study presents a reproducible and impactful approach for utilising qualitative research to explain and enhance the complexities of the public sector by integrating diverse disciplines and perspectives from within the system.

KEYWORDS

Qualitative research, public sector, flexible work, work-life balance, policy implementation

Voices in Transition: A Qualitative Inquiry into Lived Educational Experiences During Malta's SEC Examination Phase

Dr Ian Attard¹

¹ Institute for the Creative Arts

BACKGROUND

*This presentation explores the lived experiences of over 40 participants, including secondary school educators, parents, students, and administrators, during Malta's high-stakes three-year preparatory phase for the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations. Using qualitative methodologies rooted in critical narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, this discussion emerged from a number of findings published in the book *Voices: A Journey through Ideological Perceptions of Quality, Standards, Principles and Practices in Maltese Education*.*

The presentation aims to initially foreground key findings from a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions that sought to critically reflect on the ideological, emotional, and structural components shaping Maltese education. Subsequently, the themes emerging from the event discussion, including notions of success, student wellbeing, social justice, power structures, educational change, and cultural memory, will highlight the disconnect between educational policy and the lived realities of those within the system. Participants in the discussion event voiced concerns around systemic rigidity, political influence, frequent policy changes, and how these affect student motivation, teacher agency, and parental expectations.

Through a qualitative research lens, the presentation aims to revive historical undercurrents in Malta's education system while interrogating present-day assumptions about quality and standards. The presentation will also show participatory analysis approaches, encouraging collaborative reflection among stakeholders to validate and expand on the interpretations presented in the book. The presentation will conclude with methodological reflections on the affordances and tensions of using in-depth qualitative interviews in education research, particularly when seeking to bridge policy discourse with community voice.

OVERALL AIM

*The presentation aims to explore the lived experiences of students, parents, teachers, and administrators during Malta's SEC examination phase, highlighting the disconnect between educational policy and everyday realities. Drawing on qualitative interviews and thematic analysis from the book *Voices*, it examines issues like success, wellbeing, social justice, and systemic rigidity. It also reflects on the value of participatory, narrative-based methods in educational research to*

surface hidden tensions, revive historical perspectives, and promote stakeholder-led reflection on quality, standards, and change in Maltese education.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The presentation will offer academics key insights into how qualitative, narrative-based methods can illuminate the complex realities behind high-stakes assessment in Malta. It will demonstrate how lived experiences reveal tensions between policy ideals and everyday educational practices, especially around success, equity, wellbeing, and systemic change. Attendees will gain a deeper understanding of how participatory analysis can bridge research and practice, and how critical reflection on historical and ideological influences can inform more responsive education systems. The session aims to provoke post-reflective discussions on the role of qualitative inquiry in shaping inclusive educational reforms.

RESULTS

N/A

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This presentation has the potential to generate meaningful impact at various levels in various fields including society, curriculum development, and broader educational priorities at both national and global levels.

At a societal level, the presentation highlights the emotional, cultural, and ideological tensions that shape the experiences of key stakeholders, the students, parents, teachers, and administrators during Malta's SEC examination phase. By surfacing authentic voices from within the education system, the research presentation reveals the human cost of high-stakes assessment and systemic rigidity. The findings presented challenge dominant narratives around broad concepts such as educational value, success and merit, calling attention to issues of social justice, mental wellbeing, and power dynamics. This contributes to a more inclusive societal dialogue about the values underpinning education and encourages public reflection and consultation on how educational structures impact young people's life chances and personal development.

From a curriculum standpoint, the presentation challenges traditional approaches that narrowly align educational success with examination performance. It encourages educators and policymakers to rethink the role of public consultation to re-model Malta's educational structure and aims of curriculum design by integrating socio-emotional learning, flexible pathways, and learner-centred practices that emerged from public discussion. The voices presented through qualitative discussion inquiry call for a curriculum that is not only academically rigorous but also culturally responsive, historically informed, and empathetic to

diverse learner needs. The research further supports the importance of embedding reflective, dialogic, and participatory pedagogies in teacher education and curriculum planning, aligning with current shifts toward holistic and inclusive education frameworks.

At a national level, the presentation directly engages with Malta's ongoing debates around quality assurance, assessment reform, and educational standards. It offers a timely contribution to policy discussions by grounding them in real-life experiences rather than abstract metrics. The focus on ideological perceptions and historical legacies provides a valuable lens for understanding the challenges faced by the current system and guiding future reform in more socially just directions. Moreover, globally, this study resonates with international educational priorities, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education. It echoes global calls for inclusive, equitable, and learner-centred education systems that prioritise wellbeing and lifelong learning. The methodological emphasis on participatory, qualitative research also contributes to global discourse on democratising knowledge production and ensuring that education policy is informed by those it mostly affects.

KEYWORDS

Education Experiences, Qualitative Inquiry, Educational Policy, In-depth Reform

Crafting a Digital Fashion Heritage: Weaving Narratives and Exploring Digital Technologies in Fashion Heritage Preservation

Rozela Franco¹

¹ MCAST Applied Research and Innovation Center

BACKGROUND

The intersection of digital technology and traditional craftsmanship in fashion and textile heritage presents significant challenges and valuable opportunities. As technological advancements accelerate, the tangible cultural expressions embedded in fashion and textile crafts gradually fade, placing indigenous knowledge at risk of marginalisation. Despite the growing role of digitisation in cultural preservation, its impact on safeguarding and revitalising textile heritage remains underexplored. This research project seeks to address this gap by examining the complexities of 'Crafting a Digital Fashion Heritage: Weaving Narratives and Exploring Digital Technologies in Fashion Heritage Preservation'. Specifically, it investigates the challenges of digitising traditional techniques, evaluates the potential of digital platforms in amplifying and conserving cultural narratives, and explores consumer engagement with digital fashion heritage. Additionally, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for industry stakeholders and cultural institutions while bridging gaps in existing literature at the intersection of technology, fashion and cultural heritage preservation. Through an autobiographical narrative lens and thematic narrative analysis, this research aspires to generate nuanced insights that support the integration of tradition and innovation in safeguarding fashion and textile heritage.

OVERALL AIM

This qualitative study aims to critically examine the intersection of digital technology, fashion, and cultural heritage preservation by investigating challenges, opportunities, consumer engagement, and practical recommendations for stakeholders. Additionally, the aim includes contributing to the existing knowledge base by addressing gaps in the literature surrounding the digitisation of traditional techniques and the use of digital platforms in preserving cultural narratives within the context of fashion heritage.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Objective 1: Examine the challenges and opportunities associated with digitising traditional techniques.

Objective 2: Explore how digital platforms can amplify and preserve cultural narratives embedded in fashion.

Objective 3: Investigate how consumers engage with and perceive digital fashion heritage.

Objective 4: Offer practical recommendations for industry stakeholders and cultural institutions on integrating digital fashion heritage into their practices.

Objective 5: Fill gaps in the existing literature on the intersection of technology, fashion, and cultural heritage preservation.

How does digitising traditional textile craft techniques contribute to the preservation and evolution of tangible cultural expressions in fashion heritage and what are the respective implications for authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainable cultural practices?

This research question explores the multifaceted impact of digitising traditional textile craft techniques in fashion heritage. It addresses key aspects such as preservation, evolution, authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability. By exploring these dimensions, the study can contribute to a nuanced understanding of how digital initiatives shape and redefine the cultural landscape in fashion heritage.

RESULTS

This study explored the intersection of digital technologies and traditional textile craft techniques in preserving and evolving fashion heritage. Using an autobiographical narrative framework, it delved into personal experiences, expert insights, and emerging themes to address the research question: How does the digitisation of traditional textile craft techniques contribute to the preservation and evolution of tangible cultural expressions in fashion heritage and what are the respective implications for authenticity, inclusivity and sustainable cultural practices? The findings emphasised five critical themes: the tension between tradition and innovation, the empowerment and agency of artisans, sustainability in craft practices, the role of storytelling in cultural preservation, and the sensory and materiality of crafts in a digital world. These insights contribute to the growing discourse on cultural heritage preservation, offering valuable implications for academic inquiry and practical applications.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This preliminary research study is a foundation for exploring the intersection of digital technologies and traditional textile craft techniques in preserving and evolving fashion heritage. To build upon this work, a comprehensive narrative study is planned as a continuation. This follow-up study will involve purposive sampling of three experts from diverse industries, such as digital technology, cultural heritage and sustainable fashion. These individuals will be interviewed in-depth to capture the richness of their experiences, insights and professional narratives. The primary aim of this extended study is to understand how their work

has contributed to shaping contemporary practices in the preservation and evolution of tangible cultural expressions in fashion heritage.

The narrative interviews will allow these experts to reflect on their unique contributions, challenges and the implications of their efforts. This approach will allow for a more nuanced exploration of how digital interventions impact cultural practices' authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability within the fashion heritage space. By engaging with professionals from varied backgrounds, the study seeks to uncover interdisciplinary perspectives and generate actionable insights that could inform academic discourse and practical applications in this field.

KEYWORDS

narrative study; digital fashion; technologies; craftsmanship; cultural heritage; textile crafts

Challenges of Migrant and Refugee Students' Adjustment to Vocational Higher Education in Malta: Student Mentors' Perspectives

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¹ MCAST Institute of Community Services

BACKGROUND

Migrant and refugee vocational higher education students increasingly represent a significant proportion of enrolments within Maltese vocational and higher education, yet their educational trajectories are often shaped by social inequities that impede access, participation, and completion rates. Despite Malta's efforts to enhance inclusivity in post-secondary education, many of these learners encounter structural barriers linked to credential recognition, legal and residency requirements, financial precarity, language proficiency, and social integration. These challenges are compounded by experiences of trauma, discrimination, and a lack of culturally responsive support services, which together undermine academic engagement, well-being, and long-term educational success.

Student mentoring has emerged as a strategic intervention to address these challenges, providing one-to-one guidance and support for vulnerable learners. At Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), student mentors play a pivotal role in facilitating access to academic resources, navigating bureaucratic systems, and fostering social belonging for migrant and refugee students. However, little research has examined how mentors themselves perceive and respond to the unique needs of this group within a rapidly evolving educational context.

This qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring student mentors' perspectives on supporting migrant and refugee learners at MCAST. Using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, the research examines the complex interplay of institutional policies, socio-economic realities, and mentoring practices that shape these students' educational experiences. Drawing on Tinto's theory of social integration and emancipatory theory, the study provides critical insights into how mentoring can both mitigate barriers and challenge inequities within vocational higher education.

OVERALL AIM

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by migrant and refugee students in adjusting to vocational higher education in Malta, as perceived by student mentors, and to critically examine the role of mentoring in fostering academic and social inclusion. The research sought to generate evidence-based recommendations for institutional reforms that support equitable access,

retention, and success for marginalised students in vocational higher education settings.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The research generated a thematic understanding of the structural, socio-economic, and psychosocial barriers faced by migrant and refugee students in vocational education. It identified mentoring as a key mechanism of support that mitigates, but does not eliminate, systemic inequities within the educational environment. The outcomes include actionable recommendations for institutional reform, encompassing credential recognition, financial aid, multilingual pedagogies, anti-discrimination initiatives, and culturally responsive mental health services to enhance retention and academic success for migrant and refugee students.

RESULTS

The study revealed five major and intersecting challenges that hinder migrant and refugee students' successful participation in vocational higher education in Malta: First, the non-recognition of prior qualifications and legal constraints, leading to academic downgrading or barriers to apprenticeships due to documentation and residency issues. Second, financial precarity, including tuition fees for non-EU students, delayed access to financial aid, and competing work and caregiving responsibilities. Third, language barriers, which negatively impact academic comprehension, participation, and social integration in a bilingual learning environment. Fourth, anti-immigrant sentiments, ranging from microaggressions to discriminatory attitudes, affecting students' confidence, belonging, and well-being. Fifth, mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, often exacerbated by displacement experiences and inadequate access to culturally sensitive counselling or social work support.

While student mentors play a vital role in providing academic guidance, emotional support, advocacy, and referrals to additional services, their efforts are constrained by institutional limitations. Thematic analysis demonstrated that mentoring fosters belonging, resilience, and improved retention rates, yet institutional reforms are essential to address deeper structural inequities. The findings underscore that equitable access and success for migrant and refugee students depend on more than individual support; they require institutional and policy-level transformation to dismantle barriers and ensure inclusive, socially just education.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This completed study offers a critical contribution to the limited body of research on migrant and refugee students in vocational higher education, with particular attention to the Maltese context. Its findings have practical, institutional, and policy-level implications that can significantly shape future support strategies for these students.

At the practice level, the study highlights the pivotal yet under-resourced role of student mentors in bridging educational and social gaps for migrant and refugee students. Recommendations include structured mentor training on intercultural competence, trauma-informed approaches, and systemic advocacy. Practical strategies such as buddy systems, targeted language support, and closer links between mentors and external agencies can help address immediate barriers.

At the institutional level, the findings advocate for reforms that move beyond ad hoc support towards systemic inclusion. This includes flexible credential recognition processes, early and sustained language programmes, streamlined financial aid mechanisms, and expansion of culturally competent mental health services. Strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration between academic, administrative, and support services can create a more coherent network of care for migrant and refugee students.

At the policy level, the study underscores the need for alignment between national migration, education, and social policy to guarantee equitable access to education for displaced populations. It calls for enhanced coordination between educational institutions, government bodies, and non-governmental organisations to remove bureaucratic obstacles and ensure that education functions as a fundamental right, not a privilege contingent on administrative or financial status.

Beyond Malta, the research contributes to global discussions on educational justice and inclusion, offering a model of how qualitative inquiry can reveal nuanced experiences and generate transformative recommendations for practice and policy. The impact of this study lies in its advocacy for education as a site of empowerment for migrant and refugee students; a space where barriers are dismantled, social cohesion is nurtured, and vulnerable students can envision sustainable educational futures.

KEYWORDS

Migrant and refugee students, vocational education, student mentors, Malta, educational challenges

Bridging Technology and Human Experience: Perspectives on AI-Driven Sustainability in the Blue Economy

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BACKGROUND

This study explores the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancing sustainability within the blue economy, a framework for sustainable ocean resource use projected to contribute USD 3 trillion annually by 2030. The blue economy encompasses sectors like aquaculture, maritime transport, renewable energy, and coastal tourism, balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship. Oceans, covering two-thirds of Earth's surface, support 80% of global trade via maritime transport and provide critical ecosystem services, including oxygen production and climate regulation. However, marine ecosystems face significant threats from pollution, overfishing, and climate change, with shipping contributing 2.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. AI technologies, such as predictive analytics, computer vision, and machine learning, offer transformative solutions to these challenges, achieving. to investigate how stakeholders—technical people, regulators, and coastal communities—perceive AI's role in fostering sustainability in the blue economy. The study's current quantitative focus, emphasising technical metrics like pollutant classification accuracy and economic projections, is planned to be reframed to explore human experiences, trust, ethical concerns, and health outcomes linked to AI-driven environmental improvements. By integrating stakeholder narratives, the study aims to inform user-centric AI design and equitable policies for sustainable ocean management.

OVERALL AIM

The study outlines AI's applications across blue economy sectors. Computer vision achieves high accuracy in monitoring marine waste, supporting cleanup efforts. In renewable energy, AI optimises offshore wind and tidal energy systems, improving efficiency and reducing costs. In fisheries, predictive analytics enhance stock assessments, reducing overfishing. Smart port operations leverage AI for predictive scheduling and resource allocation, minimizing emissions and enhancing trade efficiency. These advancements are supported by a surge in research, highlighting AI's role in digital transformation, energy efficiency, and predictive analytics.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The study furnishes comprehensive information regarding many sectors of the blue economy. We shall examine marine renewable energy. Furthermore, we shall

examine port operations, encompassing cargo handling and storage. Coastal tourism will also be examined, including lodging, transportation, and ancillary services. The prosperous development of these industries is essential for attaining competitiveness and guaranteeing long-term economic sustainability. We aim to demonstrate how leveraging AI to utilise additional data could provide a transformational effect. We will elaborate on our experience in applying AI to ocean monitoring in the Gulf Region and present some related experimental work and statistics. Digital transformation in the blue economy fosters interconnected innovations across various industries and sectors, resulting in numerous advantages.

RESULTS

- *Trust in AI systems varies.*
- *Economic resilience is enhanced*
- *Ethical concerns centre on data privacy and cybersecurity*
- *Health impacts are significant, with communities linking AI-driven pollution monitoring to improved respiratory health*

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The study aligns with the Technology, Healthcare, and the Human Experience in Qualitative Research track of the conference, contributing to the theme "Bridging Disciplines: Qualitative Research Across Fields by showcasing qualitative research's versatility in bridging environmental science, economics, and health." The study's current quantitative focus, emphasising technical metrics like pollutant classification accuracy and economic projections, is planned to be reframed to explore human experiences, trust, ethical concerns, and health outcomes linked to AI-driven environmental improvements. By integrating stakeholder narratives, the study aims to inform user-centric AI design and equitable policies for sustainable ocean management. The study elaborates on the need for marine and air environmental protection and discusses the economic consequences and impacts. Also, various facets and applications of digitisation and AI for the blue economy will be explained, with elaboration on the modern technologies combined with AI. Further, the study will address strategies for harnessing AI in environmental-economic practices.

KEYWORDS

Blue economy; artificial intelligence; ecosystem; environment protection; machine learning

Revisiting University-Industry Collaboration in the Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence

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BACKGROUND

The European Union (EU) is pro-actively shaping the future of digital economy through a series of initiatives aimed at establishing a robust framework for knowledge governance, specifically through the Data Governance Act, the Data Act and the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act. These initiatives are moving nations towards an increasingly knowledge-intensive economy where knowledge governance is placed at the centre of policy debate. Small EU member states have been faced with unique recurring challenges to catch up with front-runners of this digital economy yet are making headways. The demography of a member state does not make it immune to the impacts of emerging technologies, such as recent advancements in generative artificial intelligence, but rather risk making them more vulnerable.

The academic sector is an important player within the digital economy, contributing through the academic and research missions. Following accession in the European Union, nations have had to undergo various transformations and restructuring. One such transformation is the role or mission that academic institutions play within the society, putting more importance towards university-industry (U-I) collaboration with the participation of government and other supporting institutions, thus the emergence of the entrepreneurial mission of academic institution. This collaboration presents various barriers shaped amongst other aspects, on the respective stage of the university lifecycle. With a business demography that is heavily dependent on small and medium organisations, the economy seeks to benefit more through U-I collaboration with small organisations.

OVERALL AIM

The aim of this grounded theory study, is to identify the actors, enablers and challenges of research undertaking within the small EU member state of Malta and how this is shaping the University-Industry collaboration. Thus understanding how to better align academic and industry interests, expectations as well as challenges of each entity to participate and survive in a digital economy.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Being a grounded theory study, it is expected that a formal grounded theory emerges which help explain human behaviour of researchers, together with a number of theoretical propositions that further describe the underlying studied

phenomena of the research-practice gap. This model is intended for policy makers to consider that impact university-industry collaborations.

RESULTS

This study has transitioned from a convenience sampling stage, during which 10 cases were identified, to a purposive sampling stage, with an additional 8 cases, covering the various stakeholders previously mentioned. Initial emerging theories include the role that generative artificial intelligence is playing for academic researchers leading to the embracing of the technology. This in turn is widening the gap between research and practice in situations where industry entities position themselves differently from academia thus creating new factors that shape the success of university-industry collaboration.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This study strengthens and supports existing literature on topics of academic expansion, knowledge creation models and university-industry collaboration by investigating the phenomenon as experienced by a new university in a small EU state. By revisiting the modes of U-I collaboration during Industry 5.0, this study has observed a lot of parallels to previous studies, especially those undertaken in other EU states with similar research intensity such as the 'Emerging Modes of Cooperation between Private Sector Organizations and Universities' (EMCOSU) project. The major contribution of this study is the identification of a new factor to existing models of U-I collaboration, the 'Positional Factors' that take into consideration organizational policies and technological risks, amongst others, thus shaping the proximity of academic institutions and industry.

This study is at a point where theories have started to emerge yet are not fully saturated. Thus, entering the theoretical sampling stage, whereby the next interview candidates are chosen to help saturate core categories. This is an essential part of GT to ensure that the emergent theory is not just substantive but a formal theory that this abstract of time, place and people so that the identified concepts must fit the data and have an enduring grab.

KEYWORDS

University-Industry Collaboration; Grounded Theory; Small-Medium Organisations; Artificial Intelligence; Research-Practice Gap

Between Culture and Clicks: Social Media Identity of GCC Youth

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BACKGROUND

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region constitutes a pivotal site for examining digital identity negotiation, characterized by asymmetric techno-cultural dynamics: near-total social media saturation (Greater than 95% youth penetration; GSMA, 2023) coexists with robust collectivist frameworks prioritizing familial reputation, modesty norms, and communal accountability. With youth (18 to 29 years) comprising greater than 50% of the GCC population (UNDP, 2022)-a demographic critical to national visions like Saudi Vision 2030 and Kuwait Vision 2035-their digital practices are catalysts for societal transformation. Yet scholarly understanding remains fragmented due to three limitations: 1. Contextual Overgeneralization: Research frequently homogenizes "Arab youth," obscuring distinctions between revolutionary mobilization contexts (e.g., Arab Spring) and affluent Gulf states where youth navigate state-orchestrated digital ecosystems with distinct socio-technical constraints. 2. Platform Agnosticism: Despite Instagram, TikTok, and X serving divergent functions-aesthetic/reputational curation, algorithmic experimentation, and pseudonymous discourse-existing work lacks systematic cross-platform analysis, ignoring how affordances shape identity fragmentation. 3. Agency Dichotomization: Prevailing frameworks reductively position Gulf youth as culturally constrained or resistant modernists, overlooking their tactical hybridity in synthesizing global platform logics with localized obligations through sophisticated audience management. These gaps generate tangible risks. Documented tensions-such as kin-mediated context collapse (e.g., familial discovery of political pseudonyms) and reputational precarity (e.g., viral content jeopardizing marital/professional prospects)-underscore deficits in culturally embedded digital literacy. As GCC states accelerate digital governance initiatives (e.g., UAE Centennial 2071), elucidating youth identity negotiation becomes imperative for policy coherence, educational relevance, and ethical platform design.

OVERALL AIM

This study examines how GCC youth negotiate digital identity across Instagram, TikTok, and X, addressing two questions: 1. How do cultural values shape platform-specific self-presentation? 2. What strategies do youth employ to manage visibility across audiences? By integrating Social Identity Theory and

Networked Publics, it aims to develop a process model of identity negotiation that reflects both cultural constraints and digital agency.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

1. Identification of platform-specific identity practices (e.g., Instagram for respectability, TikTok for experimentation). 2. Documentation of culturally rooted strategies (audience partitioning, pseudonymity) to mitigate relational risks. 3. A theoretical framework (Culturally-Anchored Affordance Negotiation/CAAN) linking cultural norms, affordance interpretation, and tactical adaptation. 4. Evidence of youth agency reframing Gulf youth as skilled navigators—not passive subjects—of digital visibility.

RESULTS

Three themes emerged from 36 GCC youth interviews/focus groups:

1. *Hybrid Identity Performance*: Participants curated "respectable" selves for family-facing platforms (Instagram) while experimenting with humour/style on TikTok or candid critique on pseudonymous X accounts.
2. *Relational Boundary Management*: The "family gaze" drove anticipatory self-censorship (e.g., deleting posts if cousins followed). Women prioritised modesty adjustments; men managed reputational risks in debates.
3. *Platform-Specific Economies*:
4. *Instagram*: Reputational ledger for aesthetic curation.
5. *TikTok*: Sandbox for playful, peer-oriented personas.
6. *X*: Arena for anonymous cultural/political discourse.

Cross-cutting tactics included account segmentation (public/private profiles), audience partitioning (Close Friends lists), and algorithmic risk mitigation (avoiding hashtags). These informed the CAAN model, illustrating a feedback loop: cultural anchors → affordance reading → relational risk appraisal → strategy selection (e.g., ephemeral Stories for sensitive content).

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This research fundamentally reframes Gulf youth as agentic architects of digital identity, generating transformative impacts across science, society, industry, and policy. Scientifically, it pioneers the Culturally-Anchored Affordance Negotiation (CAAN) model—a non-Western framework that theorises how cultural anchors (familial reputation, relational risk) dynamically shape platform affordance interpretation. This model challenges universalist assumptions in Social Identity Theory and networked publics literature, establishing a methodological benchmark for culturally grounded digital ethnography in understudied regions. Societally, the study empowers youth by validating their sophisticated tactical

competence (e.g., audience partitioning via Instagram's "Close Friends," pseudonymous cultural critique on X), reducing intergenerational friction by demystifying online practices for families and community leaders. Critically, it reveals mental health benefits: Strategic self-presentation mitigates social-sanction anxiety, fostering resilience in hyper-visible digital environments where a single post could impact marital eligibility or employment. For education systems, it demands a paradigm shift toward culturally responsive digital literacy curricula. Such programs would teach platform-specific tactics (e.g., Instagram as a reputational ledger, TikTok as a low-stakes experimentation sandbox) and algorithmic risk management-replacing Western-centric "online safety" dogma with localised identity empowerment frameworks. Industry impact is equally urgent: Social media platforms must prioritize cultural UX localisation, developing kinship-based audience filters (e.g., "restrict visibility to nuclear family") and ephemeral formats aligned with GCC relational dynamics. These innovations address documented unmet needs for granular control in collective societies, enhancing user trust and regional market competitiveness. In policy, findings directly align with GCC national visions (e.g., Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Centennial 2071), positioning youth as co-designers-not just beneficiaries-of digital transformation. Actionable recommendations include establishing youth advisory panels for safety toolkits and reforming cyber-governance to enable agency through context-dependent privacy norms. Economically, the study supports entrepreneurship by clarifying reputational curation strategies for content creators and reduces workforce vulnerabilities (e.g., algorithmic amplification of controversial posts affecting careers). By centering lived experiences, this work redefines digital identity as a skilled craft of hybridity with scalable implications for 450 million youth in collectivist societies across Asia, Africa, and the Global South.

KEYWORDS

GCC youth; platform affordances; networked publics; Social Identity Theory; context collapse.

Understanding Employee Perspectives on Corporate Social Responsibility at Arab Open University – Kuwait: A Qualitative Case Study

Mohammad Alajmi

BACKGROUND

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an essential part of higher education institutions, especially given their core mission to disseminate knowledge, train future leaders, and contribute to societal development. Universities are adopting CSR practices, which include outreach programs, sustainability projects, and student-led campaigns. However, there is a gap in research that focuses on understanding how employees perceive and engage with these CSR activities, as most research focuses on students' perspectives. Understanding staff perspectives is essential, as their identification with and participation in CSR can directly influence its success and sustainability. This study addresses this gap by exploring how employees at the Arab Open University – Kuwait perceive CSR practices. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT), the research will explore how these practices may shape their motivation, engagement, and organisational sense of belonging.

OVERALL AIM

- To explore how employees perceive CSR initiatives at AOU-Kuwait.- To identify factors that influence staff motivation with CSR.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

This study might show that CSR activities at AOU–Kuwait make employees feel more proud, motivated, and connected to the university. It might also be found that when staff understand CSR goals clearly and are more involved in planning these activities, the impact on their engagement could be stronger. On the other hand, the results might highlight that unclear communication or limited staff participation can reduce the benefits of CSR. Overall, the findings could help the university improve how it shares information about CSR and how it includes employees in these practices, leading to stronger connections between staff and the institution.

RESULTS

Ongoing research

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The study will offer recommendations to enhance CSR communication, integrate staff more actively in CSR planning, and align CSR with professional development opportunities

KEYWORDS

CSR SIT AOU HE Qualitative research approach

The Potential of LiDAR Technology in Interdisciplinary Qualitative Research: A Case Study on Practical Applications

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BACKGROUND

LiDAR technology, available today in a variety of platforms and accuracy levels, has become a versatile tool for interdisciplinary qualitative research. It enables precise three-dimensional mapping of the surrounding environment by measuring distances with laser pulses and generating accurate spatial models. In the practical part of this study, three systems were used: terrestrial laser scanning (TLS), a high-precision handheld 3D laser scanner (HLS), and an iPad equipped with a LiDAR sensor. TLS, offering millimetre-level accuracy, was applied to medium-scale projects such as building condition assessments, structural diagnostics, heritage documentation, and inventory measurements. The handheld scanner, capable of 0.1 mm accuracy, was used for documenting wall cracks and cavities, as well as creating highly detailed 3D models of sculptures and bas-reliefs. The iPad's LiDAR sensor, while less accurate, proved to be an effective and cost-efficient tool for rapid inventory, approximate dimensional measurements, and as a complementary device during fieldwork. In the theoretical discussion, other platforms are considered for their potential applications, including UAV-mounted LiDAR for large-scale surveys with centimetre-level accuracy, and backpack LiDAR systems using SLAM technology, which offer high mobility with an accuracy of 3–5 cm. The presentation will showcase selected examples of research conducted using TLS, a handheld 3D laser scanner (HLS), and an iPad with a LiDAR sensor.

OVERALL AIM

The aim of the presentation is to showcase the practical capabilities of TLS, HLS, and an iPad with a LiDAR sensor in qualitative research. It will include examples of measurements from selected research objects, highlight differences in data quality, and demonstrate the potential of integrating multiple data sources for interdisciplinary applications.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The main expected outcome is to demonstrate the value of LiDAR measurements, particularly those obtained using TLS, HLS, and an iPad with a LiDAR sensor. Participants will learn how to select platforms for specific project needs and how varying levels of accuracy affect interdisciplinary applications. Furthermore, the presentation will highlight the benefits of integrating data from different LiDAR sensors.

RESULTS

Preliminary results from the practical experiments confirm that each LiDAR platform offers distinct advantages depending on the scale, required accuracy, and working conditions of the project. Terrestrial Laser Scanning (TLS) provided the highest stability and millimetre-level precision, making it particularly effective for structural diagnostics, detailed building surveys, and heritage documentation. Its point clouds showed excellent consistency and geometric accuracy, enabling reliable measurements even in complex architectural environments. The high-precision handheld 3D laser scanner (HLS) proved invaluable in capturing fine surface details, with sub-millimetre accuracy (0.1 mm) allowing for precise documentation of wall cracks, cavities, and the reproduction of sculptural elements in high-quality 3D models. This level of detail is particularly important for conservation work and micro-scale diagnostics.

The iPad's LiDAR sensor, although less accurate, demonstrated strong potential for rapid data collection, preliminary assessments, and approximate dimensional measurements in the field. Its portability and immediate visualisation capabilities significantly accelerated workflows, especially during early project phases or in locations with limited access to professional equipment. Comparative analysis of the datasets revealed that integrating point clouds from different platforms is feasible and can enhance the completeness of spatial information. While merging data requires careful alignment and resolution matching, the combined results provided multi-scale, multi-detail datasets that could be tailored to specific interdisciplinary needs, from large-scale context mapping to micro-scale surface inspection.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This research demonstrates the growing importance and broad applicability of LiDAR technology in interdisciplinary qualitative research, impacting multiple fields on scientific, economic, societal, environmental, and industrial levels. From a scientific perspective, the integration of different LiDAR platforms provides new opportunities for precise spatial data acquisition, enabling researchers from architecture, cultural heritage preservation, engineering, and environmental sciences to collaborate more effectively. The high-resolution 3D models and detailed diagnostics produced through TLS, handheld 3D laser scanner, and mobile LiDAR devices support innovative methodologies and improve the quality of qualitative research. Economically and industrially, this work promotes cost-effective and efficient surveying and diagnostic practices. Understanding the strengths and limitations of each LiDAR system allows organisations to select the most appropriate tool for their needs, reducing unnecessary expenditures and

optimising project timelines. The availability of affordable LiDAR sensors in consumer devices like iPads increases access to advanced measurement technologies, encouraging their use among small and medium enterprises, educational institutions, and public agencies. This wider accessibility can accelerate innovation and improve competitiveness in sectors such as construction, heritage management, and environmental monitoring. From a societal standpoint, enhanced 3D mapping and condition assessment techniques contribute to better preservation of cultural heritage sites and infrastructure, supporting maintenance strategies that prolong the lifespan of valuable assets. Moreover, increased awareness and documentation quality help raise public engagement with heritage and built environment issues. Environmentally, precise spatial data aids in monitoring natural and urban ecosystems, facilitating sustainable development, resource management, and disaster prevention. The use of LiDAR for detailed environmental assessments aligns with global priorities related to climate change adaptation and smart city initiatives. Finally, this research supports national and global priorities by advancing digital transformation efforts and encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration. The demonstrated potential of combining multiple LiDAR data sources opens new avenues for research and practical applications, expanding the impact of qualitative research across diverse scientific and professional domains. By bridging technology and qualitative inquiry, the project contributes meaningfully to the development of innovative, integrated approaches to understanding and managing complex spatial environments.

KEYWORDS

LiDAR; Terrestrial Laser Scanning; handheld 3D laser scanner; iPad LiDAR; point cloud

Weaving Heritage into Sustainability: Intergenerational Learning for Early Childhood Teacher Education in Malta

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BACKGROUND

Intergenerational learning has gained prominence within European policy as a mechanism to foster active citizenship and intergenerational solidarity (European Council 2011). The European Commission's (2012) report on Learning for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Learning encourages educational strategies that draw on older adults' experiences for societal benefit. Older generations possess experiential knowledge in sustainable practices, such as mindful consumption, reuse, and community cooperation; skills forged in circumstances of resource constraint but highly applicable to current environmental imperatives (DeVore 2016). However, in Malta, many traditional practices associated with sustainability are gradually disappearing (Spiteri 2023). While early childhood and care (ECEC) teachers' education (ITE) programmes often emphasise recycling and environmental education, they rarely integrate heritage-based perspectives arising from intergenerational learning. This study explores whether structured intergenerational sessions can convey sustainability knowledge to ECEC student kindergarten educators, motivating them to integrate lived insights into early childhood pedagogy. By bridging older adults' practices with modern educational aims, the project contributes to discussions on embedding culturally rooted sustainability pedagogy within early years education (Fitzpatrick 2019).

OVERALL AIM

This study aimed to examine how intergenerational reminiscence sessions between older adults and ECEC student kindergarten educators could facilitate the transfer of sustainability-related knowledge. Specifically, it explored how lived traditions of resourcefulness, food preservation, and community sharing could inform ECEC teaching practices that promote ecological stewardship rooted in cultural heritage.

A mixed-methods research design was utilised (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018), combining a quantitative strand with qualitative inquiry. The broader study included a one-group pre- and post-test employing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) to assess psychosocial effects for older participants. However, this article focuses on the qualitative component, built on a dialogic, relational design (Wells 1999) in an interpretivist framework (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The scope was to gather rich, context-specific data on how

intergenerational dialogue influenced student kindergarten educators' conceptualisations of sustainability and their emerging professional identities.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The project anticipated that student educators would develop a deeper, practice-based understanding of sustainability, conceptualising it as a culturally embedded way of life rather than a set of abstract environmental directives (Engdahl 2022; Fitzpatrick and Marie Halpenny 2023). Through exposure to older adults' lived narratives of reuse, food preservation, water conservation, and collective resource-sharing, student educators were expected to gain insights into sustainable practices grounded in heritage and daily life experiences. This intergenerational exchange was envisaged to inspire meaningful, hands-on classroom applications, including repurposing of materials, engaging young children in gardening and food preparation learning experiences, storytelling about past community practices, and facilitating collaborative projects that emphasise cooperation and care for resources (Sihvonen et al. 2024). Furthermore, the approach aimed to demonstrate the value of older adults as co-educators, positioning them as active contributors to ITE and sustainable community development. By integrating heritage-based sustainability knowledge into early years pedagogy, the project sought to bridge generational wisdom with contemporary educational practices, strengthening Education for Sustainable Development in early childhood contexts (Oropilla and Ødegaard 2021).

RESULTS

Five sustainability-related themes emerged: resourcefulness and reuse, food sustainability and waste prevention, water and energy conservation, self-sufficiency, and community sharing. Participants shared stories about repurposing tins, jars, and fabric scraps; sewing clothes from curtains; making toys from cardboard; preserving food via pickling or sun-drying; feeding surplus bread to animals; using wells or shared ovens to reduce energy use; and home gardening or keeping livestock. These stories illuminated sustainability as a coherent lifestyle practice. The student kindergarten educators reported a conceptual shift, reframing sustainability as a culturally situated construct rooted in collective memory and everyday practices, rather than a detached or abstract principle. Participants anticipated implementing hands-on sustainability activities in future placements, including creative projects using recycled resources, child-led gardening initiatives, interactive workshops focused on reusing leftover food, narrative-based learning inspired by past community traditions, and collaborative role-play exercises designed to nurture cooperation, ecological awareness, and water-saving behaviours. The sessions repositioned older adults as active

educators and custodians of valuable knowledge, challenging preconceived notions about generational worth and fostering a deeper appreciation of heritage-based learning among student educators.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The findings sustain the assertion that intergenerational reminiscence constitutes a powerful pedagogical strategy for advancing education for sustainable development within early childhood ITE (Fitzpatrick and Marie Halpenny 2023). By connecting with older adults' experiential ecological wisdom, the student educators reconceptualised sustainability as contextually situated and enacted in everyday life (Engdahl 2022). This encounter illuminated for them the imperative of learning these traditional, practice-based approaches so they could serve as conduits for passing sustainable living principles on to the children they will educate in the future. Besides reshaping the student educators' understanding of sustainability, this dialogic engagement illuminated new pedagogical possibilities. It enabled future teachers to imagine and discuss authentic, experiential learning opportunities that move beyond prescriptive environmental slogans, that foster children's creativity, problem-solving skills, and capacity to act as agents of sustainable change (Caiman and Lundegård 2014). At the level of professional formation, the study demonstrates the value of positioning older adults as legitimate knowledge partners in ITE, recognising them as active contributors to contemporary educational aims. Such collaboration aligns with European policy frameworks promoting active ageing, lifelong learning, and the transmission of cultural heritage across generations (European Commission 2012a; European Council 2011). It also responds to calls within teacher education for more socially responsive and community-embedded approaches to preparing educators for sustainable futures (Engdahl 2022; Fitzpatrick 2023). From a methodological perspective, the research offers a transferable framework for applied qualitative inquiry, illustrating how heritage-based sustainability practices can be reactivated and embedded in contemporary ITE programmes. This model holds potential for replication across diverse educational contexts, contributing both to the preservation of disappearing local knowledge systems and to the enrichment of sustainability education. Embedding structured intergenerational strategies within ITE curricula can foster early ecological consciousness while simultaneously enhancing student educators' relational and cultural competencies. Such approaches have the potential to transform teacher education into a collaborative, intergenerational endeavour that empowers future educators to cultivate social, emotional, and ecological responsibility in the children they teach (Oropilla et al. 2021; Sihvonen et al. 2024).

KEYWORDS

Intergenerational learning, Education for Sustainable Development, Early Childhood Education and care, initial teacher education, Heritage-Based Pedagogy

Theoretical Sampling as a Methodological Imperative: Grounded Theory Insights from an MCAST Social Care Student Placements Study

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BACKGROUND

Educational institutions face the problem of providing students with diverse, adaptable abilities due to the growing complexity of digital, global workplaces. With an emphasis on small island contexts, this Grounded Theory (GT) study explores vocational training within the context of a changing social care industry. Based on availability, the study starts with convenience and purposive sampling, focusing on students at Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST). This practical decision is motivated by practical and contextual factors, specifically time limits and accessibility (Marshall et al., 2013). Also, the researcher is able to gather baseline information that emphasises early themes and guides the course of the investigation.

This phase is just the beginning. To improve and expand the emerging categories, the study also needs theoretical sampling. The researcher has now reached this point in her study path. GT, which was first presented by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, is based on the fact that theory is developed from data and refined via ongoing comparison. The intentional selection of data sources that elucidate, test, or saturate categories is known as theoretical sampling, and it is essential to this process (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Emerging issues from this study include student age, mentorship relationships, intercultural staff dynamics, and communication barriers.

When interviewing mentors and students, the researcher could observe specific patterns emerging through these interviews. For example, most of the students made reference to the treatment of service-users by service-workers. The majority of mentors frequently linked age and lack of communication skills to the misbehaviour of students throughout their placements. At this point, the researcher's next data collection phase would be observations instead of conducting interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of such concerns. Observation is a valid and frequently necessary tool in theoretical sampling when it can shed light on interactions, surroundings, or behaviours that data from other sources might overlook. (Corbin & Strauss 1998).

OVERALL AIM

The methodological path of a GT study which investigates the developmental effectiveness of placement experiences among MCAST Social Care students is

critically examined in this presentation. The emphasis here is not just on the findings but also on the theory's development, emphasising theoretical sampling as a key factor in creating a conceptually complex, data-supported, explanation of student learning in practice-based settings.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

This research is still ongoing. However, it seems to be showing that theoretical sampling emerges as a crucial methodological requirement for investigating student placements. The sampling strategy, which was initially informed by practical access, changes in response to ongoing comparisons, exposing deep conceptual categories related to student identity, institutional culture, and mentoring. The researcher is able to improve conceptual coherence and fill in data gaps, and hone these categories using theoretical sampling. While theoretical sampling is an inherent part of the GT process, this very study has shown that theoretical sampling is an essential step at this point in the data collecting process, since it is now clear that additional theoretical sampling is required to saturate the data and arrive at a theoretical conclusion. The study is expected to foster the development of the researcher's theoretical sensitivity, thereby strengthening the rigour and depth of the emerging grounded theory.

RESULTS

Conceptual gaps are discovered through constant comparison and memoing (Birks & Mills, 2015), especially with regard to the ways in which mentorship techniques, ward-specific cultural climates, and institutional support systems influence students' professional identities and resilience. At this point in the study, the researcher is always thinking about how, in spite of early attempts to gather data, several facets of student placement experiences are still not well understood. The researcher feels impelled to delve more into how certain environments influence students' learning journeys after realising that her initial assumptions regarding students' adaptations were overly generalised (Charmaz, 2006). The thoughts recorded in memos act as essential reference points that guide the researcher's decisions on expanding the sample frame.

Placement mentors, ward managers, care staff, coordinators, and students with atypical or divergent placement trajectories are added to the sampling frame in order to fill in these gaps and ensure theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher was able to reinforce the theoretical framework of her developing categories by deliberately looking for voices that are initially missing, especially from students who have experienced placement difficulties or display remarkable coping mechanisms. This experience reaffirms the need for GT to be flexible and dynamic, particularly when applied to the understanding of intricate

human processes (Hall & Callery, 2001). The methodological necessity of sampling for meaning rather than just variance is demonstrated by this process (Morse, 2007).

Importantly, this stage of the research shows that theoretical sampling is a fundamental epistemological commitment in GT, not a supplementary method, as it safeguards that the developing theory stays grounded, reflective, and substantively sound. Hood (2007) points out that if theoretical sampling is not applied rigorously, it could result in answers that are merely partial or superficial. In contrast, this study embraces the generative potential of GT and purposefully uses sampling to develop integrative theoretical frameworks and improve conceptual categories.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This study can help to make a difference in several areas. It examines how young students' learning and development are impacted by mentorship, professional and personal identities, and educational or work contexts. The study demonstrates how these elements support—or occasionally impede—people's career launch. Additionally, it is important for social inclusion, educational equity, and assisting future employees in adapting to and remaining resilient in their occupations.

The results are particularly helpful for educational institutions that emphasise practical, job-related training, such as MCAST. They can utilise this information to enhance their work placement courses and mentoring initiatives. The results also support teaching methods that focus on students' real-world experiences. Lastly, by focusing on how workplace culture and mentorship foster resilience, the insights can assist in enhancing training and support for employees in the education and care sectors. The impact may not be immediate, but it's still meaningful.

Particularly in relation to practice-based professional education, this presentation adds to wider discussions concerning methodological reflexivity, flexibility and rigour in qualitative research (Hall & Burns, 2009; Tracy, 2010). The researcher realises that responsiveness—the ability to change course in response to new information—is just as important to qualitative rigour as consistency. Responding to the data that is being received is just as important as adhering to GT's procedures and standards. Thus, the choice to use theoretical sampling at this point in the study.

This dedication to methodological responsiveness necessitates careful handling of moral conundrums, particularly when collaborating with insider participants whose viewpoints challenge role boundaries and confidentiality while also adding rich context (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002; Gair, 2012). It confirms that

methodological choices that are sensitive to the data's changing needs are just as important to the integrity of GT as analytical techniques.

KEYWORDS

Grounded Theory, Placements, Sampling, Qualitative Research.

The use of behavioural data from telecommunications networks in the Smart City concept – a review of existing research results in the process of determining mobility patterns.

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BACKGROUND

Integrating behavioural data from telecommunications networks with urban planning is gaining importance in the context of Smart City development. This review analyses existing research on the use of mobile network data—such as call detail records (CDRs), signalling data, and location-based services, including Cell ID—for scientific evaluation and characterising urban and suburban mobility patterns. Synthesising recent research, the article highlights the advantages of telecommunications data, including their large scale, real-time availability, and population-wide coverage, as well as their limitations related to privacy, spatial accuracy, and representativeness. The review also categorises methodologies used to extract mobility patterns, including clustering algorithms, trajectory mining, machine learning methods, and big data analytics.

OVERALL AIM

Overall, the article illustrates how telecommunications-derived mobility information can support traffic management, public transport planning, and emergency response strategies, contributing to more efficient and adaptive smart city systems, development planning, and investment.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Indication of new data quality from Cell ID, behaviour identification, while at the same time, anonymisation as a social trust for telecommunications operators. Using data and analyses in Smart City conception for planning of transport and new investments.

RESULTS

Integrating behavioural data from telecommunications networks with urban planning is gaining importance in the context of Smart City development. The review also categorises methodologies used to extract mobility patterns, including clustering algorithms, trajectory mining, machine learning methods, and big data analytics. An article pointing out non-obvious mobility patterns and their identification in the field of correlated data from the area of economics, human behavioural analyses, technology and Big Data sets, with correlation algorithms.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The study will clearly demonstrate how accurate data is collected and estimated to understand the methodologies and quality of technology currently used for Big Data analyses in Smart Cities, leveraging the concept of continuous monitoring based on the principles of mobile networks operation (2G/3G/4G/5G) to maintain communication. We will demonstrate that understanding these processes and high-quality data is the foundation for making investment decisions that improve residents' well-being and impact human capital mobility.

KEYWORDS

data for development ; travel time estimation; call detail records ; smart city

Behavioral Determinants of Students' Investment Decisions and Their Implications for Financial Education

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BACKGROUND

Behavioural mechanisms activated in the process of making investment decisions constitute a key area of research on the rationality of economic behaviour and choices. According to Shiller (1997), market participants' decisions are strongly influenced by social and emotional factors, which indicates the need for education that takes these mechanisms into account. Investment psychology, as a subdiscipline of behavioural finance (Zielonka, 2003; Czerwotka, 2019), is gaining importance in the context of economic education for young people. Despite the growing number of young participants in the capital market in Poland, a research gap has been identified in both the literature and educational practice in the form of limited knowledge about the impact of investment education on youth, the expectations of young people toward capital markets, and the decision-making processes of young investors. The planned research task responds to the increasing significance of investment psychology in financial education and points to the need to update the didactic approach in schools in this regard. The proposed study focuses on identifying the presence of cognitive heuristics and emotional responses such as the disposition effect (Shefrin & Statman, 1985; Zielonka, 2005), overconfidence (Odean & Gervais, 2001), and loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The study will also take into account elements of bounded rationality theory (Simon, 1955), cognitive biases described by Shiller (1997), and the discrepancy between declared intentions and actual decisions (Białaszek et al., 2018). The project will make it possible to diagnose the scale of these phenomena and to determine differences in decision-making processes among groups of students in Poland representing economics, technical, and humanities fields.

OVERALL AIM

The overall aim of the planned research is to identify and assess the behavioural mechanisms underlying investment decision-making among students. The analysis focuses on cognitive heuristics: the disposition effect, loss aversion, and overconfidence, which affect the quality of decisions made under conditions of risk. The experiment will analyse the following relationships: 1. The impact of field and level of study on susceptibility to cognitive heuristics. 2. The relationship between the level of declared financial knowledge and the occurrence of cognitive biases in investment situations.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The results of the project will be used to develop recommendations for the education system and higher education, highlighting the need to integrate behavioural finance content into the curricula of financial and academic education programs. The project will also serve as the basis for preparing a scientific monograph and scholarly publications in journals included in the MEiN list.

RESULTS

The study is currently in the preparatory phase; therefore, no empirical results are available at this stage.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The project has the potential to have a significant impact on society by deepening the understanding of investment decision-making processes among young people, particularly students. Modern financial markets are becoming increasingly accessible to young individuals due to the development of technology, online trading platforms, and investment applications. While this democratisation of access offers opportunities for building wealth, it also exposes inexperienced investors to heightened risks. In this context, making sound investment decisions requires both solid financial knowledge and awareness of one's own cognitive and emotional limitations. The project's findings will make it possible to identify the most common cognitive heuristics, such as the disposition effect, loss aversion, and overconfidence, as well as emotional mechanisms that influence investment choices in this age group. The conclusions drawn from the study will serve to develop evidence-based recommendations for financial education, with particular emphasis on the need to integrate behavioural finance content into the curricula of both secondary schools and higher education institutions. Such integration of theoretical knowledge with the practical aspects of investment psychology can significantly enhance the competencies of young investors, equipping them to make more rational, informed decisions and reducing their susceptibility to cognitive biases. In the long term, the implementation of these recommendations can contribute to raising the overall level of financial awareness among the younger generation. This, in turn, may result in more stable personal finances and more responsible participation in economic life. Moreover, it may foster trust in financial institutions and capital markets by promoting long-term investment behaviours and prudent financial planning. Through the planned publication of results in the form of a scientific monograph and peer-reviewed articles, the project will influence not only direct beneficiaries but also the academic and educational communities, acting as a catalyst for further research and the introduction of innovative teaching methods in financial education.

KEYWORDS

Behavioural finance, Investment decision-making, Cognitive heuristics, Financial education, Students

PE and Well-Being from the perspective of students - a participatory approach study

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BACKGROUND

For the last three decades, schools were declared as the ideal setting for well-being promotion amongst children and adolescents. Furthermore, the utilisation and recognition of student-voice in schools is currently highly encouraged, not only in respect of improved classroom practices, but also regarding how this affects students' well-being. Physical Education is considered a core component of education in promoting the well-being of students, extending beyond the traditionally known physical benefits. Studies show how practices in PE can develop both subjective well-being and social connections. If the goal of promoting well-being through PE is to be achieved, a paradigmatic shift in PE stakeholders' thinking and practices is required, moving away from narrowly defined content and approaches. Such a shift is more likely to have a real and lasting impact when students' voices, as key stakeholders, are considered in policy development and implementation. This study aims at filling this gap in relation to PE and well-being. A group of ten student-researchers in a secondary school in Malta took part in a participatory approach study during which they suggested the core principles of PE for well-being – enjoyment, variety, teamwork, empowerment and the outdoors. The principles, together with the pedagogical practices which the student-researchers highlighted as effective in addressing well-being, led to the development of what Fredrickson defines as enduring resources for well-being. Both the core principles and the pedagogical practices mentioned by the student-researchers align to the literature, thus confirming the weight that should be given to student-voices in both curriculum planning and implementation.

OVERALL AIM

This study aims to explore how PE can be reimagined to better promote well-being in secondary schools, using student voice. Using a participatory approach with ten student-researchers in Malta, the study identifies five core principles and effective pedagogical practices, highlighting the importance of integrating students' perspectives into PE policy, curriculum, and practice for lasting well-being outcomes.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes include a PE framework that reflects students' identified principles for well-being, leading to more engaging and inclusive practices. Incorporating student voice is anticipated to enhance enjoyment, social connection, and empowerment in PE, fostering both physical and psychological well-being. The study may also influence policy and curriculum design, encouraging a shift toward student-centred, well-being-focused PE programs.

RESULTS

This study engaged ten student-researchers (SRs) in Malta to reimagine Physical Education (PE) for promoting well-being, resulting in five core principles: enjoyment, content variety, decision-making, teamwork, and the outdoors. Their perspectives, gathered through participatory discussions, revealed how these principles could enhance learning, engagement, and overall well-being.

Enjoyment emerged as central to PE, linked to motivation, participation, and skill development. SRs stressed that fun should not replace learning but complement it, creating a cycle where enjoyment fosters engagement and deeper learning. They called for greater content variety to avoid boredom, enhance equity, and stimulate curiosity, ensuring all students learn together from new challenges.

Decision-making and voice were equally important. SRs valued opportunities to influence lesson content and practices, seeing this as a route to increased belonging, self-confidence, and interest. They highlighted the role of collaborative teacher-student dialogue in shaping meaningful, engaging PE experiences. Empowerment was tied to being trusted with responsibilities, such as leadership roles or planning activities, which made students feel valued and capable.

The outdoors was seen as a unique contributor to well-being, offering fresh air, adventure, problem-solving, and a calming connection to nature. Group work, another key element, promoted confidence, cooperation, and skill-sharing. Healthy competition within teams was valued for building resilience, motivation, and social bonds, provided it was inclusive and sensitive to students' abilities.

Overall, SRs envisioned PE as a collaborative, varied, and inclusive space that balances learning with enjoyment, empowers student voice, and nurtures both physical and psychosocial well-being. They emphasised that involving students in PE planning and delivery fosters engagement, equality, and lasting positive impacts—suggesting that student perspectives should be integral to PE curriculum design and policy.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Integrating the findings of this study into the Physical Education (PE) curriculum would prompt a significant shift towards a more student-centred, well-being-

focused approach. The identification of five core principles—enjoyment, content variety, decision-making, teamwork, and the outdoors—provides a framework for designing lessons that move beyond traditional, skill-only models towards experiences that foster both physical and psychosocial development.

Curriculum planning would incorporate mechanisms for regularly gathering and acting on student voice, ensuring that lesson content reflects learners' interests, needs, and preferred learning styles. This could involve participatory planning sessions, periodic feedback cycles, and flexible lesson structures that adapt to student input. Content variety would be embedded as a guiding principle, reducing over-reliance on repetitive activities and ensuring exposure to diverse sports, movement forms, and outdoor experiences. This approach would not only sustain interest and motivation but also promote equity, as all students begin new activities on equal footing.

Decision-making and empowerment would be operationalised through structured opportunities for students to select activities, influence rules or formats, and take on leadership or organisational roles. Such practices would develop autonomy, responsibility, and collaborative skills, while reinforcing students' sense of belonging and value within the class. Teachers' role would expand to facilitators of co-learning, balancing professional expertise with responsiveness to student perspectives.

The emphasis on teamwork and healthy competition would shape grouping strategies and assessment practices, focusing on cooperation, mutual support, and shared achievement rather than solely on individual performance. Outdoor learning would be recognised as a legitimate and essential part of the PE curriculum, integrated where possible to provide holistic well-being benefits.

Overall, these changes would require curriculum documents, schemes of work, and teacher training to explicitly embed student voice, variety, and empowerment as core objectives, ensuring that PE is positioned as a meaningful contributor to lifelong well-being rather than merely a vehicle for physical fitness.

KEYWORDS

well-being, Physical Education, student voice, broaden-and-build theory, student agency

Learning Beyond the Hard Skills: Stakeholder Attitudes to Soft Skills Training in Maltese Small and Micro Businesses

Ilaria Spiteri Axiak

BACKGROUND

Small and micro businesses are the backbone of Malta's economy, representing the vast majority of registered businesses (circa 99% of business units). While their agility and close-knit structures can foster innovation and adaptability, they often face significant constraints in dedicating time and resources to structured training and development. Soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and teamwork, are increasingly recognised as critical to sustaining competitiveness, enhancing client relationships, and navigating organisational change. However, in many of these businesses, investment in soft skills training remains limited, with owner-managers and other decision-makers prioritising operational demands over long-term workforce capability building.

In small island contexts such as Malta, the interplay between cultural norms, economic pressures, and market size further shapes training attitudes and practices. Stakeholders, including business owners, HR consultants, policymakers and employees, highlight barriers such as cost consciousness, lack of dedicated HR functions, and a perception that soft skills are less urgent than technical expertise. At the same time, there is growing awareness that client satisfaction, employee retention, and sustainable business growth depend on embedding these competencies within the workforce.

Despite recognition of their value, little empirical research has explored how different stakeholders in Malta perceive and approach soft skills training in small and micro businesses. This study addresses that gap, applying a grounded theory methodology to generate a context-specific understanding of the factors influencing attitudes, decision-making, and implementation. The findings offer practical, research-informed insights to support policy development, employer strategies, and training provision tailored to the realities of small and micro enterprises in a small island state.

OVERALL AIM

The aim of this study is to explore and discuss stakeholder attitudes towards soft skills training in Maltese small and micro enterprises, identifying the cultural, operational, and strategic factors that shape these perspectives. Using a grounded theory approach, the research seeks to generate a context-specific framework that

informs policy, guides employer decision-making, and supports the design of relevant, sustainable training interventions in small island state economies.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The study is expected to produce a theory that is grounded in data, explaining how owner-managers, HR consultants, employees and policymakers perceive and prioritise soft skills training in Maltese small and micro enterprises. It will highlight the interplay between cultural attitudes, operational constraints, and strategic considerations, revealing enablers and barriers to implementation. The resulting framework will offer practical recommendations for aligning training initiatives with business realities, enhancing workforce capabilities, and informing policy interventions tailored to the needs of small island state economies.

RESULTS

Preliminary findings reveal that while stakeholders broadly acknowledge the value of soft skills for sustaining competitiveness and improving client relationships, their prioritisation in small and micro businesses remains inconsistent. Owner-managers often perceive soft skills as beneficial but secondary to technical training, particularly under cost and time constraints. This reactive approach to training is reinforced by the absence of dedicated HR functions and a tendency to address skills gaps only when problems arise.

Cultural and contextual factors in Malta, including the “island mentality,” strong client-centred cultures, and close-knit organisational structures, shape both the perceived need for and the delivery of soft skills training. HR consultants emphasise the importance of integrating soft skills into broader business strategy, yet note that smaller enterprises frequently lack the structures or processes to do so effectively. Policymakers recognise the role of soft skills in national workforce development but face challenges in encouraging uptake among resource-constrained businesses.

The emerging theory suggests that attitudes towards soft skills training are influenced by a combination of operational pressures, business identity, market positioning, and leadership mindset. Enablers to soft skills training include visible links between soft skills and business performance, accessible training formats, and alignment with company values. Barriers to training include short-term cost considerations, scepticism about training outcomes, and entrenched habits.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This research will generate original and context-specific knowledge on stakeholder attitudes towards soft skills training in Maltese small and micro businesses, directly contributing to scientific research by addressing a gap in both the small

island state literature and the wider field of workforce development studies. Through its grounded theory approach, the study will offer a theoretical framework that captures the interplay between cultural norms, operational realities, and strategic decision-making in such businesses, providing a foundation for future comparative research and methodological replication in other contexts. The findings have clear implications for the economy and finance by supporting more long-term competitiveness and sustainability, which make up the majority of Malta's business landscape. By reframing soft skills as a strategic investment rather than an expense, the study will encourage business leaders to integrate such skills into growth strategies, potentially leading to improved client retention, productivity, and innovation capacity of human capital.

From a societal perspective, the research addresses skills that underpin employability, adaptability, and workplace well-being. Strengthening soft skills can improve employee confidence, reduce workplace conflict, and foster more inclusive and collaborative organisational cultures. This contributes to social cohesion and individual career progression, particularly in a labour market where smaller businesses are a primary source of employment.

The industry impact lies in guiding HR consultants, training providers, and business support organisations in tailoring interventions that are relevant and cost-effective. By highlighting the enablers and barriers to training of soft skills, the research will support the design of training solutions that fit within the realities of small business operations, thereby increasing uptake and effectiveness.

In terms of curriculum, the study will provide evidence-based recommendations for embedding soft skills into vocational training, higher education, professional development programmes and L&D strategies. This will help align curricula with the actual needs of small business employers, ensuring that graduates enter the workforce with the necessary skills that are most valued in the sector.

Finally, the research addresses national and global priorities by aligning with Malta's National Employment Policy (2021-2030), the National Education Strategy (2024-2030), the EU's Small Business Act, and other broader policy goals related to lifelong learning and employability for economic and business resilience. The study aims to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers to contribute to shaping strategies and support mechanisms that enhance skills development in small and micro enterprises, ensuring that these businesses remain competitive.

KEYWORDS

Soft skills; small and micro businesses; grounded theory; training and development; human resource strategy

Understanding Financial-Decision Making in Malta's Property Industry

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BACKGROUND

Malta's property industry is a crucial component of its economy, contributing significantly to the country's GDP, employment, and foreign investment. Over recent years, Malta's real estate sector has experienced growth, largely driven by demand from both local buyers and international investors. The property development sector also has an impact on the scale and location of the economic activity (Vassallo Simiana, 2012). Indeed, in many economies, residential building activity is at the heart of economic growth and, consequently, acts as a regulator in economic development (Bormpotsialou & Rovolis, 2019).

The residential selling property prices record a stronger increase. The NSO's Property Price Index (PPI) which is based on actual transactions involving apartments, maisonettes, and terraced houses - continued to increase in annual terms. The annual rate of change stood at 5. 4% in the last quarter of 2023, up from 4. 6% in the previous quarter. This contrasts with developments in the euro area, where prices on average decreased at an annual rate of 1. 1% (Central Bank of Malta, 2024). In February 2025, the number of final deeds of sale relating to residential property amounted to 1,021, an increase of 0. 1% when compared to those registered in February 2024. The value of these deeds totalled €287. 5 million, representing an increase of 6. 3% when compared to the corresponding value recorded in February 2024 (NSO, 2025).

Data on rents based on contracts registered with the Housing Authority show that rents in the last quarter of 2023 continued to grow in annual terms. The average range of estimates indicates that rents have increased at annual rates of between 4. 7% and 5. 6% in the quarter under review (Central Bank of Malta, 2024). While it has seen impressive growth, there are significant challenges that need to be addressed, particularly regarding affordability, sustainable development, and the impact of foreign investment. Despite these hurdles, the sector is expected to continue to grow in the coming years, with developers and investors focusing on high-end projects and sustainable, eco-friendly properties.

OVERALL AIM

The research aim is to examine financial strategies, challenges, and decision-making processes within Maltese property companies. Specifically, this study aims to explore the ways in which property firms operating in Malta, manage their

financial resources, navigate challenges in the real estate market, and make strategic decisions to achieve growth and sustainability.

The research will analyse how Maltese property companies finance their operations, including equity vs. debt financing, and the impact of the country's financial policies. It will examine the phenomenon of investment choices, including residential, commercial, or mixed-use developments, as well as strategies in dealing with local and international investors. The research will help to assess the financial risk management strategies in place by the companies and considering market volatility, interest rates, and the cyclical nature of the property market. It will also help in evaluating the key financial metrics such as profitability, return on investment, and overall financial health of property companies.

This focus will provide valuable insights into the specific financial practices and decision-making frameworks that property companies in Malta use to navigate an increasingly complex and competitive market.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes are to understand the personal approach taken by key players in financial decision-making regarding property investments in Malta. Additionally, the study aims to identify the factors that have the most significant influence on property values in the country. Another key outcome is to examine how risk assessment is incorporated into financial decisions when acquiring property, as well as to highlight the biggest financial risks currently present in Malta's property market. Furthermore, the research seeks to determine if there are specific property types or locations in Malta that are more desirable or targeted. Lastly, it aims to assess whether property companies in Malta are primarily focused on investment properties for appreciation and rental income, or on properties intended for sale.

RESULTS

The preliminary results are showing that: Property companies mainly have two types of financing options: issuing bonds, which is typically available to companies with long operating records, and bank loans, which are more accessible for newly incorporated companies. Companies can utilise these options depending on their financial strategies and development stages.

Throughout the property development process, companies face various risks and challenges —during the property purchase stage, the construction stage, the finishing stage, and even the selling stage. Therefore, a risk assessment at each stage is essential to effectively manage these risks.

Customers play a crucial role in both the process and the financial perspective, as companies rely on customers' willingness to spend and purchase property.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Understanding financial decision-making in Malta's property industry can have a significant impact on other studies across several disciplines and sectors. Here's how:

- *Insights into financial behaviour in the property market help governments craft housing policies, taxation laws, and investment regulations.*
- *Property markets are closely tied to economic performance. Understanding financial trends in Malta's real estate sector can aid broader economic projections and planning.*
- *Studies in finance and investment can benefit from real-world decision-making data, improving models for risk assessment, ROI prediction, and portfolio diversification.*
- *Malta's unique position as a small, EU-based island economy provides a valuable comparison point for similar emerging or micro-markets.*
- *Knowing how financial decisions affect property choices helps urban planners design more effective zoning, infrastructure, and development strategies.*
- *It provides data on how financial motivations contribute to urban shifts, impacting long-term development plans.*
- *Studies in behavioural economics and sociology can analyse how individuals and companies weigh financial risks versus lifestyle or cultural factors when investing.*
- *Financial decision patterns often align with migration, income, and generational trends, which sociologists can further explore.*
- *Understanding investment motivations helps analyse the impact of rentals on local housing availability and pricing.*
- *Insights support decisions on where and what type of accommodation developments are most viable.*

In essence, understanding financial decision-making in Malta's property industry doesn't just inform real estate research — it provides a foundation for a multidisciplinary view of the island's socio-economic structure, influencing future studies in finance, urban development, policy, and more.

KEYWORDS

Property, Financing, Challenges, Risks and Customers

Mercer CFA Global Pension Index as a tool for assessing the adequacy and sustainability of pension systems – a comparative analysis of the best and worst pension models

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BACKGROUND

This article focuses on assessing the performance of contemporary pension systems in the context of key challenges, such as population ageing, demographic decline, and growing pressure to finance public spending. Its goal is to identify pension systems with high adequacy, stable funding, and a high level of institutional integrity, and, based on this, to recommend actions necessary to ensure the future retirement security of citizens. The assessment of the mechanisms of contemporary pension systems was based on the Mercer CFA Institute Global Pension Index 2024. The Mercer Index encompasses over 50 parameters assigned to three main categories: adequacy, sustainability, and integrity. The quantitative analysis was supplemented with qualitative research elements, enabling the assessment of difficult-to-measure factors, such as regulatory transparency, corporate governance standards, and the level of public trust in pension institutions. The article's conclusions indicate that pension systems that promote universal participation, encourage long-term saving, gradually raise the retirement age, and ensure effective institutional oversight receive the highest ratings. The Netherlands, Iceland, and Denmark top the rankings for pension system efficiency. Their systems are characterised by high benefit adequacy, stable funding based on diversified sources, and a high level of institutional integrity. In contrast to the leaders, the countries with the lowest ratings are characterised by low participation, limited capital savings, unfavourable demographic trends, and insufficient regulatory mechanisms.

OVERALL AIM

The overall goal is to identify pension systems with high benefit adequacy, stable funding, and a high level of institutional integrity, and, based on this, to recommend actions necessary to ensure the future retirement security of citizens. Assessment of the index methodology – a discussion of the research methods used (literature analysis, statistical data analysis, qualitative elements) and a justification for their importance in assessing pension systems.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The expected results of the article include: identification of best practices in pension systems (the Netherlands, Iceland, and Denmark) and a diagnosis of weaknesses in countries with low ratings, such as low participation rates and unfavourable demographic trends. They demonstrate the crucial role of qualitative methods, complementing quantitative analysis, in assessing the adequacy and integrity of systems. They also confirm the effectiveness of the MCGPI methodology, which combines statistical data and literature. The article formulates reform recommendations, emphasising the application goal of utilising the report's findings in designing pension policy and strengthening the stability of systems.

RESULTS

Analysis of data from the Mercer CFA Institute Global Pension Index 2024 indicates significant variation in the quality of pension systems between the countries ranking highest and lowest. Preliminary results confirm that Northern European countries such as the Netherlands, Iceland, and Denmark received the highest scores. These systems are distinguished not only by high pension adequacy but also by a strong link to the funded pillar, which provides a significant source of funding for future payments. A key element of their success is widespread participation in pension plans and effective institutional oversight, ensuring transparency and protecting participants' interests. In contrast, countries ranked at the bottom of the ranking are characterised by low pension assets relative to GDP, limited social security coverage, and insufficient regulatory mechanisms. Preliminary analyses confirm that the problems of these systems stem largely from unfavourable demographic trends, such as low fertility rates and increasing life expectancy, which put significant pressure on the pay-as-you-go pillar. The preliminary results also demonstrate that qualitative factors play a significant role in the index's construction, not only in terms of hard quantitative indicators such as the replacement rate, pension asset ratio to GDP, and retirement age. Qualitative analysis captures aspects such as public trust in institutions, regulatory transparency, and corporate governance standards. This allows the MCGPI to provide a more comprehensive picture of the functioning of pension systems. In summary, the preliminary results indicate that the foundation of stable and highly rated systems is a combination of broad participation, a strong capital component, and transparent regulations. At the same time, they confirm that the absence of such elements significantly reduces the quality of pension systems and requires deeper structural reforms.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The findings of this article could have a significant impact on the development of research in economics and finance, particularly in the economics of ageing societies, public finance, and capital markets. A comparative analysis of pension systems globally not only provides insights into the effectiveness of individual models but also creates a benchmark for empirical research on the adequacy and sustainability of social security systems. First, the article deepens the scientific debate on methods for measuring the quality of pension systems. It demonstrates that combining quantitative and qualitative tools is crucial for reliably assessing long-term financial stability and institutional integrity. This could serve as an impetus for further research on integrating statistical indicators with behavioural and social components in economic analysis. Second, the study highlights the role of public policy and institutional regulations as factors determining social trust and individuals' retirement savings decisions. In this way, the article contributes to the development of research on the interaction between fiscal policy, financial markets, and social behaviour. Third, the results have practical implications for comparative economics, enabling the identification of pension system models that can be adapted in other countries. This research can support the formulation of reform strategies and the forecasting of their impact on public finances and social well-being. In summary, the paper's findings will enrich the economics and finance literature by suggesting new research directions for measuring the adequacy of pension systems, assessing their sustainability, and designing socioeconomic policies in the face of an ageing population.

KEYWORDS

Mercer CFA Institute Global Pension Index; pension systems; benefit adequacy; financial sustainability; institutional integrity; comparative analysis; quantitative research; qualitative research; population ageing; pension policy.

GenAI in Education: Fostering Ethical and Critical Engagement Among Educators and Learners

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BACKGROUND

The rapid emergence of Generative AI (GenAI) presents both challenges and opportunities for educators and learners worldwide. While international bodies, such as UNESCO-UNEVOC, have begun to publish practical recommendations for the ethical and practical use of AI in teaching, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these recommendations can be successfully implemented in a real-world educational setting. This project addresses this gap directly by adopting an action research approach that moves beyond policy and theory, critically testing the most recent UNESCO-UNEVOC recommendations for European vocational educational institutes within one of its designated centres.

This study is grounded in the philosophy of Ubuntu, an African humanist worldview encapsulated by the phrase, "I am because we are". Ubuntu pedagogy emphasises relationality, communal knowledge-building, and the ethical responsibilities we hold towards one another in shared educational spaces. Within the context of AI integration in teaching and learning, Ubuntu offers a critical, values-led lens through which to explore how technologies are adopted in ways that uphold human dignity, creativity, and inclusion.

OVERALL AIM

The study has two interrelated aims: first, it seeks to translate the recommendations of the UNESCO-UNEVOC 2025 report, "AI adoption in European TVET: Challenges, opportunities, and recommendations" into practice by designing and delivering a series of hands-on workshops for educators and students. These workshops will serve as a testing ground for the practicality and usability at an institutional level. Second, the study aims to formulate a locally developed set of guidelines for ethical GenAI integration that empowers educators and students to address the challenges faced within our academic community.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The project will deliver a set of tested, actionable outputs designed to guide ethical AI integration at MCAST. Outcomes will include: A series of professional learning workshops for educators and students, focused on values-driven GenAI use. Institution-specific guidelines for ethical GenAI adoption, aligned with UNESCO-UNEVOC recommendations. A peer-reviewed journal article presenting the case study and offering a practice-based model for other institutions. Dissemination of

findings at international conferences to engage wider educational stakeholders and ensure broader impact beyond MCAST.

RESULTS

As this is a working paper, final results are not yet available. However, based on the research design, our findings will offer a robust understanding of the practical and ethical challenges of implementing AI in vocational education, particularly in MCAST.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Scientific research: Our study will impact scientific research by providing a crucial, practice-based framework for the ethical integration of Gen AI. We plan to write and submit a paper to an academic journal, which will move beyond theory to offer a real-world case study and contribute directly to the literature on AI pedagogy, digital ethics, and the evolving roles of educators.

Curriculum: Our study will impact the curriculum area by providing a tangible, values-led set of guidelines for integrating GenAI into vocational education. It offers practical guidance on redesigning teaching and assessment practices, helping educators and curriculum developers to embed critical AI literacy and ethical considerations directly into course content.

KEYWORDS

Generative AI (GenAI); Vocational education; Curriculum integration; Academic integrity; Ethical framework

Determinants of ESG funds in Poland – evidence from an XGBoost analysis

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BACKGROUND

The rapid growth of sustainable finance in Europe reflects both increasing investor interest in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations and the tightening of regulatory frameworks. For many years, the scale at which ESG factors were integrated into investment decisions remained modest, largely due to limited transparency among financial service providers. This situation changed with the adoption of the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR) by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. By imposing disclosure obligations and restricting the misuse of “green” or “responsible” labels, the SFDR has significantly improved market credibility and addressed the risk of greenwashing.

At the same time, technological advances have transformed financial market practices. Following the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, the FinTech sector expanded rapidly, while innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and blockchain entered mainstream use. These tools have proven particularly valuable in financial analytics, supporting tasks such as time series forecasting, risk assessment, and anomaly detection. Among them, ML techniques are increasingly applied in investment research, offering new insights into determinants of fund performance and investor behaviour.

Investment funds, including ESG funds, represent an important segment of financial markets, granting investors access to diversified portfolios, reduced transaction costs, and professional management. In the case of ESG funds, however, their effectiveness and attractiveness depend on multiple factors, including regulatory conditions, fund characteristics, and investor preferences. The growing application of ML algorithms, such as Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost), provides an opportunity to identify and evaluate these determinants with high precision. Against this backdrop, the analysis of ESG funds in Poland using ML methods contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping sustainable investment.

OVERALL AIM

The main aim of the study is to identify and evaluate the key determinants influencing the performance of ESG investment funds in the Polish market using advanced machine learning methods. By applying the Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost) algorithm, the research seeks to capture the relationships between fund

performance and selected explanatory variables, including fund-specific characteristics.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Based on the literature review, the results of the study are expected to demonstrate that analysis using XGBoost can identify the determinants of ESG fund performance in Poland, and also confirm that machine learning is an effective tool for predicting fund investment outcomes. Furthermore, the main determinants of fund performance are expected to be fund size and fund age.

RESULTS

It's an ongoing research.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Research focusing on the applicability of XGBoost in the context of ESG funds falls directly within the field of finance, particularly in the areas of investment analysis, portfolio management, and sustainable finance research. While studies on the general performance of investment funds are relatively common, research specifically examining the determinants of this performance remains relatively rare. This makes the integration of advanced machine learning techniques into such analyses especially valuable, as it fills an important gap in current financial literature. It is also important to emphasise that investments incorporating ESG assets within portfolios have been steadily gaining popularity for more than a decade. Forecasts suggest that this trend will continue in the coming years, supported by rising public awareness of environmental and social factors, as well as by the gradual wealth accumulation in societies worldwide. This phenomenon is evident not only in developed countries but is particularly significant in emerging economies, where growing financial literacy and awareness are encouraging individuals to invest surplus capital through financial markets. From the investor's perspective, mutual funds, including ESG funds, are highly attractive because they require no specialised knowledge of investing, while also offering relatively low transaction costs and access to diversified portfolios managed by professionals. At the same time, rapid technological advances are increasing the accessibility of machine learning tools, which is gradually changing the way financial decision-making processes are approached. Providing empirical evidence on what drives ESG fund performance in Poland allows for a more informed and data-driven approach to fund selection within investment portfolios. By demonstrating the predictive accuracy and flexibility of XGBoost, this study underscores how machine learning not only complements but also strengthens traditional econometric methods. This methodological contribution may foster broader adoption of ML

techniques in financial research, ranging from performance forecasting to factor modelling in capital markets. These insights hold particular importance for both current and potential investors as well as for fund managers. Investors will be able to make more conscious decisions regarding fund selection, while managers can draw on the results to guide portfolio design, strategy development, and long-term fund performance optimisation.

KEYWORDS

ESG funds; XGBoost; Machine Learning; determinants of ESG funds; financial markets

Linkages Between Higher Learning Provision and Innovation

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BACKGROUND

In 2024, Malta is a moderate Innovator with performance at 88% of the EU average according to the European Innovation Scoreboard – 2024)=. Despite this good score, Malta in the past few years has witnessed strong decreases since 2017 in design applications, knowledge-intensive services exports and direct and indirect government support of business R&D. Moreover, while Malta has a relatively high number of non-innovative enterprises with the potential to innovate, it also faces a considerable share of non-innovative enterprises lacking the willingness to do so. A silver bullet that can help to reduce this deficit is the essential, yet often overlooked, role of higher learning provision in fostering innovation within micro-organisations.

The local Micro-organisations, which can be defined as firms with fewer than ten employees, are critical drivers of economic growth and job creation in Malta, but they face unique challenges in innovation due to their limited resources, small scale, and lack of dedicated research and development (R&D) departments. Higher education institutions (HEIs) can provide a vital external ecosystem that enables these small firms to overcome these limitations and access the resources necessary for innovation.

In Malta, it is clear that while the linkages between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and innovation are well-established on a national policy level, there are significant and often systemic barriers that prevent these linkages from functioning effectively.

OVERALL AIM

The aim of this work is to break new ground about the role that higher learning provision plays in fostering Innovation in micro-organisations. To date, there are no local studies that utilise a Grounded Theory approach on the subject matter. These distinct elements provide the antecedent conditions for an original and pioneering research project. In doing so, the proposed research seeks to clarify the Higher learning-Innovation relationship and establish a line of thinking with the aim to generate greater levels of innovation within micro-organisations.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

This study posits that a deeper understanding of this relationship is essential for developing effective policies aimed at strengthening the innovation cap.

While much of the literature on innovation focuses on large enterprises and established ecosystems, this abstract posits that higher education institutions serve as a critical, yet often overlooked, catalyst for innovation in smaller firms. The primary linkages are explored through three key mechanisms: human capital development, knowledge transfer, and the cultivation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

RESULTS

Preliminary results highlight these main elements

Cultural and Goal Mismatches

The most fundamental barrier is the difference in culture and primary goals between academia and the business world, especially for micro-organisations.

- *Differing Time Horizons*
- *Conflicting State funded Incentives:*
- *Language/lexicon and Communication Barriers*
- *Organisational and Structural Barriers*
- *The very structure of HEIs can make collaboration difficult, creating a lack of internal incentives and processes for engaging with external partners.*
- *Bureaucracy*
- *Deep seeded "Silo" Mentality*
- *Financial and Resource Constraints*
- *Both HEIs and micro-organisations often face resource limitations that inhibit collaboration.*
- *Lack of Dedicated Funding for Collaboration*
- *High Cost of Accessing HEIs's Resources*
- *Limited Internal Capacity in Micro-Organizations*
- *A perceived lack of Intermediaries and Support Systems*
- *The absence of dedicated "boundary-spanners" or facilitators can prevent linkages from forming.*
- *Limited Role and adoption of Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs)*
- *Weak or Tribal Networks*

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This research aims to garner a more robust understanding of how Malta can increase the linkages between Higher Learning provision and Innovation. Moreover, it aims to influence innovation evidence-based policies through these four main pillars.

1. Knowledge Creation and Research

It is understood that Higher education institutions (HEIs) are primary drivers of basic and applied research. This research generates new knowledge, theories, and discoveries that form the foundation for technological advancements and innovative solutions.

2. Human Capital Development

Understandably, the task of teaching and developing a competent workforce falls to HEIs. They also need to provide transversal skills, such as critical thinking, analytical, creative, and problem-solving abilities, that are necessary for innovation. By means of specialised courses, experiential education, and multidisciplinary initiatives, HEIs can foster an entrepreneurial spirit and adjust to the changing needs of the labour market. Fostering "acquired diversity" through intercultural encounters and cross-cultural fluency is another aspect of this, as they have been linked to creative ability.

3. Technology Transfer and Commercialisation

HEIs can act as key intermediaries in transferring knowledge from academia to industry and society. This includes:

- Start-ups and Scale-ups: Supporting faculty and students in launching new ventures based on university research. A notable mention is the use of incubators and accelerators to provide resources, mentorship, and funding for these entrepreneurial endeavours.*
- Collaborative Research: Engaging in symbiotic partnerships to address specific industry challenges and facilitate the application of academic research.*

4. Fostering an Entrepreneurial Culture

Beyond formal entrepreneurship programs, HEIs cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset that encourages creativity, risk-taking, resilience and the pursuit of innovative ideas. This involves:

- Curriculum Innovation: Integrating entrepreneurial learning outcomes across various disciplines.*
- Support Systems: Creating forums for discussion, providing mechanisms for high-risk ventures, and empowering individuals to pursue innovative ideas.*
- Interdisciplinary Collaboration or clusters: This involves breaking down silos between academic disciplines to encourage diverse perspectives.*

KEYWORDS

Innovation, Entrepreneurial Culture, Curriculum Innovation, Human Capital Development, Innovation Mindset

Immigrant students and their sense of belonging in the Maltese community through sports activities

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BACKGROUND

In recent decades, Malta has become an increasingly multicultural society. Immigration has doubled the resident population since the mid twentieth century, with newcomers now comprising a significant share of the island's youth. This demographic transformation prompts questions about how young people from diverse backgrounds negotiate belonging in a country known for strong local traditions. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) underscores that individuals derive self esteem and norms from group memberships; therefore, forging connections with peers and institutions is crucial for adolescent immigrants. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory adds that development unfolds within nested contexts family, school, community so experiences in one setting can affect feelings of inclusion more broadly. Sports clubs and school teams represent particularly powerful arenas for integration because they offer shared goals, structured interaction and opportunities to learn the Maltese language in an informal environment. On the pitch or in the pool, youth must collaborate, communicate and support each other, allowing cultural differences to become assets rather than barriers. Local sporting culture also plays a role in supporting a sense of belonging: village feasts and football chants draw on national history. For example, at a 2021 match against Turkey, references to the 1565 Great Siege galvanised fans and players alike, reinforcing national identity and provide a common repertoire for newcomers and locals alike. At the same time, adolescents navigating multiple cultural affiliations may develop hybrid identities that blend ancestral heritage with Maltese norms (Elliott & Mendelson, 2009). Drawing on six semi-structured interviews with first and second generation immigrant adolescents (age 11-16) active in Maltese sports clubs, this qualitative interpretivist study examines how participation in community sport shapes identity work and belonging offering insights for educators, club administrators and policymakers seeking to foster inclusion.

OVERALL AIM

The study aimed to explore the perception and experience of belonging among immigrant adolescents in Malta through sports. The study focuses on three main goals in order to accomplish this. First, it looks into how sports affect immigrant youth's identity and self-perception, especially during the crucial adolescent years.

Second, it examines how participation in sports is used to negotiate national identity, paying particular attention to how adolescents manage their cultural heritage and assimilate into Maltese society. Third, the study looks at how social settings like sports teams and schools can support inclusive behaviours that give people a feeling of community.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The study was expected to uncover that regular involvement in sports would strengthen immigrant youths' self confidence and perceptions of inclusion. Researchers anticipated that belonging to a sports club would either provide social support networks, encourage cultural adaptation and give students a stronger feeling of connection to Malta, or enhance feelings of isolation, discrimination and exclusion. It also expected to identify barriers to inclusion and highlight practices that foster inclusive, supportive environments.

RESULTS

Data from six semi-structured interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to capture recurring patterns in participants' narratives. Three interrelated themes emerged Self, National Identity and Social Environment.

Under Self, sport was portrayed as more than recreation; it offered a platform for self expression, confidence building and personal growth. Several adolescents confessed feeling pressure to modify behaviour, language or appearance to "fit in," yet described sports clubs as spaces where differences could be accepted and where they could experiment with new identities. Participants highlighted how team membership validated their opinions and skills, countering feelings of inferiority sometimes encountered in wider society.

The National Identity theme revealed that speaking Maltese and engaging in local sporting traditions deepened youths' connection to the country. Participants expressed pride when representing Malta, noting that club environments helped them appreciate national symbols and shared histories. Learning the Maltese language reduced feelings of exclusion and enabled them to form friendships with Maltese peers. Sport was seen as a bridge between ancestral cultures and Maltese identity, allowing for the development of hybrid identities.

The Social Environment theme underscored the importance of inclusive practices. Adolescents appreciated coaches who treated all athletes fairly, offered equal playtime and provided emotional support. Diverse teams (mixing Maltese and immigrant students) were viewed positively because they created networks of mutual aid and eased cultural adjustment. Even in competitive settings, participants found that collaboration fostered lasting friendships and mutual respect. Overall, the thematic analysis shows that participation in school and

community sports clubs helps immigrant adolescents navigate identity challenges, learn the host language and build supportive social networks. Inclusive coaching and heterogeneous teams are key to maximising these benefits.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The findings carry practical implications for multiple stakeholders. For educators and school administrators, the study underscores that inclusive sports programmes are not simply extracurricular; they are integral to fostering a sense of belonging and emotional well-being among immigrant adolescents. Schools should therefore prioritise access to a range of sports and invest in culturally responsive coaching. Training teachers and coaches to recognise the challenges of language barriers, cultural adjustment and identity negotiation can help them create environments where every student feels valued. For example, professional development might include workshops on inclusive communication, bias awareness and strategies for ensuring equitable playtime and recognition. Schools can also facilitate peer mentoring schemes that pair newly arrived students with longer-term residents, using sports teams as a vehicle for social connection.

Sports clubs and community organisations play an equally significant role. The research suggests that clubs serve as micro communities where national identity can be negotiated and hybrid identities embraced. Club administrators should strive for diversity in membership and leadership, actively recruiting coaches and volunteers from various cultural backgrounds. Implementing clear codes of conduct that emphasise respect, fairness and inclusion can help prevent discriminatory behaviours and ensure that immigrant youths perceive clubs as safe spaces. Partnerships between clubs and schools could extend opportunities for participation, especially for families who face financial or logistical barriers. Local councils and national sports bodies might offer subsidies or transportation support to ensure equitable access.

At a broader policy level, the study advocates for integrating sports into national strategies for immigrant integration. Policymakers could incorporate sport-based programmes into initiatives that currently focus on language learning or employment. Collaborations between ministries of education, culture and youth can facilitate funding and shared objectives. For example, creating national guidelines on inclusive coaching or establishing accreditation for clubs that meet diversity benchmarks could raise standards across the sector. Moreover, researchers can build on these findings by conducting larger, longitudinal studies to examine how belonging evolves over time and whether results vary across different sports (team vs. individual sports) or gender.

In the longer term, the impacts extend beyond individual well-being. When immigrant youths feel a stronger sense of belonging, they are more likely to engage positively with peers, perform better academically and contribute to community life. Inclusive sports programmes thus have the potential to enhance social cohesion, reduce prejudice and strengthen civic identity across Malta. By highlighting the transformative potential of sports for integration, this research provides evidence-based direction for schools, clubs and policymakers seeking to build a more inclusive society.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant adolescents, social identity, sport, national identity, sense of belonging

Bridging Migration and Security Studies: A Qualitative Analysis of Border Militarisation

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BACKGROUND

Despite the openness of globalisation, the development of cyberspace, and virtual presence, growing evidence points to the strengthening of barriers, including along national borders. One expression of this state of affairs is the phenomenon of border militarisation, manifested through the use of advanced equipment for border surveillance, as well as the traditional use of military and military equipment to deter irregular migration. This concept is currently a key issue in security policy and migration management. However, given its relevance, more and more methodological challenges arise for researchers studying this issue. Analysing border militarisation requires an interdisciplinary perspective that combines migration studies, national and international security, defence studies, sociology, international relations, and political science. Another challenge is the application of qualitative methods, which allow for capturing both the practical and discursive dimensions of this process. This study, therefore, focuses on a methodological reflection on the issue of studying border militarisation from a qualitative perspective. The main goal of the analysis is to demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of qualitative research methods used to study this phenomenon. These include: analysis of political and media discourse, analysis of visual materials, in-depth interviews with migrants, border residents, border guards, and activists. The analysis will also focus on ethical and practical issues related to conducting research on an issue that evokes strong social emotions. The presented study will demonstrate how qualitative methods not only allow for the study of border militarisation but also enable the disclosure of hidden narratives, meanings, and experiences of the actors involved.

OVERALL AIM

The main goal of the analysis is to present the possibilities and limitations of qualitative research methods used to study border militarisation. These methods are analysis of political and media discourse, analysis of visual materials, and in-depth interviews with migrants, border residents, border guards, and activists. The analysis will also focus on ethical and practical issues related to conducting research on an issue that evokes strong social emotions.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

This study aims to demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of border militarisation research. Furthermore, it will demonstrate how qualitative methods not only allow for the study of this phenomenon but also enable the disclosure of hidden narratives, meanings, and experiences of the actors involved.

RESULTS

The proposed study may reveal significant limitations of methodological approaches in studying border militarisation. This stems from, among other things, limited access to the researched groups (e.g., border guards, migrants), the confidentiality of certain information, and the respondents' excessive emotional attachment to the research subject (due to their life circumstances). Furthermore, the phenomenon of border militarisation is highly politicised. Maintaining the researcher's objectivity may therefore pose a challenge. However, studying border militarisation may also provide an opportunity to capture differences in the narratives of individual research groups, media and political discourses, and visual materials. Furthermore, qualitative methods allow for "capturing from the inside" certain factors influencing the securitisation of migration. In this context, important conclusions will be drawn that border militarisation is not solely a security phenomenon but also constitutes a significant social and cultural issue from an analytical perspective.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The study will contribute to broader reflection on the development of qualitative methodology, strengthen interdisciplinary research on borders and migration, and highlight the importance of ethics in the social sciences. Furthermore, it may contribute to increasing public awareness of the phenomenon of the securitisation of migration in media and political debate. The results may also strengthen policymakers' reflection on ethical issues related to migration policy.

KEYWORDS

migration, border militarisation, qualitative methods, media discourse analysis, in-depth interviews

Qualitative Approaches to Understanding Household Financial Decision-Making

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BACKGROUND

Household financial decisions primarily involve the generation of income and its allocation between consumption and savings; decisions related to investing; decisions concerning the use of external sources of financing for household expenditures (debt); and decisions related to risk management within the household. Closely linked to the concept of financial decisions is the category of household financial behaviour, which can be broadly defined as any human action relevant to money management. The issue of household financial decision-making takes on particular importance in the context of today's unstable geopolitical and economic environment. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on households, the war in Ukraine, the decline in purchasing power, and the threat of energy poverty all amplify the risks and uncertainties surrounding household financial management. Traditionally, the process of household financial decision-making has been examined using quantitative models, focusing on measurable variables such as income, savings, credit use, or debt ratios. While these approaches are valuable for identifying patterns at the macro level, they often overlook the complex social, cultural, and psychological dimensions that shape how individuals and families make financial choices. Financial decisions are not purely rational or economically motivated; rather, they are embedded in everyday practices, personal narratives, and contextual constraints. For example, households may prioritise education-related expenses over long-term savings, or avoid formal financial institutions due to mistrust, cultural norms, or past experiences of exclusion. Qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic approaches, provide tools to uncover these subjective perspectives. They allow for a deeper understanding of financial behaviour. Such research reflects a growing recognition in the social sciences and behavioural economics that financial decision-making is multidimensional, shaped not only by economic conditions but also by identity, social relations, and perceived risks. Incorporating qualitative approaches can therefore enrich household finance research, challenge established models, and contribute to more inclusive financial education, policy, and product design.

OVERALL AIM

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive review of existing literature on personal finance and household financial decision-making that employs qualitative research methods. The review seeks to map the field, identify key theoretical and methodological approaches, and highlight the contributions and limitations of qualitative inquiry in understanding financial behaviour.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes include a synthesis of how qualitative methods have been applied in the study of personal finance, identification of recurring themes, and recognition of methodological strengths and weaknesses. The review will also propose directions for future research, emphasising interdisciplinary connections and the potential for integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence in household finance.

RESULTS

The study is currently in progress, and the findings will be presented during the conference. It is expected that the review will reveal the ways in which qualitative approaches uncover hidden aspects of financial decision-making, including emotional influences or perceptions of risk

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This research will contribute to the broader field of economics and finance by addressing a gap in the systematic study of qualitative approaches to personal and household finance. Traditional work in this discipline has relied heavily on rational choice and behavioural models, which provide valuable insights into aggregate patterns of financial behaviour. However, these models often fail to capture the full complexity of everyday financial practices, particularly the ways in which decisions are shaped by social, cultural, and psychological factors. By consolidating qualitative evidence, this review highlights how financial choices are embedded in social contexts and influenced by cultural norms, interpersonal trust, and individual identity, rather than being solely rational or economically determined. Integrating these perspectives into economics and finance deepens our understanding of how households manage resources, perceive risk, and cope with financial challenges. It demonstrates that financial behaviour cannot be fully explained by quantitative indicators such as income, credit scores, or debt ratios alone. Instead, qualitative analyses uncover the underlying drivers of these patterns: why some households avoid formal banking services, how families negotiate competing financial priorities, and how individuals experience exclusion from financial systems. Recognising these dimensions can inform the design of

more inclusive financial products, targeted educational initiatives, and policies that reflect the realities of diverse households. In addition, this review will advance methodological development in the field. By critically examining the use of qualitative approaches—such as in-depth interviews, case studies, focus groups, and ethnographic methods—in personal finance research, it will identify strengths, limitations, and emerging best practices. This assessment will provide guidance for future studies and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among economists, sociologists, and policymakers. Ultimately, this project bridges abstract theoretical models with lived household experiences, enriching both academic debates and practical applications in economics and finance. By placing human experience at the centre of financial analysis, it contributes to a more comprehensive, inclusive, and resilient understanding of household decision-making.

KEYWORDS

Household finance; Qualitative research; Literature review; Financial decision-making; Personal finance

Enablers and Challenges faced by Female Entrepreneurs of Small Businesses in Malta. A Grounded Theory Study.

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BACKGROUND

In recent years, the role of female entrepreneurs in Malta has gained significant attention. It is considered as a vital component of economic and social progress. In Malta, a small island nation, characterised by its unique cultural and economic landscape, female entrepreneurship in small businesses presents opportunities and challenges.

Despite the growing recognition of women's contributions to the business sector, female entrepreneurs often face distinct barriers that can hinder their success. This research study seeks to explore the factors that facilitate and hinder the success of female entrepreneurs operating small businesses in Malta. The primary objective of this grounded theory study is to identify and assess the enablers and challenges.

OVERALL AIM

This research study aims to determine the enablers and challenges encountered by female entrepreneurs of small businesses in Malta, a small island state. The main aim of this grounded theory study is to identify and evaluate the enablers and challenges. The outcome of this study addresses the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, relating to poverty, quality education and gender equality, focusing on female entrepreneurs.

Grounded Theory is the methodological stance adopted by the researcher for this research study. Grounded Theory consists of a series of systematic and iterative steps for sampling, data collection and analysis, coding, creating a coding schema, memoing and reflexivity. This process leads to the construction of an initial conceptual model.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

This study was based on the participation of twenty female entrepreneurs in Malta. The researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews to be able to elicit rich insights from the participants on the research area. The researcher conducted a four-stage coding process using the qualitative software MAXQDA. Constant comparison of data was implemented throughout the data analysis. Constructs were placed in a hierarchical structure using Corbin and Strauss's Conditional Matrix coding paradigm, encompassing Contextual Conditions, Actions/Reactions and Consequences/Outcomes.

RESULTS

Preliminary results show that enablers and challenges of female entrepreneurship may vary from business-related matters, and financial challenges to personal and family-related issues. The personal characteristics of ambition, determination and perseverance are crucial for success. Exposure to business and enterprise education plays an important role for the entrepreneur to augment organisational performance. Knowledge of IT skills and eagerness to learn about accounting software programmes, use of digital marketing and having an entrepreneurial mindset are effective contributors to success stories.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The conclusions of this research study highlight the importance of a strong character, resilience, perseverance, and soft skills for female entrepreneurs of small businesses. Emphasis is placed on the importance of business and enterprise education to be incorporated from early stages of schooling, the need for different educational programmes and forms of support required to overcome the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs of small businesses. Such educational programmes include business and enterprise education, IT skills and digital marketing.

KEYWORDS

Female entrepreneurship, small island state, grounded theory, enablers and challenges.

Challenges and Barriers Faced by Leaders within Small Family-Owned Businesses in a Small Island State: A Grounded Theory Approach

Mary Rose Mifsud

BACKGROUND

The primary aim of this study is to identify the challenges and barriers faced by leaders who lead with different leadership styles, within small family-owned businesses in a small island state. This study uses a grounded theory approach. Leadership plays a crucial role in organisational domains. Various leadership styles have been studied and explored across different contexts to determine the most effective approaches for organisational success. Effective leaders are often found to be self-aware, reflective and insightful, and able to understand the qualities required for constructive leadership. The latter qualities are particularly important for small companies, where the choice of leadership style can significantly impact business growth.

OVERALL AIM

The aim of adopting a Grounded theory approach is to identify the hindrances and benefits that arise within the environment of a family-owned business regarding leadership, following an iterative process of data collection and analysis. This study utilises this qualitative approach, conducting twelve open-ended interviews with professional leaders. The data collected during these interviews were analysed by using MAXQDA software. Coding and memoing, contributing to the reflexive process, were utilised to analyse the main findings.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The findings revealed that leaders in these businesses face challenges related to navigating modern versus traditional mindsets, decision-making in uncertain situations, resistance to change, managing conflicting interests among leaders, and dealing with high expectations from the founding members or previous generation.

RESULTS

Results indicated that leaders need to be included in decision-making processes, especially when changes or forward-looking strategies are planned, to prevent miscommunication and misplaced blame.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

Results of this study include recommendations that will aid to sustain the existing practices and to raise awareness for effective leadership within the business to succeed, particularly in a small island state.

KEYWORDS

Small businesses, Family firms, grounded theory, leadership

AI in Small Organizations Core Value Chain Alignment: Guiding Artificial Intelligence Towards Human and Organizational Goals

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BACKGROUND

Technology development is traditionally a key support activity in small organisations. However, the latest developments in artificial intelligence (AI) is potentially an evolution of technology within an organisation's primary activities as detailed in Porter's value chain. To date, such integration often remains fragmented, leading to tensions between human behaviour, organisational knowledge, and technical systems. AI's capacity to shape operations, behaviours, and organisational practices introduces both opportunities for efficiency and risks of manipulation, control, and misinformation. Understanding how organisations navigate these dynamics across different stages of their lifecycle is crucial for aligning AI with human and organisational goals.

OVERALL AIM

This study aims to develop a grounded theory model that captures the lifecycle states of small organisations as they integrate AI, focusing on the interplay between human behaviour, organisational knowledge, and technical/ethical considerations. The goal is to provide a conceptual framework for guiding productive and responsible AI adoption.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The research is expected to yield a taxonomy of AI usage tiers (basic, intermediate, advanced) and a consolidated coding schema that highlights how human behaviour, organisational structures, and technical design converge. These outcomes will contribute to a theory of alignment between AI capabilities and organisational value chains.

RESULTS

Through a process of constant comparison, memoing and method triangulation, the study consolidated hundreds of data segments into higher-order categories from 26 cases. The emergent model identifies latent behavioural patterns, organisational alignment scores, and ethical/technical dynamics across lifecycle states. Findings reveal that organisations at intermediate AI usage levels show stronger knowledge engagement and the importance of AI education, while basic users emphasise experts' knowledge, human control and trust. The more advanced

users increasingly elaborate on the systemic integration of AI into decision-making and creativity aspects.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The proposed model offers a novel lens for both researchers and practitioners to understand the socio-technical integration of AI in small organisations. By mapping alignment across lifecycle states, the framework supports more ethical, effective, and sustainable adoption of AI, helping organisations maximise benefits while mitigating risks of manipulation, misinformation, and loss of human agency.

KEYWORDS

Artificial Intelligence, Small Organisations, Grounded Theory, Organisational Theory

Exploring Strategy, Logistical Processes, and Access to Medicines in Malta's Public Sector Pharmaceutical Distribution: A Grounded Theory Study

Bernardette Scerri Rossi

BACKGROUND

Access to medicines is a foundation of the right to health, yet public health systems face persistent challenges in ensuring timely, equitable, and sustainable access. In Malta, a small island state highly dependent on imports, the pharmaceutical supply chain is shaped by logistical limitations, regulatory frameworks, and procurement policies. While larger countries' systems have been studied extensively, little research has examined how small states navigate pharmaceutical distribution. This study applies a constructivist grounded theory methodology to investigate Malta's public sector supply chain, focusing on the interplay between policy, procurement, pricing, and access.

OVERALL AIM

The study aims to explore the strategic and logistical processes that influence access to medicines in Malta's public healthcare system. By applying grounded theory methodology, the research seeks to generate a framework that captures the complex patterns, stakeholder interactions, and systemic barriers shaping the delivery of free medicines to entitled patients.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The study is expected to generate a theoretical model that shows how contextual factors, such as formulary governance, pricing policies, and regulatory frameworks, interact with actions and reactions, including procurement decisions and stakeholder collaboration. It will also capture the resulting consequences, such as inequities, delays, and budgetary pressures. By mapping these inter-relationships, the model will identify important leverage points where targeted reforms and strengthened collaboration can enhance the sustainability, equity, and resilience of Malta's pharmaceutical supply chain.

RESULTS

Five in-depth interviews with procurement and policy stakeholders were coded and analysed using MAXQDA. Six core concepts emerged: (i) governance of formulary inclusion and maintenance; (ii) pharmaceutical pricing and budget allocation; (iii) medicine procurement systems; (iv) patient treatment availability; (v) regulatory and legal frameworks; and (vi) cross-organisational collaboration. Findings

revealed systemic inefficiencies in health technology assessment (HTA) processes, reliance on outdated pricing mechanisms, procurement rigidities, inequitable entitlement models, and fragmented interdepartmental collaboration. These issues collectively compromise timely access to essential medicines and the sustainability of Malta's 100% public reimbursement model.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The study contributes original insights into pharmaceutical distribution in small state health systems. By offering a grounded theory of Malta's supply chain dynamics, it provides policymakers, regulators, and procurement authorities with a conceptual framework for reform. The findings underline the urgency of integrated policy planning, strengthened pharmacoeconomic expertise, and more flexible procurement models. Beyond Malta, the research offers valuable lessons for other small or resource-constrained health systems striving to balance cost, equity, and sustainability in access to medicines.

KEYWORDS

Pharmaceutical Supply Chain; Access to Medicines; Public Procurement; Grounded Theory Methodology; Pharmaceutical Policy

Environmental aspects of ESG reporting and corporate financial performance – a systematic literature review

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BACKGROUND

In recent decades, the European Union has set a new direction for the development of member state economies, placing significant emphasis on climate and environmental issues. The new CSRD Directive, in force since 2024, imposes new reporting obligations on companies, including non-financial reporting (Environment, Social, Governance, ESG), in which financial information on corporate performance is integrated with non-financial disclosures. Within the "E" dimension, companies present initiatives that demonstrate their commitment to pro-environmental actions. These activities are assumed to result not only in an improved corporate image but also in increased operational efficiency, greater innovation, and resource savings. This raises the question of the financial implications of corporate engagement in environmental initiatives and their impact on financial performance in both the short and long term. Another important issue is the obligation to report EU Taxonomy alignment indicators (turnover, CAPEX, OPEX). These indicators allow stakeholders to assess the extent to which revenues, capital expenditures, and operating expenses align with the environmental criteria set by the European Union and the principles of sustainable development. Comparing environmental indicators with financial ones (e.g., operating margin, profitability, financial liquidity) also makes it possible to evaluate whether investing in "green technologies" affects the economic efficiency of companies. Existing research results remain inconclusive, which justifies conducting a systematic literature review to consolidate current knowledge and identify research gaps.

OVERALL AIM

The main objective of this study is to conduct a systematic literature review on the impact of environmental aspects of ESG reporting on corporate financial performance. The study aims to analyse the consistency and divergence of empirical findings, identify dominant theoretical approaches, and evaluate the methodologies applied in examining this relationship. It also seeks to highlight research gaps and emerging trends in the literature, as well as to assess the significance of transparency in environmental disclosures for investors and other stakeholders. In this way, the study will enable the formulation of both theoretical

and practical conclusions, relevant to academic research and economic practice alike.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

A systematic literature analysis will make it possible to determine whether research findings confirm the existence of a relationship between environmental performance and the financial performance of companies operating in different countries and across various sectors of the economy. The analysis will also indicate whether this relationship is positive or negative and, if such a link has been empirically demonstrated, identify the key factors that have had a decisive influence on the outcome.

RESULTS

Preliminary research findings suggest a positive relationship between corporate environmental activities and financial performance, particularly in terms of reducing the cost of capital, increasing profitability, and enhancing market value. At the same time, studies show that regulations on mandatory ESG reporting and compliance with the EU Taxonomy foster greater transparency, improve the quality of reported data, and trigger transformative processes within companies. However, the results vary across sectors and regions, and some analyses point to neutral or even negative relationships, especially in the case of companies incurring high environmental investment costs or demonstrating weak performance in pollution reduction.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

This research may contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between environmental aspects of ESG reporting and corporate financial performance. In particular, it will provide important arguments in the ongoing debate on the role of environmental disclosures in shaping strategic and investment decisions. In the environmental dimension, the analysis will offer insights into how green investments affect pollution reduction, the limitation of natural resource consumption, and improvements in energy efficiency. The findings will also indicate the extent to which pro-environmental actions foster corporate innovation, for example through the implementation of new technologies, and how they contribute to lowering operational costs in the long term. Identifying such effects will help assess whether ecological investments should be viewed merely as regulatory costs or rather as a source of competitive advantage. In the economic and financial dimension, the research will make it possible to determine whether, and to what extent, pro-environmental activities translate into improved profitability, reduced cost of capital, and increased market

value of companies. The analysis may demonstrate that ESG reporting transparency reduces information asymmetry between companies and investors, thereby leading to more efficient market valuation and more stable access to financing. An expected outcome of the study is also to contribute to the theory of sustainable finance by identifying mechanisms that link environmental initiatives with economic performance. The literature review will allow for the identification of positive, neutral, and negative relationships, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of this complex interrelation. From a practical perspective, the results may support managers in making decisions about capital allocation to pro-environmental projects and serve as a valuable source of knowledge for investors, regulators, and policymakers. Identifying which strategies and reporting practices enhance economic performance may contribute to formulating recommendations for regulatory policy and support the development of future reporting standards. This, in turn, may strengthen the integration of sustainability considerations into both corporate strategies and financial market practices, fostering long-term value creation for businesses and society.

KEYWORDS

reporting, ESG, environment, corporate finance, financial markets

Sustainable development and energy efficiency in real estate valuation methodology according to the new European Valuation Standards

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BACKGROUND

Sustainability, and the wide range of issues it encompasses, is becoming increasingly important in the work of property valuers. This is driven by economic pressures, ongoing climate change, resilience issues, resource and supply chain challenges, and reputational concerns. Regulations and market sentiment are making energy efficiency and sustainability increasingly important for property owners, investors, lenders, and users. These issues are evolving alongside evolving scientific knowledge, public policy experience, and the growing emphasis on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation means reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, in line with the Paris Agreement, which in the EU is implemented through, among other initiatives, the European Green Deal. Adaptation involves building resilience to the impacts of climate change—floods, wildfires, etc.—as well as protecting nature and biodiversity.

OVERALL AIM

The main objective of this study is to critically analyse the changes in real estate valuation methodology proposed in the European Valuation Standards 2025 in the context of energy efficiency and sustainable development requirements resulting from EU documents, including: Directive (EU) 2024/1275 of 24 April 2024 on the energy performance of buildings; Directive (EU) 2023/1791 of 13 September 2023 on energy efficiency.

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The author intends that the result of the conducted analyses will be to indicate which of the proposed solutions in the field of real estate valuation in the Polish legal and market realities will be possible (realistic) to apply and which of them will encounter difficulties of an objective nature (independent of the property appraiser).

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The analyses carried out as part of the work will constitute a starting point for developing national solutions aimed at adapting national professional standards to European requirements.

KEYWORDS

real estate valuation, valuation approaches, green buildings, Green leases, energy efficiency

The importance of financial instruments supporting academic research and innovative entrepreneurship (ARIE) in creating Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) policies aimed at innovation in European Union countries

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BACKGROUND

Academic entrepreneurship is presented as a system of support for newly established enterprises based on the know-how of people involved in scientific research (researchers, students, and university graduates). Its basic feature is innovation and the place where it originates, which also distinguishes specific innovators. Innovation is a new or improved product or process (or a combination thereof) that differs significantly from previous products or processes of a given entity and that has been made available to potential users (product) or put into use by the entity (process). Academic entrepreneurship, due to its reliance on the intellectual capital of research centres and its particular importance for economic development, should be supported. Based on academic structures, including access to research infrastructure, a network of contacts with business representatives and the institutional environment, it is relatively easy to carry out inventive processes and build relationships with the economy in terms of identifying market needs and the expectations of potential investors. The ecosystem in the area of academic entrepreneurship, including technology parks, business incubators, and technology transfer centres, as well as academic career offices, fosters the creation of an integrated innovation support system. From the point of view of the functioning of universities, academic entrepreneurship strengthens the third mission, which refers to cooperation with the environment. The Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) policy plays a very important role in the development of academic entrepreneurship. It comprises a set of measures and instruments within the strategy of the government or institutions aimed at supporting scientific development, implementing new technologies, and creating and commercialising innovations in order to strengthen the country's economic competitiveness and social development. These measures include, among other things, promoting scientific research and creating a favourable legal and financial framework for innovation.

OVERALL AIM

The main objective of the research is to identify financial support instruments within the STI policy in European Union countries and to demonstrate their

importance in comparison with other instruments (collaboration, open access, human capital, commercialization). The research is based on data contained in The EC-OECD STIP Compass database. It collects together in one place qualitative and quantitative data on national trends in science, technology and innovation (STI) policy. This database is based on the survey and includes 5,521 different policy initiatives and 7,298 different policy instruments, covering 61 countries (including all OECD countries).

MAIN EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Based on a regression model in which the dependent variable will be a country's innovation measured by the number of patents, and the explanatory variables will be categories of instruments assigned to: "Collaboration," "Open access," "Human capital," "Commercialization," and "Financing." On this basis, the significance of the explanatory variables' impact on the explained variable and its specificity will be determined. The correlation between the variables will also be examined.

RESULTS

The expected results of the research suggest that financial support instruments play a key role in fostering innovation in countries. Countries with lower levels of public funding for research create incentives for joint industry-academia patents.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The development of academic entrepreneurship benefits the economy both nationally and globally, particularly in terms of increasing innovation and, consequently, competitiveness. It should be the foundation for cooperation between the science sector and the economy, and the basis for national and European policies in this area, and thus a pillar. As a result, in addition to newly created enterprises, jobs are created, and the quality and productivity of work are improved. Academic entrepreneurship is a kind of bridge between science and the economy, enabling the transfer of knowledge to business, and should be a pillar of building a knowledge-based economy. The results of research indicate the significant importance of creating strategies to support STI at the national level in order to create conditions for the development of innovation. It is becoming crucial in linking scientific research with innovative entrepreneurship. Research in this area will enable the formulation of recommendations for STI policy in EU countries. It will be particularly valuable to evaluate instruments in countries where economic innovation is highest in order to identify effective STI policy instruments. To date, little research has been conducted in this area. The development of research and innovation is the foundation of economic development. This is important from the perspective of both the European Union and national economies. The analysis will

also provide information on changes in the impact of existing instruments. The analysis will be cross-sectional in nature. It will enable comparisons between countries. The research methodology was appropriately adapted to the objectives of the study, and the data source provides a basis for conducting objective analyses relating to the proposed spatial and subject scope. The data in The EC-OECD STIP Compass database is updated every two years. Data are collected under the auspices of the OECD Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy (CSTP) and the European Union's European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC). The planned analysis will also allow for the assessment of changes in STI policy in countries with growing innovation. This will enable the identification of recommendations for effective measures in the area of national policies to support innovation. The research will also confirm the contributions of universities to innovative entrepreneurship.

KEYWORDS

academic research and innovative entrepreneurship (ARIE), STI policy, financing

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