

# Prospective Implications of Increasing Foreign Player Quota in Top Tier Maltese Football: A Case Study



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## Problem Statement

In recent years, the phenomenon of labour migration has been a prevalent sport research topic (Özmen, 2019). This is particularly apparent in football, described by Royuela & Gásquez (2019, p.718) as the, “most globalized sport in the world”. This study builds on this research area, as it aims at analysing how foreign influx impacts a small footballing nation like Malta. Presently, the main stakeholders of Maltese football are contemplating the possibility of increasing the foreign quota in Malta’s top tier league, from the current limit of seven (already among the softest in Europe), to nine in upcoming seasons. Currently, there seems to be two main diverging fronts vis-à-vis this development: those in favour represented by top tier clubs, and the players’ union which is largely against.

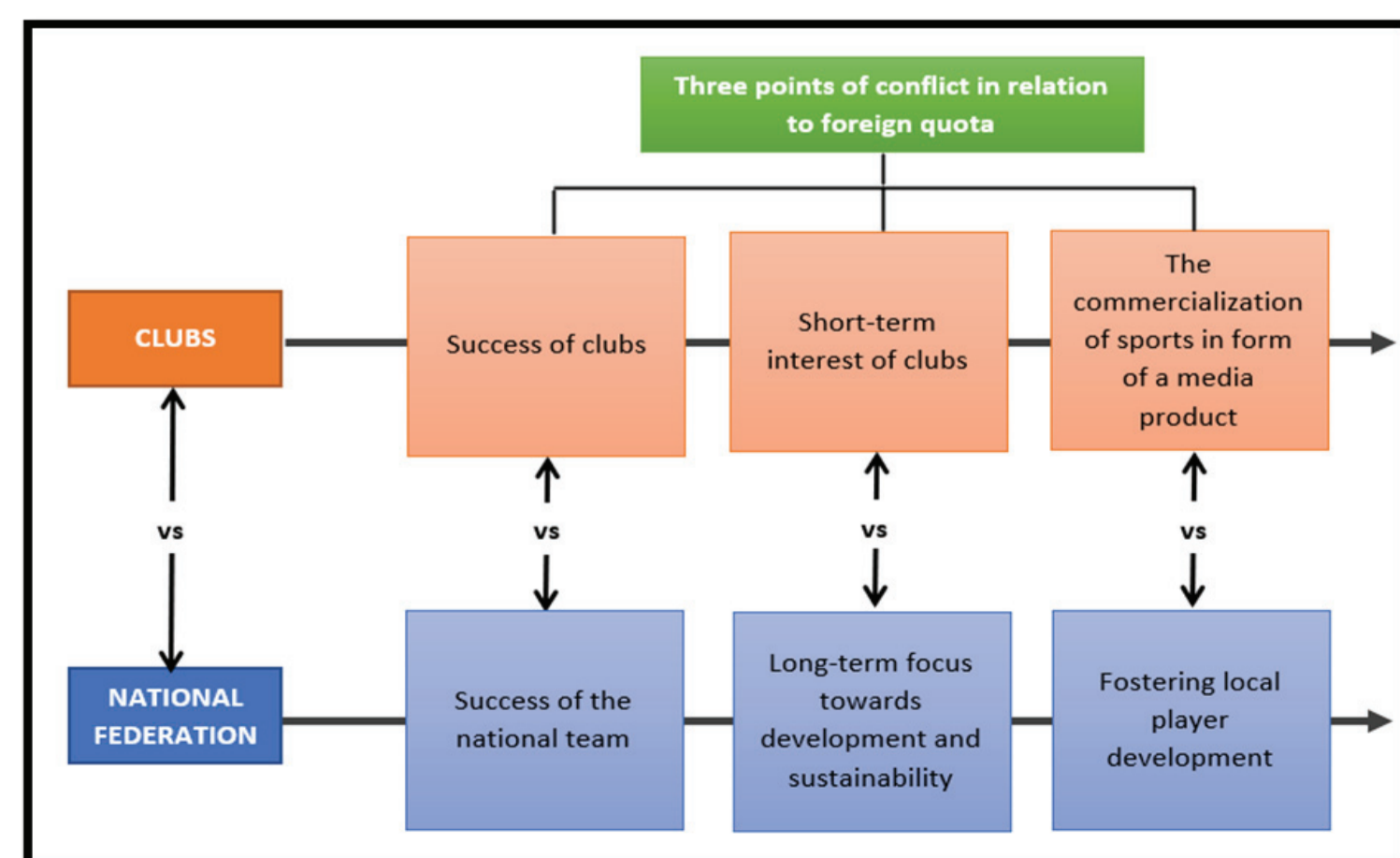
## Research Approach

The research paradigm chosen to investigate the attitudes around this quota increase, consisted of a *concurrent mixed-method approach*, comprising five interviews with *experts*, and a web-based survey (N=436). To give equal prominence to both the quantitative and qualitative datasets, a *concurrent triangulation design*, aimed at integrating the results obtained from both datasets, was sustained even during data analysis.

## Project Overview

This exploratory case study focused on the Maltese men’s football Premier League. The proposed foreign quota increase resulted into general scepticism, particularly because Malta was highlighted by UEFA as, “the only country where both the number of domestic players in the top league is decreasing and the number of national team players playing abroad is falling” (MFA, 2019, p.75). Maguire’s (2011) theoretical framework based on three points of conflict between clubs and national federations, with regards to prioritising winning and commercialisation over player development, was used as a basis for the study. Themes emerging from the qualitative dataset were discussed through *template analysis*. Quantitative analysis involved a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics to test a series of hypotheses, using the respondents’ role in local football as the independent variable. The findings indicated general scepticism among the local football community towards any positive effects resulting from a foreign quota increase, with ‘parents/guardians’ the category least supportive of a prospective increase. ‘Experts’ indicated that the foreign quota should not be viewed in isolation, but as one of a set of important decisions needed to overcome several perennial problems of Maltese football. Most respondents considered Maltese players to be at a disadvantage vis-à-vis foreigners, with a majority also considering that foreign influx has had a positive spillover on the level of local players. Moreover, it is unlikely that a quota increase would improve the league’s competitive balance or attract more fans at stadia. In line with the literature reviewed, findings indicated that the identification of a roadmap that satisfies all stakeholders is unlikely. Nonetheless, it is necessary for clubs and the national federation to work synergistically in developing a long-term project which safeguards the development path of local players. This can be done through incentives related to ‘club-homegrown players’ and productive academies, national investment in sport and limits on non-EU players, among others.

## Theoretical Framework for the Study (Maguire, 2011)



## Methodology

### Data Collection

- **‘Concurrent Mixed Method Approach’** (Creamer, 2018).
- Five interviews with ‘experts’ (**heterogeneous maximum variation sampling**):
  - National Governing Body Official.
  - Players’ Union Official.
  - Club Administrator.
  - Experienced Senior Coach.
  - Experienced Youth Coach.
- Web-Based Questionnaire (N=436, **convenience sampling**).
  - Basic demographic questions.
  - Thirteen closed questions (Likert scale).

### Data Analysis

- **‘Concurrent Triangulation Design’** (Creamer, 2018).
- Qualitative Dataset
  - **‘Template Analysis’** (Saunders et al., 2019).
- Quantitative Dataset (Analysis Using *RStudio*)
  - Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test.
- **Descriptive Statistics** (Median, Inter Quartile Range).
- **Inferential Statistics** (non-parametric testing) to test a series of hypotheses
  - ‘Kruskal Wallis’
  - ‘Dunn Multiple Comparison Test with Bonferroni Adjustment’.

## Research Variables

### Independent Variable

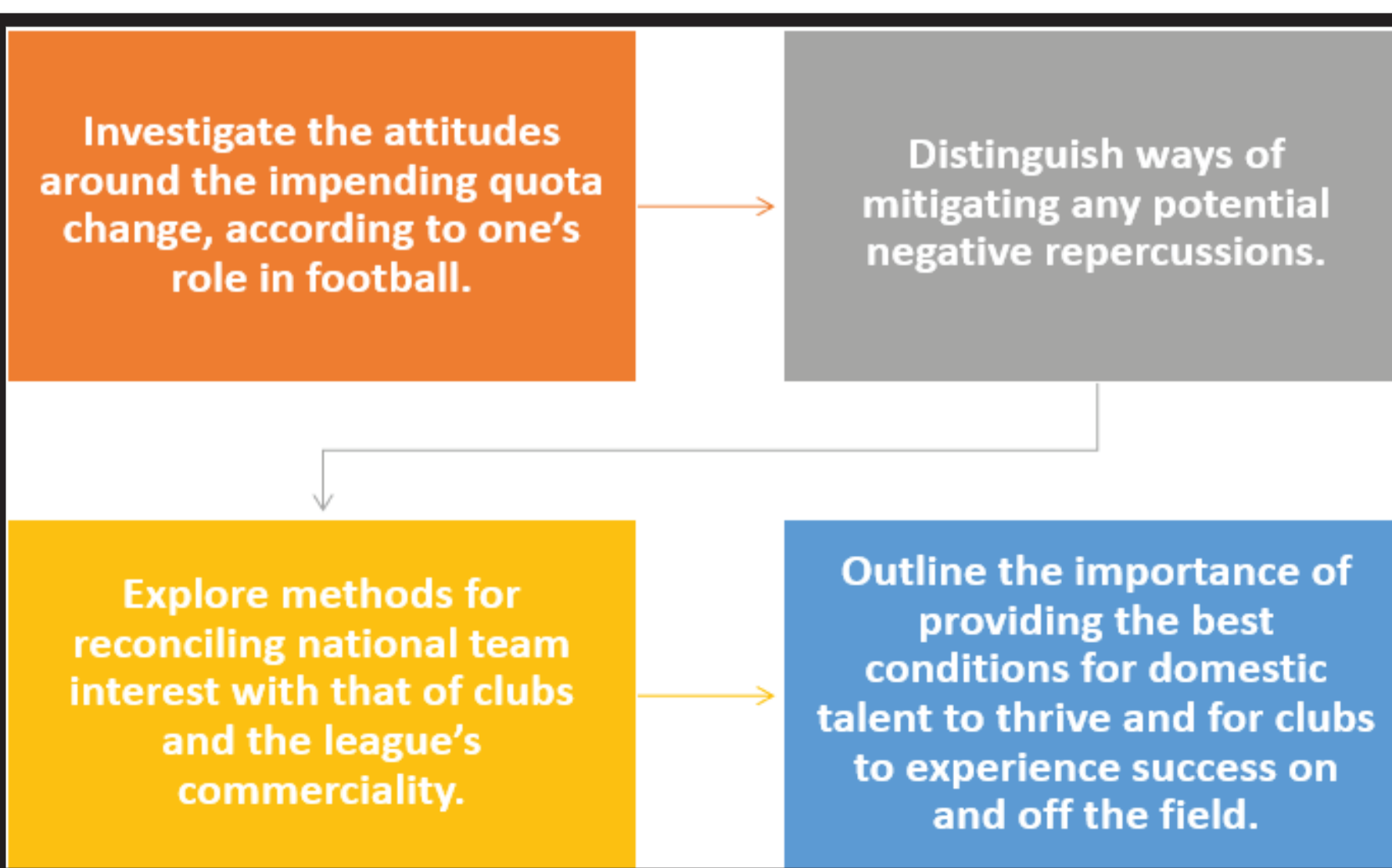
The respondents’ role in local football

### Dependent Variables

Survey questions focusing on:

- The opinion on the foreign quota increase.
- The context around Maltese football.
- Success of clubs versus success of national team.
- Short-term interest of clubs versus long-term focus of federations.
- Commercialisation versus fostering local player development.

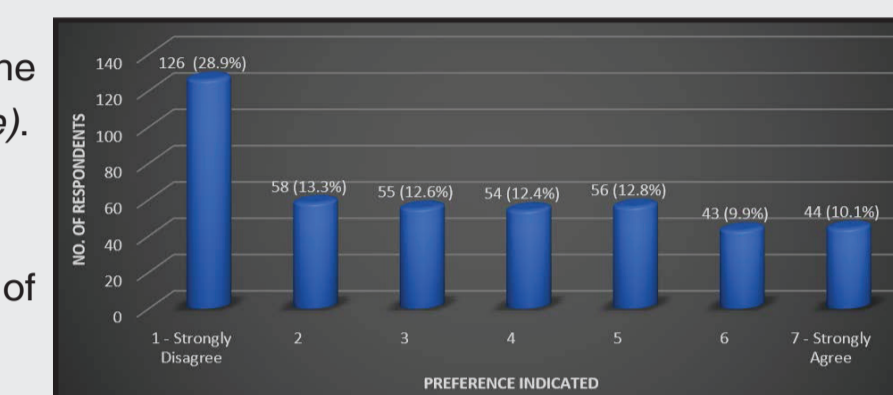
## Research Objectives



## Main Findings

### Foreign Quota – Positively or Negatively Perceived?

- **Qualitative Dataset**
  - None of the interviewees agreed completely with the proposed increase.
  - Any increase should be linked to a clear strategy on how to improve youth football.
- **Quantitative Dataset**
  - General disagreement towards the increase (*refer to adjacent figure*).
  - One major statistical difference ( $p < 0.05$ ), that related to *parents* being significantly less in favour of the foreign quota increase than *senior coaches* ( $p = .016$ ).
- **General scepticism** among the local football community towards any positive effects resulting from a foreign quota increase.
- **Need for a holistic strategy** that caters for the priorities of both the national federation and clubs.
- Decision should **not be taken in isolation**.
- Linking the development to improvements in youth football, particularly the importance of ensuring that **local talent is safeguarded**.
- General belief that **locals are disadvantaged** vis-à-vis foreigners.
- **Top tier clubs seem to be more reluctant** to field Maltese youth players.
- Unlikely that a foreign quota increase would improve the **league’s competitive balance or improve the league’s attractiveness**.
- Sense of **inevitability** towards the foreign quota increase, due to:
  - the **perennial struggles** of Maltese football (short-term management style, monopsony of clubs)
  - **current developments** which shall limit further the pool of local players (Lega-Pro development, increase in Premier League teams).
- **‘Salary/transfer capping’** was not signalled by participants in this study. This is surprising considering the clubs’ limitations and this being a recurrent theme in the literature reviewed (Gardiner & Welch, 2016).



## Main Recommendations

- **Limiting the number of foreigners** which can be registered by each team per season.
- Limiting the number of **non-EU players**.
- The introduction of the **‘club-homegrown’** rule. Eventually this can be developed further by specifying number of U21s/U23s in matchday squads.
- Re-introduction of a **‘Reserves/U21s’** league for Premier League clubs.
- **Reducing MPL teams** to eight, including rigorous licensing requirements related to level of coaching, infrastructure, financial/administrative parameters.
- **Government support** for clubs to reduce liability for Maltese players when becoming professionals, in the form of grants, educational programmes, work-sport friendly schemes and assistance for talented youths.
- Improved club **incentives** that truly solicit the use of homegrown players at senior level.
- A reform in nursery structures which pursues a **collaborative environment between MFA and clubs**, avoiding circumstances where the two compete for the same resources.

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