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THINK

IDEAS • MALTA • RESEARCH • PEOPLE • UNIVERSITY



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FREE



CELEBRATING
15
YEARS

What will you
THINK of next?



editorial

Manner

Before transforming into a butterfly, a caterpillar must first dissolve itself almost entirely. After a lifetime of eating and growing up to a hundred times its original size, the caterpillar brings its reality to a sudden halt within the hardened chrysalis. Through a surge of enzymes, its entire form melts away, leaving behind a protein-rich liquid for the cells of its new body to digest.

A few short weeks later, it emerges reborn.

Metamorphosis is rarely a peaceful process of growth. In biology, it requires a radical structural overhaul, breaking down a form that once functioned so well to build something entirely new. Butterflies remind us that we are not passive observers of a changing world. By shifting our manner – the way we think – we fundamentally alter how we interact with the world, creating room for new realities to exist.

Issue 50 embodies the heart of metamorphosis, or the experience of being just on the cusp of change itself.

The University of Malta is undergoing a deliberate transition, questioning the very structures and traditions that made us. We are asking: Which alternative proteins would we try, and where does our appetite draw the line? What happens when we design workplaces around diverse abilities, rather than forcing humans to adapt? What truths do we miss by filtering the future entirely through adult eyes? How is Malta's changing skyline affecting our collective identity? How can food education alter what teens eat? What effect do science lessons have on the older generation – do they change how we age?

Do not just watch the world change. Become an agent of your own transformation. **THINK.**

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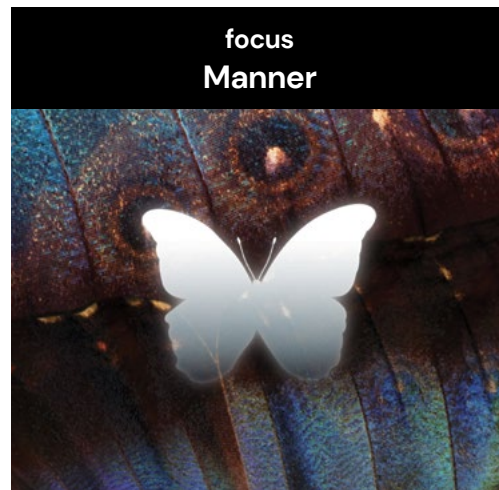


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Proof that borders blur when you share the same sea



focus
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A tiny butterfly flapping its wings today may lead to a devastating hurricane weeks from now. Even the smallest decision can shape the future. Your story is just one of many possible outcomes.

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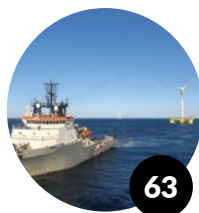
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THINK

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**L-Università
ta' Malta**

Sundried, Slow-cooked and... Sustainable?

Testing the Mediterranean Appetite for Alternative Proteins

Authors: Annah Mallia
and Dr Petra Jones

Food neophobia is the clinical reluctance to eat novel or unknown foods. In a Mediterranean context, where culinary heritage is a source of pride, this biological 'safety' mechanism can become a significant barrier to environmental sustainability.

Traditional diets are the bedrock of Mediterranean identity, but as global food systems reach a breaking point, a new menu is emerging. From familiar plant-based staples to the frontiers of lab-grown meat, a study from the University of Malta's Department of Food Science, Nutrition and Dietetics explores whether local consumers are ready to embrace a more sustainable plate, or if ingrained tradition, safety fears, and the 'ick factor' remain unbreakable barriers.

TRADITION IN TRANSITION

On a typical Mediterranean table, grilled fish, slow-cooked meat, and aged cheeses are more than food – they are tradition. But behind these familiar dishes lies a growing question: can the way we eat today sustain the world of tomorrow? By 2050, the global food system must feed 10 billion people while responding to climate change and environmental degradation. Traditional livestock farming places heavy pressure on land and water. If current consumption patterns continue, the strain on both planetary and human health will intensify.

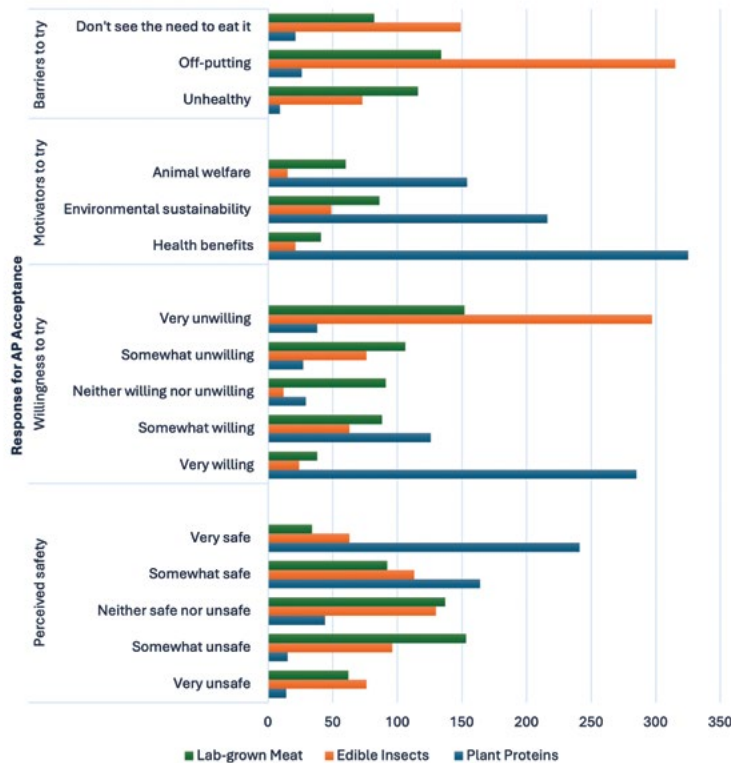
Alternative proteins (APs) offer a solution. These sustainable substitutes, ranging from plant-based proteins to cultured (lab-grown) meat and edible insects, are moving from niche markets into mainstream Mediterranean diets as consumers seek to reduce meat intake. To understand how Maltese consumers perceive these sources, a study led by Annah Mallia under the supervision of Dr Petra Jones surveyed 479 adults. The study used an online panel survey with a structured questionnaire adapted from a 2022 Food Standards Agency (FSA)-commissioned study. It included demographic questions and assessed participants' knowledge, perceptions, willingness, concerns, and motivations regarding three APs. The data were presented visually in tables, similar to Table 1, then organised in Excel and imported into SPSS for analysis. Chi-squared tests were used to examine relationships between demographic factors and perceptions of alternative proteins, including knowledge, safety, and willingness. The cohort, predominantly female

and health-literate, provides a unique window into the demographic most likely to drive dietary change.

The results reveal a clear hierarchy of acceptance. Plant-based proteins were viewed as the safest and most preferred option, with 50.3% of participants rating them highly, compared to only 7.1% for lab-grown meat. Safety perceptions closely mirrored willingness to try. While health benefits motivated plant protein choices, environmental sustainability and animal welfare drove



Annah Mallia
Photo by James Moffett



Transforming food systems requires more than technological advancement; it requires cultural adaptation.

Table 1: Participants' responses on acceptance of APs on lab-grown meat, edible insects, and plant proteins

interest in cultured meat. Insects primarily attracted curiosity due to novelty rather than perceived necessity.

THE BARRIER OF EMOTION

However, perceived benefits alone do not eliminate hesitation. Interestingly, despite high levels of health literacy among participants, knowledge did not override emotion. Even for those well-versed in nutrition and sustainability, barriers to acceptance differed markedly between products.



Dr Petra Jones
Photo by James Moffett

Disgust and unfamiliarity played a substantial role in the rejection of edible insects, a clear manifestation of food neophobia, the psychological reluctance to eat novel or 'alien' foods. This visceral reaction proved highly resilient; even when presented with incentives or safety assurances, more than half of the respondents stated that nothing would convince them to try edible insects.

Cultured meat faced its own hurdles, with nearly half of the participants describing it as 'off-putting'. This reflects a deep-seated discomfort with the production process itself, suggesting that for a health-literate audience, the 'naturalness' of food remains a non-negotiable value.

THE TRUST GAP

Regulatory uncertainty also fuelled mistrust. The fact that around 11% of health-conscious respondents expressed concerns regarding insect safety regulations, while 28% questioned oversight of cultured meat, is particularly telling. When consumers lack clarity about legal frameworks and safety assessments, scepticism

naturally increases. Transparent communication and clearer regulatory guidelines could therefore play a pivotal role in building confidence. For an informed public, knowing *how* a product is monitored is often as important as knowing *what* is in it.

FROM FRICTION TO FLOW

For Mediterranean societies, the transition must be handled thoughtfully. Positioning plant-based options within familiar dishes may be more effective than radical dietary shifts. Cultured meat requires transparent communication about its production, whereas insects may require processed forms that reduce visual disgust cues. APs are not a replacement for tradition, nor are they a universal solution; rather, they are an additional tool for sustainability. Ultimately, transforming food systems requires more than technological advancement – it requires cultural adaptation. Whether APs become a Mediterranean staple will depend on our ability to move beyond 'the ick factor' and build a bridge of trust between the laboratory and the kitchen table. **T**

Learning to Govern the Ground

Author: **Timothy Alden**

*A new student-worker scheme between the **Lands Authority** and the University of Malta offers a structured entry point into one of the country's most complex administrative systems, combining legal, economic, and environmental perspectives on land. Aside from offering potential career opportunities at the Lands Authority, student trainees are equipped with multidisciplinary knowledge that ensures the course has something to offer everyone.*

Land in Malta is never just land. It carries legal title, economic value, planning restrictions, and environmental constraints, often layered into the same parcel. The institution responsible for navigating that complexity on behalf of the state is the Lands Authority, established in 2017 under Chapter 563 of the Laws of Malta to replace the former Land Department.

Its remit is extensive. The Authority administers public land, issues leases and concessions, manages state-owned property, and oversees the allocation of land through public tenders. These functions sit at the centre of how land is distributed and used across the country. Beyond its public-facing role, the Authority also handles the technical administration of government leases, rent revisions, and compliance monitoring, as well as managing encroachments on public land. Its work requires continuous coordination with other regulatory bodies, including planning and environmental authorities, situating it within a wider system of land governance.

In collaboration with the University of Malta, the Lands Authority launched a student-worker scheme in sustainable land management in 2024, combining employment with structured academic training. Initially designed for its own employees and trainees, the course equipped participants with a broad skillset tailored to Malta's needs. Following the graduation of 16 Lands Authority staff members, the programme was opened to the wider public in October 2025.

Comprising 16 ECTS, the Short Course Award in Land Management is delivered over two semesters at MQF Level 4. Coordinated by the Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development, the programme is designed and taught across multiple university departments, bringing together law, economics, spatial planning, and sustainability into a single course of study. Its structure reflects the realities of land management, where no single discipline is sufficient to tackle the subject comprehensively.

Each subject corresponds to a different layer of land governance.

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

One of the clearest examples of this multidisciplinary approach is the Introduction to Property Law module. Rather than assuming prior legal knowledge, it introduces participants to the core principles governing ownership in Malta. This includes the legal definition of ownership, the right to peaceful possession, and the limits placed on that right through regulation and public interest. While the course introduces basic technical and foundational principles, it also offers learners the opportunity to delve deeper into the historical, cultural, and sociological contexts that have shaped Malta's landscape.

In their second semester, students will, for example, learn about the Socio-Spatial Influences in Maltese Spatial Planning. In practice, this module will take students on a journey beginning with the Order of St John

and extending beyond the British Period in Malta, explaining the planning principles behind the development of Malta's towns and villages. The module then covers policy developments since Malta's Independence, providing a holistic understanding while telling a national story, situating contemporary land use by placing it within its broader historical context.

The student-worker model combines employment with accredited study. Participants engage with administrative processes while completing the academic component, allowing theoretical knowledge to develop alongside practical experience. This format reflects a broader approach to skills development, where training is embedded within the workplace rather than detached from it.

CAREERS IN LAND MANAGEMENT

As for the sort of roles which await graduates at the Lands Authority, one may work as a **Senior Professional – Legal or Notarial**, a position that sits at the core of the Authority's legal and contractual teams. Professionals in this role support legal and notarial processes, ensure compliance with legislation, provide legal guidance across the organisation, and coordinate with internal directorates and external stakeholders. Their work ranges from legal research and litigation support to drafting and publishing deeds, advising on contracts, and overseeing notarial procedures.

Equally central to the Authority's operations is the role of **Senior Professional – Architect**, reflecting the technical and infrastructural dimensions of land management. This position plays a key role within the Valuations Unit. Professionals in this capacity oversee valuation review processes, ensuring technical accuracy, compliance with relevant legislation, and adherence to established guidelines. They collaborate closely with both in-house and external architects, contributing to the development of valuation frameworks and maintaining quality assurance standards.

As Malta continues to navigate pressures on land use, from development demand to environmental constraints, the need for structured expertise in this area remains constant. The student-worker scheme positions itself within that context, linking institutional responsibility with accredited training and creating a defined entry point into the administration of one of the country's most contested and valuable resources. **T**

The Short Course Award in Land Management falls under the remit of the Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development in collaboration with the Department of Spatial Planning and Infrastructure within the Faculty of the Built Environment, the Department of Economics within the Faculty of Economics, Management and

Accountancy and the Department of Civil Law within the Faculty of Laws. To learn more about the Institute, visit um.edu.mt/iccsd

For further information about this course, reach out to the Lands Authority: studentworker.la@landsauthority.org.mt

Stay informed about current and future career opportunities: [linkedin.com/company/lands-authority](https://www.linkedin.com/company/lands-authority)



➤ **Award in Sustainable Land Management**



in Lands Authority

Beyond Borders The SEA-EU Alliance

Author: **Jonathan Firbank**

*SEA-EU is a University Alliance forging a strategic partnership among coastal universities across Europe. **THINK's Jonathan Firbank** speaks to **Prof. Alan Deidun**, UM Rector's Delegate for SEA-EU, about the many rewards of this partnership – from the academic to the cultural and beyond.*

Despite being relatively recent initiatives, European University Alliances are increasingly gaining recognition as a strategic priority for the European Union, particularly for strengthening long-term transnational cooperation in higher education, research, innovation, and societal engagement. This flagship initiative creates networks across higher education institutions in pursuit of joint initiatives, including those in education, internationalisation, and research, to build impactful networks that not only link campuses but also connect countries in deep and demonstrable ways.

The University of Malta is a founding member of the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) Alliance, an initiative that commenced in 2019 to connect coastal universities from around the continent. The SEA-EU Office at UM falls under the Pro-Rectorate for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, led by Pro-Rector Prof. Valerie Sollars, with Prof. Alan Deidun serving as the UM Rector's Delegate for SEA-EU and the SEA-EU Association Treasurer. They are both closely involved in the integration and strategic development of the Alliance at UM, while Senior

Manager Maria Grima Calleja, who oversees the SEA-EU office and its team, drives this crucial endeavour.

As Deidun explains, 'SEA-EU is one of 73 European University Alliances being supported by the EU through the Erasmus+ funding programme. These alliances incorporate over 650 universities, a substantive chunk of European universities, which number around 3000. SEA-EU itself has nine partner universities.' In addition to UM, these include Cádiz (coordinators), Brest, Kiel, Gdańsk, Split, Algarve, Parthenope in Naples, and NORD in Norway. 'Their locations stretch from the border of the Arctic Circle to the central Mediterranean, from westernmost Portugal to as far east as Poland. SEA-EU covers quite a few latitudes and longitudes; we're quite representative!'

SHARING VALUES

Alliances such as SEA-EU build and strengthen inter-university networks. 'Through shared governance structures involving rectorates, various boards, and committees with representation from the alliance members, universities are



able to establish joint initiatives, align strategic priorities, and develop shared tools and services,' Grima Calleja says. The mobility of staff and students, a bedrock of higher education, is also facilitated by university alliances. Deidun describes this as a 'cardinal point' of these collaborations. The EU has set a target for 50% of alliance-member students to benefit from mobility, which typically involves a blend of 'virtual mobility' via communications infrastructure and physical mobility for people who want to teach or learn in a new country. Being able to share resources and knowledge is clearly a massive boon to academia.

But there are subtler benefits that, over time, prove just as important. A key part of the alliance's mission is to strengthen shared values. 'Qualifying yourself as European isn't just about citizenship; there are core European principles. These tend to come to the fore when a potential new member state applies to join the EU; it will have to meet certain criteria. While we maintain our own identities, we share common principles that connect people from the Mediterranean to the Arctic Circle.' European identity is challenging to articulate

due to this pluralism. It is so pluralistic that it is not wholly confined to Europe's borders. But this pluralism, along with other foundational ideals like egalitarianism, humanism, and liberty, remains powerful in spite of this complexity.

University alliances both represent and give structure to these common values. On the one hand, 'this common set of principles allows us to move forward, they provide a solid starting point for future collaboration'. On the other hand, the 'principles we adhere to reinforce a sense of cohesion, of European identity.' The EU's immensely popular Erasmus+ programmes are visible demonstrations of Europe's best qualities. Visibility has a quality of its own. A University Alliance can advocate for these values as an institution. Deidun has recently represented SEA-EU at a panel on the European Ocean Pact, which seeks to strategise and then legislate Europe's Blue Economy – the economy around marine infrastructure and ecosystems – in a bid to render it sustainable. This is just one of several opportunities in 2026 that SEA-EU can harness to ethically influence EU marine policy. ➡



Left: From left to right: Prof. Alan Deidun, Rector's Delegate for SEA-EU, Prof. Alfred J. Vella, Rector of the University of Malta, and Prof. Valerie Sollars, Pro-Rector for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, celebrating the 5th anniversary of the SEA-EU Alliance, a partnership they have been instrumental in supporting and advancing at the University of Malta.

Right: Celebration of the 5th Anniversary of the SEA-EU Alliance – Friday, 21 February 2025

Photos courtesy of UM's SEA-EU Office

SEA LINKS

A commonality of SEA-EU members is, of course, their maritime heritage. Each university is close to a major harbour. As Deidun explains, 'This is the gel, the nexus that connects these partner universities.' Thus, the sea proved to be a starting point for the SEA-EU Alliance. Marine and maritime fields tend to be resource-intensive and dependent on collaboration, and were central to SEA-EU's initial mission in 2019. In addition to accredited intensive programmes that offer micro-credentials, 'SEA-EU has launched three joint education programmes, a bachelor's and two master's degrees, and we are *en route* to having a joint PhD.'

The undergraduate degree on sustainability in the Blue Economy – created and delivered collaboratively by seven SEA-EU members – is the SeaBlue programme. This allows students to move through countries and engage with projects and industry as they study this definitively international subject. SEA-EU has also launched MIPMAL, a joint master's in port management and logistics, which offers a similar degree of mobility. If, for example, a student is learning how to make this space more sustainable, they will need to interact with the private sector. 'SEA-EU has a number of councils. It has a Student Council, for example, but also a Stakeholders

Group and a Cities and Ports Council. There are people from transport authorities, and people from aquaculture.' This means that SEA-EU facilitates mobility beyond universities. 'Stakeholders get to speak to their peers from other countries within these bodies. This creates additional societal impact beyond campus, while still widening our capacity for research.'

The third, equally mobile education programme, STORM, is another master's degree, this time in organisational sustainability and resilience management. 'While the sea is a factor that has connected the participating SEA-EU universities, our mission and research go beyond marine and maritime studies and research. Four years ago, we opened up collaboration among the universities in other sectors. Several other academics and faculties have started joining forces.' Collaborations have extended to include the humanities, UM's Faculty of Theology, as well as the Faculties of Science and Engineering. 'We also have collaboration among people in medicine, sports, and communication... a lot of sectors. The Alliance, nowadays, is much more inclusive. And, of course, all faculties and disciplines are welcome to participate in this cooperation.'

Cooperation is not restricted just to joint education and research initiatives. Events are also front and centre – football tournaments, photo exhibitions, and musical performances



Left: Representatives from SEA-EU Alliance partner universities gathered for SEA-EU Governing Week 2025.

Right: From left to right: Rectors representing the SEA-EU Alliance members on the day the SEA-EU Association was established as the alliance's legal entity – Prof. Doctor Paulo Águas (University of the Algarve), Prof. Dragan Ljutić (University of Split), Vice President Prof. Ralph Schneider (University of Kiel), Prof. Alfred J. Vella (University of Malta), Prof. Antonio Garofalo (The Parthenope University of Naples), Prof. Casimiro Mantell (The University of Cadiz), Prof. Hanne Solheim Hansen (University of NORD), Prof. Piotr Stepnowski (University of Gdansk), Prof. Pascal Olivard (University of Brest).

Photos courtesy of UM's SEA-EU Office

are some notable examples of cultural exchange. Nor is SEA-EU just connecting academics and students. Administrative staff are equally well-positioned to engage with and exchange insights and practices with colleagues from other universities. 'For example, our library staff organised a SEA-EU Library Staff Week for SEA-EU staff employed in libraries. They exchanged perspectives and information about methodologies and policies that they adopt when addressing situations and challenges of mutual interest.'

MALTA'S PLACE

Malta was particularly well-positioned to play a key role in SEA-EU: as one of the very few European island nations and one of the even smaller number of countries with English as an official language. 'Perhaps the most challenging aspect of establishing SEA-EU was turning it into a legal entity.' Given that English is, at this point, the world's second most widespread language, it is also SEA-EU's 'operational language'. Registering it as an association in Malta was a far smoother process because of this, and UM holds the treasurer role for the same reason. 'This is a bit of a feather in Malta's cap. Not every University Alliance reaches this stage; it can be very tricky, but UM's legal office did a fantastic job. An association can employ staff and apply for funding

under its own steam' – a complementary institution that reduces rather than increases each university's workload.

As Deidun states, the 'reputational gain' from UM's contribution is just a fraction of how SEA-EU benefits Malta. 'For example, just before this interview, I was speaking with Kiel's Dean of Engineering, Prof. Dr Martina Gerken, who is organising a workshop or seminar here this autumn.' This venture is supported by SEA-EU research seed funds that are conditional on university collaboration. The subject could not be more useful to Malta. 'The event will focus on developing a probe to test water for its nitrate content. This is very relevant to Malta because our groundwater, which is used for irrigation, is too nitrate-rich from fertiliser runoff. Currently, the water is tested through a complicated and costly laboratory technique. A probe could test the water *in situ*, saving time and money. The seminar will invite local stakeholders working in water services, connecting not just academics and students but also other professionals who would be engaging with this emerging technology. This is a particularly telling example of the benefits that University Alliances like SEA-EU bring to Europe. Two universities at opposite ends of an entire continent are innovating, collaborating, and then disseminating their work at speeds once impossible, for the benefit of all. 





Manner

Before a caterpillar seals itself away, life is good – yet it still trusts nature's call. Although this metamorphosis of manner appears incredibly intimate and personal, its success relies heavily on its environment.

At the University of Malta, we are challenging the status quo

by questioning the very assumptions and patterns of our society. That is why, in Issue 50, **THINK** invites you to take wing and become an agent of change. Because while everything may fall into place on the surface, we must listen to the deeper rumblings of life.



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Built to Adapt

Engineering a Smart and Sustainable Workstation
for an Inclusive Workplace

Author: **Antonia Ribeiro**



According to Article 27 of the UNCRPD and the UNCRPD Act of 2021, work and protection against unemployment are human rights. Yet, international data suggests a persistent lack of employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The **MASCOT project**, a collaboration between the University of Malta, industry, and government entities, aims to create more employment opportunities within the manufacturing industry for people with disabilities by developing an adaptable manufacturing workstation.

In the European Union, '21.8% of people aged 15 to 64 years without a disability were outside the labour force', versus 35.0% of people with some disability, and 67.7% of people with a severe disability (Eurostat, 2025). In 2024, the unemployment rate in Malta for people without disabilities was around 3%. This rate shot up to over 8% for people with disabilities, according to Eurostat.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2026) recognises access to appropriate assistive technologies as a 'precondition for accessing and retaining decent work'. At UM, a multidisciplinary team is developing assistive technology for the manufacturing industry, thus addressing employment discrimination and ableism faced by people with disabilities.

The MASCOT project, *Development of a sMart And Sustainable inClusive wOrksTation*, is a collaboration between UM, Seifert Systems – MASCOT's industrial partner, and Aġenzija

Sapport – the national provider of disability-related services. The UM team includes Prof. Ing. Emmanuel Francalanza as lead investigator and smart manufacturing expert, Prof. Ing. Paul Refalo as the specialist in sustainability, Dr Amy Camilleri Zahra, who brings expertise in disability studies, and Amberlynn Bonello and Nicole Vassallo as the research support officers (RSOs) helping to keep the project on track. The project is a collaboration between the Department of Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering, which provides expertise in smart and sustainable manufacturing, and the Department of Disability Studies, which provides expertise in accessibility and inclusive practices.

MASCOT aims to create an 'inclusive, smart, and sustainable manufacturing workstation' that meets the needs of both the manufacturing industry and people with disabilities. The researchers recognised that current workstations are often designed

according to industrial standards. This, in turn, suggests that the physical and software-related features currently implemented may not provide adequate support for people with physical, intellectual, or cognitive disabilities.

DESIGNING FOR CUSTOMISABILITY

The MASCOT workstation is a reconfigurable manufacturing workstation that can be customised for different impairment groups, abilities, and needs. Central to the design is a human-machine interface (HMI) that can be personalised and adjusted according to each person's preferences, pace, and experience, while providing step-by-step guidance and quality checks.

The key attributes of the MASCOT workstation are its reconfigurability, modularity, and real-time adaptability, enabled by a custom-built Artificial Intelligence (AI) module. This module adapts to the operator in real time, ➡

providing relevant, sensory-tolerant, and cognitively accessible assistance and guidance throughout the assembly process. Embedding AI into the workstation enables real-time adaptation to the user's needs.

Some assistive features of the workstation may include adaptable LEDs that change colour to help mitigate sensory load or loss of focus over time. Conversely, if LED lights are perceived as invasive or disturbing, the workstation would detect this discomfort in real time and switch to another output modality (such as paced text-to-speech). Physical reconfigurability is also incorporated, comprising, but not limited to, height adjustability, movable button locations, accessible material source and sink zones, and a collaborative robot (cobot), which assists with manual tasks such as fastening, especially for persons with upper-body limitations.

These assistive technologies can be toggled on and off either manually by the operator or automatically via the workstation's real-time adaptability features, sharing the responsibility and autonomy between the workstation and the user. In this way, the project aims to develop a workstation whose smart technology enables adaptability to the diverse needs of different operators who may change from hour to hour, rather than by generalising across specific impairment groups.

The system also ensures that the quality of the product being manufactured on the MASCOT workstation is a priority. As Francalanza explains, 'an overhead camera will monitor assembly in real-time to ensure that assembly is being completed correctly without the need for continuous human supervision'.

Simultaneously, the MASCOT team also wants to guarantee that the workstation is a sustainable solution.



Features of the adaptable workstation to support individuals with diverse needs employed in the manufacturing industry
Photos courtesy of Kristov Scicluna

To do so, a Life Cycle Sustainability Assessment is being carried out to evaluate the environmental, social, and economic impact of the assistive technology. This allows the researchers to develop a system that has minimal environmental impact, delivers positive social value, and is financially viable.

BRINGING ALL VOICES TO THE TABLE

The researchers are working with various stakeholders to ensure the final workstation meets diverse demands, from industrial productivity to environmental requirements and assistive technologies for different

impairments. The development process is, as the team describes it, 'iterative and multi-disciplinary'.

The MASCOT project brought different voices to the table. The team interviewed people with disabilities, their parents and caregivers, technical staff, manufacturers, and experts in disability studies to conceptualise a modular and truly inclusive workstation. People with disabilities were also involved in the preliminary testing phase, ensuring that the final design incorporated input from people with physical, cognitive, and sensory disabilities and that potential bias from AI models was thoroughly mitigated.

Integrating so many perspectives into a successful final product was challenging. Bonello highlights that during the initial stages of the MASCOT project, the team 'tried to bring as many opinions as possible early on, as well as to understand how prioritising requirements from one stakeholder group could adversely affect the other stakeholder group'. Understanding how changes in design affected accessibility and productivity became critical.

Nonetheless, the team believes that the manufacturing company's needs and those of people with disabilities can be aligned. Integrating people with disabilities expands the industry's available workforce while also enhancing the social inclusion of disabled persons. Through this collaboration,

the manufacturing industry can address labour shortages and meet legal quotas and corporate social responsibility policies. The researchers noted a positive, collaborative attitude among all stakeholders, reinforcing the need for an inclusive workstation and the positive impact of the MASCOT project.

COMING SOON

The MASCOT project began in July 2025, and a working prototype was developed at UM's Department of Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering in the first part of 2026. The next goal is to start fully testing the workstation at Seifert's manufacturing site in 2027.

Although the prototype is being developed for implementation at

Seifert's site, it is intended to be a modular solution, custom to different types of manufacturers. The research team welcomes inquiries from interested companies and sees them as opportunities for further collaboration and, ultimately, for improving the workstation. People with disabilities are also encouraged to contribute, as 'their knowledge and lived experiences in the development of the MASCOT workstation are invaluable', Camilleri Zahra explains.

The MASCOT project may not single-handedly solve all these challenges. Nonetheless, it is a promising step towards making the workforce more inclusive by centring the wants and needs of people with disabilities. **T**

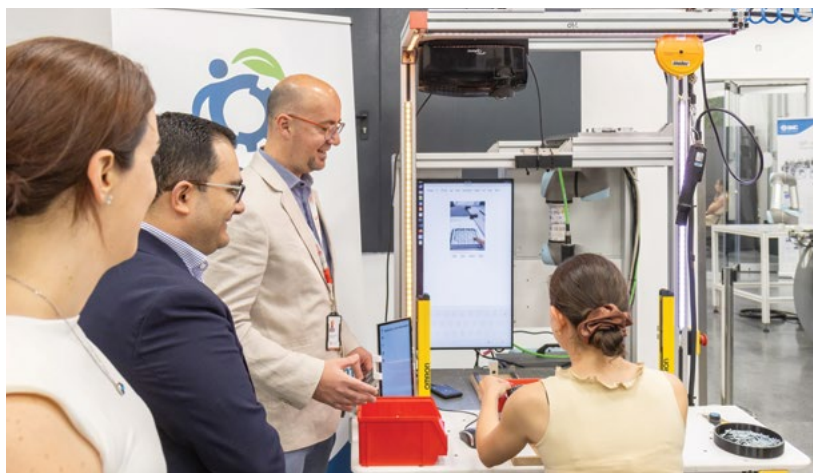
The project 'Development of a sMART And Sustainable inClusive wOrksTation (MASCOT)' is financed by Xjenza Malta through the FUSION: R&I Research Excellence Programme (R&I-2024-006T).

Learn more about the Mascot Project: mascotmalta.mt

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The MASCOT Team showcasing a configuration of the workstation
Photos courtesy of Kristov Scicluna

Nothing About Us Without Us: Young People and the Right to Meaningful Participation

Authors: **Dr Giuliana Fenech and Catherine Camilleri**

*What happens when young people are given the space, trust, and tools to use their voices and enact far-reaching change? The **Seen and Heard Project** shows that children are more than passive recipients of adult decisions – they have meaningful contributions to offer our communities.*

In a complex and often unjust world, it has become increasingly important to empower youth voices and listen to their perspectives as meaningful contributors to social change. But challenging young people to question and critique the world around them means providing space for voices to flourish and offering unique modalities for thoughts and experiences to be safely expressed. The Seen and Heard project (2023–2026), an EU-funded initiative, is carving that space, formulating a roadmap for the full lifecycle of a social movement, with young people at risk of marginalisation at the heart of co-creation. Working with children aged 10–14 in Malta, Germany, and Poland, the project includes over 48 nationalities. So far, the project has garnered invaluable comparative data on children's understanding of their rights, offering a multilingual docu-narrative that delves deeply into the educational

realities found in postmigrant schools. Beyond the data, young people themselves showcase their voices and lived experiences in creative protest films they scripted and directed; these go hand in hand with a co-created, communal poem published by a prestigious international children's publisher, Walker Books. In this way, the project highlights that youths are not passive observers but active citizens, capable of being at the heart of decision-making and to of redefining the world they live in.

NOURISHING YOUTH VOICES

UM Principal Investigator Dr Giuliana Fenech from the Department of English has a front-row seat to the creative work blossoming in the Seen and Heard mentoring programme, where young people stress that grown-ups need to truly respect and listen to the real contributions they can make to our world. 'Too much about us', they exclaimed, 'is decided

without us, and adults don't always understand how their decisions affect us'. In their protest films, Fenech notes, themes of political corruption, environmental degradation, bullying, and the lack of time to rest and play were among the most spoken of by young people. 'Apart from the depth of insight into topics not usually associated with young people,' Fenech relates, 'what struck the adults involved in the project most was the serious and reflective tone with which these issues were raised.'

That seriousness matches the gathered data. Across all three locations, children demonstrated high baseline awareness of their rights, but specific areas varied across countries. Malta showed the lowest recognition of bodily autonomy (70.3%), while Berlin's lowest scores (82%) were for the rights to expression and peaceful protest. In Wrocław, nearly all participants (98%) were aware of the right to health and a clean



environment, but only 79% knew about the right to universal equality. These gaps highlight the need to go beyond the data and unpack the lived realities shaping young people. Together with Dr Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak from the University of Wrocław and Dr Fariba Schulz from Humboldt University in Berlin, Fenech and the team were determined to truly hear what children have to say and to mould the Seen and Heard project into an autonomous space in which youths could freely and authentically engage. 'It became very clear early on in the project,' Fenech recalls, 'that children are able to balance both wonder and difficulty, with the right support in place. We needed to hear directly from them what good support looks, sounds, and feels like.'

However, encouraging young people to share their perspectives – especially when historically sidelined – is not so straightforward. For this to happen, the team invested time

in building trust with participants and adjusting expectations to make room for youth voices. By listening deeply to young people, the team saw firsthand how children have so much more to offer beyond the cultural and societal bounds that paint them as inept, naïve, and unengaged. Fenech explains that this understanding led to a mixed methodology with standpoints focused on childism, which approaches the world through the eyes of the child (Biswas & Wall, 2023); activism, which frames life as a creative journey (Irwin et al., 2024; Coleman et al., 2024); and the belief that reciprocity is only possible when power structures are dismantled and all voices are truly equal (Nussbaum, 2013). By entwining these concepts, Seen and Heard transforms into an intergenerational collaborative space that gives authority to youth voices, positioning young people as equal contributors to the future of activism and social justice.

GATHERING THE FRUIT OF THE SEEN AND HEARD PROJECT

With these methodological pillars at its roots, the project has yielded rich and evocative results, among which the creation of a communal poem encompassing the young people's engagement with human rights and their violation. Together with author Sita Brahmachari and illustrator Chris Riddell, engaged by Amnesty International Poland, the children in all countries took part in a series of workshops exploring how stories and drawings help us identify and express emotions. 'We discussed loss and sadness,' Fenech observes, 'displacement and belonging, hope and the resilience we feel as individuals and as part of a community.' Throughout the process, Brahmachari and Riddell lovingly curated all the children's reflections and ideas, presenting them to the group as a book titled *Hear Our* ➤



Young people perform their communal human rights poem during an interdisciplinary conference, in Valletta, in February 2026.

Photos courtesy of the University of Malta and Tümer Gençtürk



rights can be respected in all areas of society. Here in Malta, youths posed thoughtful and courageous questions to leading figures in children's publishing, including Maltese publisher Chris Gruppetta (Merlin Publishers), creative director Shannon Cullen (Walker Books), illustrator Matt Stroud, and author Sita Brahmachari. 'The young interviewers spoke with remarkable clarity and confidence,' Fenech says, 'addressing how publishers can better listen to children, how literature and illustrations foster empathy and understanding, and what challenges writers from diverse backgrounds face.'

Their questions prompted candid reflections from the panellists. Gruppetta spoke about the need to involve more child readers in editorial decisions, while Cullen reflected on the importance of embedding children's voices within the publishing process and highlighted her work with Empathy Day in the UK. Stroud described illustrators' creative responsibility in shaping visual narratives that resonate emotionally with young readers, and Brahmachari spoke movingly about the shared responsibility of publishers and writers in addressing representation and social impact. Together, these exchanges revealed not only the openness of industry professionals to engage in dialogue with youths, but also the perceptiveness and bravery of the children themselves. Their questions demonstrated that young



Voices, which was published by Walker Books. Seeing their voices presented on the global stage not only delighted the young participants but also ignited a sense of urgency to further build and empower this social movement and continue to shape conversations that mould their daily lives.

Innovation bloomed across each cohort, with participants taking a lead role in planning and implementing an international, interdisciplinary, intergenerational conference held in Malta last February. In addition to their participation in workshops

and presentations, the young people from each country also interviewed adults in positions of power within their communities, leading to valuable discussions and growing admiration for youth perspectives. The children in Wrocław, for example, asked policy-makers about respecting the rights and identities of young people, especially those with diverse, intercultural backgrounds. In Berlin, participants focused their discussions on what children need to feel truly heard, what adults can do to support that reality, and how children's

Young people participate in a creative protest zine-making workshop.

Photos courtesy of the University of Malta and Tümer Gençtürk



readers are not passive consumers of books, but thoughtful participants in the conversations that shape the stories written for them.

REDEFINING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

When experts across academia, policy, publishing, and beyond actually listened to children, one striking realisation emerged: that rigid, large-scale systems can become flexible spaces where what children say has real, measurable impact. In this sense, *Seen and Heard* reminds us that meaningful participation is not a symbolic gesture, but the foundation of genuine social change. ‘Social movements emerge when people recognise that their voices matter,’ Fenech says, ‘and realise that collective expression can reshape the systems around them. When young people are trusted as thinkers, creators, and collaborators, they do not simply participate in conversations about their rights – they actively help redefine them.’

The courage and clarity shown by the children in this project demonstrate that the principle ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ is not merely a slogan – it represents a practical framework for building more responsive institutions, more empathetic cultural production, and more democratic societies. If social movements begin with the courage to speak and the willingness to listen, then the voices of these young participants show that the next generation is already leading the way. 



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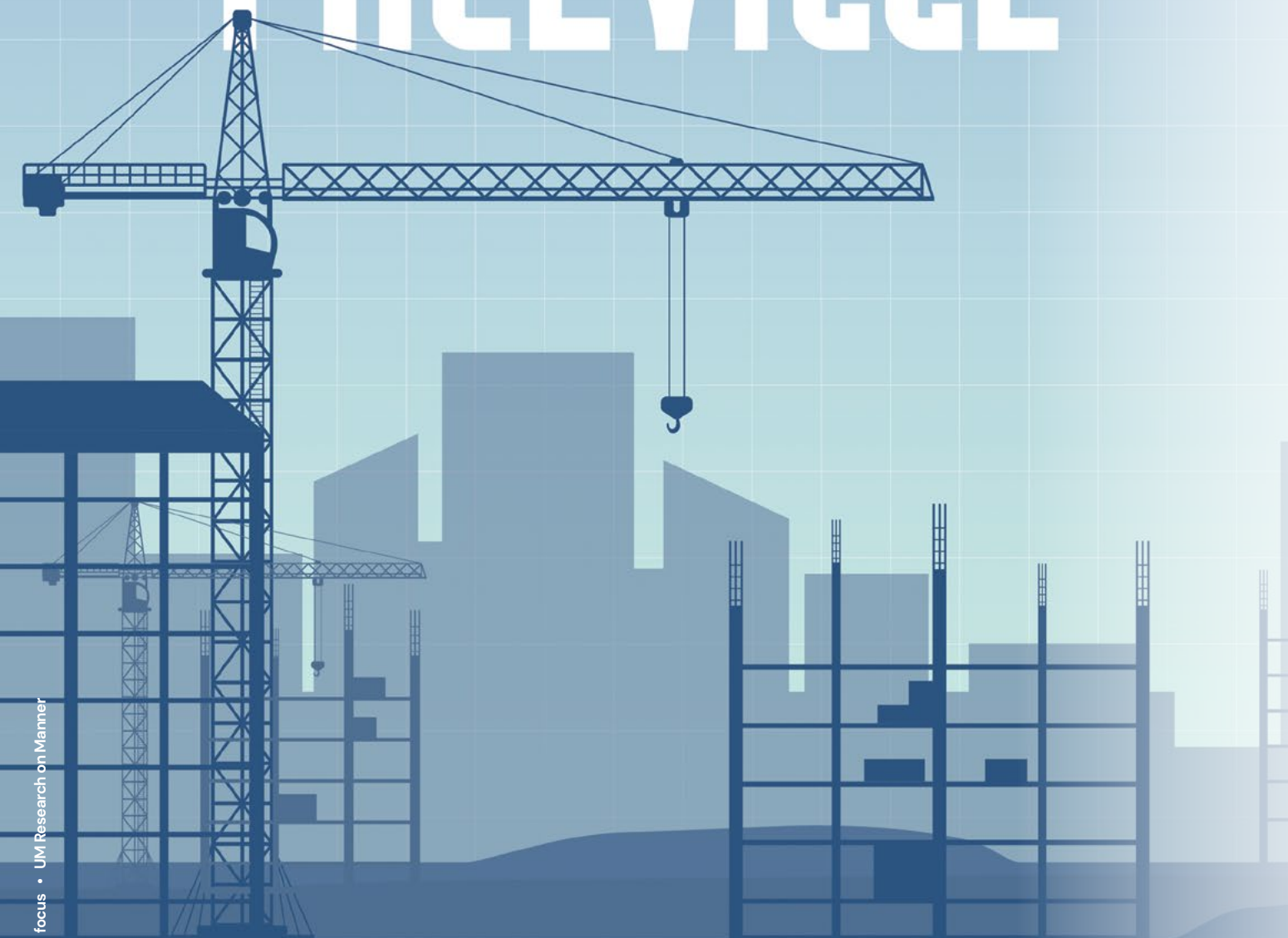
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THE FUTURE OF PACEVILLE



Author: **Martina Treeby**

*In **The Future of Paceville**, an essay collection edited by **Dr Elise Billiard Pisani** and **Prof. Reuben Grima**, Paceville becomes a microcosm for examining Malta's changing urban landscape. Exploring ideas of public space, heritage, planning, and privatisation, the publication argues that Paceville's rapid transformation reflects wider social, economic, and political shifts happening in the country today.*

When looking at the title, *The Future of Paceville*, there is a promise of a forward-looking discussion. Yet, as this collection of essays makes clear, the 'future' is already here, visible in the accelerated transformation of Paceville from a marginal coastal settlement into a dense and highly contested urban landscape. Edited by anthropologist Dr Elise Billiard Pisani and Prof. Reuben Grima (Department of Conservation and Built Heritage), this publication offers not a singular vision of what lies ahead, but a layered and often unsettling account of *how* Paceville has changed throughout the years, and more importantly, *the manner* in which that transformation has occurred. The book can be read as a study in urban metamorphosis, with Paceville as both a physical space and a place where broader shifts in Maltese society – economic, legal, cultural, and political – are accelerated and made visible to the naked eye.

FROM PERIPHERY TO PARADIGM

The introduction immediately places Paceville as a space of

contradictions. Once a 'sleepy cluster of summer residences', it became first a suburban neighbourhood, then a nightlife hub, and finally a symbol of tourism and modernity in Malta. This rapid succession of identities is not necessarily a fully organic evolution but rather a series of layered transformations driven by shifting economic priorities. The editors frame Paceville and its changing identity as a prototype for the rest of the country rather than an anomaly. The 'Paceville syndrome', as they suggest, has spread across Malta, where public spaces are increasingly reconfigured into 'consumption spaces' shaped by speculative development and transformed with increasing consequence. When speaking with contributor Dr Antoine Zammit (Department of Spatial Planning and Infrastructure), he describes Paceville syndrome as such: 'The "Paceville syndrome" is not just a question of density, which could have a logic to it if accompanied by correct land-use decisions (a healthy mix) and sustainable mobility strategies (given economies of scale potential) – it is the convergence of dense, inward-looking development, the erosion or semi-privatisation of public space and a behavioural shift

toward short-term consumption over civic life and community continuity.'

PUBLIC SPACE UNDER PRESSURE

Throughout the book, the focus is on the transformation of public space, arguably the clearest indicator of how urban metamorphosis unfolds. In Billiard Pisani's opening chapter, public space is defined as a site of conflict, negotiation, and democracy rather than just a neutral backdrop. It is this contested nature that makes it essential, as it exists where multiple groups can claim and reshape it. However, the metamorphosis of Paceville has also involved gradual erosion. Spaces once open and shared have become enclosed, privatised, or otherwise indirectly restricted, with the book repeatedly emphasising that this process is not always overt. Public space does not simply disappear. Instead, it is often repackaged and aestheticised in an effort to maintain control. What appears to be improvement – cleaner environments, new developments, carefully designed plazas, and so on – may also be concealing a deeper loss of accessibility and spontaneity that were once inherent to the space. As Billiard Pisani herself explains, '[w]hat makes a democracy is the guarantee that ➤



Left: Prof. Ruben Grima, Prof. Gorg Mallia, and Krista Bonnici from Malta University Press presenting *The Future of Paceville* to Rector Prof. Alfred J. Vella
Photos by Kristov Scicluna

Right: *The Future of Paceville* book launch held on Friday 17 April at the Millennium Chapel, Paceville
Photos by Elisa von Brockdorff

citizens, in their multiplicity, have access to places of encounter and that their representatives hold decisional power to negotiate their use.' This relationship is extremely important to the *manner* of transformation in Paceville. As the book suggests, the shift from public to private is rarely abrupt; instead, it is mediated through planning decisions and legal frameworks, as well as the surrounding cultural narratives that frame any form of development as progress.

THE LOGIC OF COMMODIFICATION

Grima's contribution extends this analysis by focusing on heritage. He traces how Paceville's historic environment has been progressively commodified, with cultural sites 'privatised, decontextualised, or demolished' in the service of tourism and speculative development. Heritage, once preserved and valued as a shared cultural resource, becomes an asset and something to be consumed. As

the book argues, the transformation of Paceville is closely tied to Malta's positioning within a globalised economy that prioritises investment, tourism, and high-value real estate. Urban space is no longer organised primarily around the needs of residents, but around the demands of capital. Grima states that '[t]he seizure of public space for private gain has escalated dramatically over the past decade, most visibly in the form of poorly managed tables and chairs in formerly public spaces, which have now spread to historic city centres across the country, from Marsaskala to Gozo. There is a growing public awareness that this encroachment on public space is eroding our quality of life.'

LAW, PLANNING, AND POWER

Paceville's metamorphosis is perhaps most clearly revealed in the chapters dealing with governance and law. Prof. David Zammit's (Department of Civil Law) analysis of Malta's legal framework highlights how historical

legacies – particularly the hybridity of the legal system – have enabled the gradual privatisation of coastal and urban spaces. The Dragonara Enclosure Case, for instance, exemplifies how legal continuity can be used to reconcile public access with private ownership, often to the advantage of powerful actors. Similarly, A. Zammit and Perit Jacques Borg Barthet (Department of Spatial Planning and Infrastructure) critique the top-down nature of urban planning, particularly in relation to the Paceville Master Plan. Rather than emerging from community engagement, planning decisions are shown to be driven by pre-established development goals, with public consultation playing a limited role. This reinforces a key argument of the book: metamorphosis is fundamentally about who controls the process of change. The contributors repeatedly point to a disconnect between the rhetoric of planning, often framed



Keynote speeches were delivered at the launch by Prof. Gorg Mallia, Fr Hilary Tagliaferro, Dr Claire Bonello, and the editors.

Photos by Elisa von Brockdorff

in terms of progress and collective benefit, and its actual outcomes. The result is a form of transformation that often appears inclusive but, in practice, is highly selective.

FRAGMENTATION AND THE RISE OF ENCLAVES

Another recurring theme is the fragmentation of urban space. Billiard Pisani's analysis of 'enclaves' is particularly striking, as developments such as Portomaso are described as self-contained environments that offer security and a curated lifestyle. While these spaces may appear public, they are in fact highly controlled, with limited access. This shift from open, heterogeneous spaces to segmented, controlled environments is a significant stage in Paceville's metamorphosis, trending towards what the book describes as 'fortress' urbanism, where social divisions are reinforced through spatial design. Anthropologist Marguerite Pace

Bonello's chapter discusses this particular perspective by tracing the historical evolution of Paceville and warning of its trajectory towards a 'fortress city'. With both a physical and a social transformation, the gap between social groups widens and shared spaces diminish.

A MIRROR FOR MALTA

Taken as a whole, *The Future of Paceville* offers more than a case study of a single locality. For a general audience, the book's message is both accessible and urgent – it invites readers to reconsider familiar spaces and to question the forces that shape them. For policymakers and practitioners, it offers a critical framework for thinking about urban development and its consequences.

Dr Marguerite Camilleri (Department of Policy, Politics and Governance) had this to say on what struck her most about the book: 'For me, it is the book's warning

about the increasing number of gated and semi-gated communities on the Islands. Gated communities are anti-social and out of place in Malta's relatively safe urban environment.' *The Future of Paceville* lives up to its title, but perhaps not in the way one might expect. Rather than predicting what Paceville will become, it shows that the future is already unfolding in ways that demand attention and, potentially, action. [T](#)

For more information about *The Future of Paceville*, scan the QR code to check out the MUP page:



NEXT-FOOD-MT:

What Adolescents and Their
Parents Know, See, and Choose
About Food



Author: **Andrea Cuschieri**

NEXT-FOOD-MT is Malta's first national study to examine what adolescents know, see, and choose about food in their everyday lives. Led by **Prof. Sarah Cuschieri**, the project explores 13- to 15-year-old students' understanding of front-of-pack labels alongside the school, neighbourhood, and home environments that shape their choices. Working with students, parents, and teachers, it moves beyond what young people eat to understand how their food decisions are formed. In doing so, it aims to generate evidence that can support more realistic education and policies for a healthier generation.

The origins of NEXT-FOOD-MT do not lie in a single moment of inspiration, but in a gradual realisation that Malta's obesity figures could not be understood through statistics alone.

Malta's first (and last, to date) nationally representative Health Examination Survey, conducted in 2015–2016 by Prof. Sarah Cuschieri, revealed that approximately 70% of adults lived with excess weight or obesity – a scale that points to systemic rather than purely individual drivers. For Cuschieri from UM's Department of Anatomy (Faculty of Medicine & Surgery), the findings from NEXT-FOOD-MT raised deeper questions about how such patterns persist across generations.

'Obesity in Malta is not a marginal or individual issue. It is a systemic, population-level problem,' she explains. 'The data told us how big the problem was, but not why it continues.'

Subsequent research under her supervision provided another critical insight: many adults in Malta struggle to interpret front-of-pack food labels in a meaningful way. Rather than being a neutral source of information, labels can be confusing, misleading, or simply ignored. This finding was pivotal in shaping the direction of NEXT-FOOD-MT.

'If adults struggle to navigate food information, adolescents growing up within these same food environments may be even more disadvantaged,' Cuschieri notes. 'They are learning from parents, shopping in the same stores, and being exposed to the same marketing, yet often with less experience and less critical awareness.'

For her, this made the case for NEXT-FOOD-MT unquestionable.

'NEXT-FOOD-MT was a deliberate next step to move upstream from outcomes to root causes,' she says. 'We wanted to examine how food labelling,

home environments, and school contexts interact during adolescence – a formative stage during which long-term dietary behaviours are established.'

The project frames adolescence as a critical window of opportunity – a moment when education, environment, and policy can align to support healthier lifelong habits.

WHAT STUDENTS KNOW: FOOD LABEL LITERACY

At the heart of NEXT-FOOD-MT is a close examination of what 13- to 15-year-old students genuinely understand about food labels – not in theory, but in practice. The study asks how adolescents interpret front-of-pack labelling, whether they trust it, and whether they actually use it when choosing foods.

Crucially, this is not assessed in a vacuum. Label literacy is explored in the contexts where decisions actually occur: in supermarkets, at home, in school canteens, and in the shops surrounding schools.

'We are not interested in whether students can memorise what a label means for an exam,' Cuschieri explains. 'We want to know how they interpret that information when they are standing in front of a shelf, influenced by price, branding, convenience, and peer preferences.'

This perspective challenges a common assumption in public health that knowledge alone leads to healthier behaviour. NEXT-FOOD-MT instead recognises that understanding interacts with context, marketing, and social norms. For example, a student may know that a product is high in sugar, yet still choose it if it is cheaper, more visible, or more socially desirable than healthier alternatives. By capturing this tension, the study moves beyond simplistic ideas of education as a cure-all. ➔



WHAT STUDENTS SEE: SCHOOL AND NEIGHBOURHOOD FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

Malta's built environment presents a distinctive challenge for healthy living. The country is densely populated, highly urbanised, and saturated with food outlets. For many students, fast food shops, kiosks, convenience stores, and supermarkets are located just steps away from school gates.

Rather than treating this as background context, NEXT-FOOD-MT places it at the centre of analysis. The project systematically maps food environments surrounding schools, documenting what adolescents are exposed to daily – what is available, what is visible, and what is heavily marketed. This mapping is then linked to students' perceptions and behaviours. Do they see healthier options as accessible? Do they feel surrounded by unhealthy choices? How does this shape their sense of what is 'normal' to eat?

'We are not looking at food choice as something that happens in a vacuum,' says Cuschieri. 'We are asking how young people interpret food information in environments where unhealthy options are often more accessible, more visible, and more aggressively promoted.'

By grounding the research in Malta's real urban landscape, NEXT-FOOD-MT aims to produce evidence that can inform not only education but also urban planning, school policies, and food environment regulation.

FAMILIES, SHOPPING, AND THE HOME FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Adolescents do not shop, cook, or eat alone. Families play a central role in shaping which foods are bought, prepared, and made available at home, as well as how food is talked about and valued. NEXT-FOOD-MT, therefore, includes parents as key participants. It explores how they interpret food labels, how they shop, and how these practices influence

what ends up in kitchen cupboards and school lunchboxes. Cuschieri is careful to frame this not as a search for blame, but as an effort to understand real-world constraints.

'Many families are doing their best within the realities they face – price pressures, time constraints, and the dominance of imported packaged foods,' she explains. 'Our role is to understand these dynamics so that policies and education can genuinely support healthier choices, rather than simply telling families what they should do.'

This family dimension is essential because food habits are often transmitted across generations. If parents normalise certain products or routines, adolescents are likely to carry those patterns forward into adulthood. By studying both generations together, NEXT-FOOD-MT captures this intergenerational dynamic rather than treating adolescents as isolated decision-makers. The



Prof. Sarah Cuschieri
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

findings from this study also inspired Cuschieri to develop *From The Doctor's Kitchen: Simple Local Healthy Food Explained*, an evidence-based cookbook created in her own time to help families make healthier food choices through simple, affordable, and locally inspired recipes grounded in nutritional and epidemiological science.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS IN SHAPING CHANGE

One of the most distinctive features of NEXT-FOOD-MT is the central role given to Home Economics teachers. These teachers occupy a unique position between curriculum and lived reality. They see firsthand how students understand nutrition in class, where misconceptions persist, and how lessons translate, or fail to translate, into real-life food choices outside school. As a result, the project positions teachers as active partners whose classroom experience shapes the research itself.

'Home Economics educators operate at the interface between curriculum intent and classroom reality,' says Cuschieri. 'Their feedback helps us distinguish between what is theoretically sound and what can realistically be implemented within Malta's education system.'

Through focus groups, teachers provide practical insights into how food literacy is currently taught, what challenges they face in terms of time and resources, and what changes might better support students' decision-making.

Their involvement ensures that NEXT-FOOD-MT's recommendations will not be purely academic. Instead, they will be grounded, feasible, and relevant to the everyday realities of Maltese classrooms.

A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TAILORED TO A SMALL ISLAND

NEXT-FOOD-MT is deliberately interdisciplinary, bringing together public health, education, and policy perspectives. Led by Cuschieri, the project includes collaboration with Prof. Stefano Moncada

from UM's Islands and Small States Institute and Prof. Jason Gilliland of Western University, Canada, a global expert in youth food environments.

This collaboration reflects the complexity of adolescent nutrition itself. Health outcomes, educational practices, and environmental exposures cannot be separated if the goal is meaningful change.

The study is also explicitly tailored to Malta's small-state context. High population density, reliance on imported foods, and close proximity between homes, schools, and commercial outlets create a distinctive setting in which multiple influences intersect in daily life.

'We are not looking at diet in isolation,' Cuschieri emphasises. 'We are examining how knowledge, environments, families, schools, and policies intersect to shape everyday choices.'

By combining data from students, parents, teachers, and mapped food environments, NEXT-FOOD-MT captures these interactions with a level of detail rarely possible in larger countries. This integrated design is what makes it one of the most comprehensive adolescent nutrition studies ever conducted in Malta – and potentially a model for other small island states facing similar challenges.

TOWARDS A HEALTHIER GENERATION

As fieldwork unfolds across Malta and Gozo, NEXT-FOOD-MT is expected to inform national strategies in health, education, and food policy. The study will provide Malta's first national evidence base on adolescent food label literacy and school food environments, while strengthening collaboration between researchers, educators, and policymakers.

Rather than producing a single intervention, the project aims to catalyse a broader shift in how Malta approaches adolescent nutrition.

'The legacy of NEXT-FOOD-MT is not one programme,' Cuschieri reflects. 'It is about empowering young people with critical skills while also shaping environments that make healthier choices easier.'

In a country where food is deeply woven into culture and daily life, understanding what students know, see, and choose about food may prove to be one of the most important steps Malta can take towards a healthier, more resilient future.

Ultimately, NEXT-FOOD-MT is not simply a research project – it is a national investment in the wellbeing of Malta's youth, grounded in evidence, collaboration, and a commitment to lasting change. 

NEXT-FOOD-MT is financed by Xjenza Malta, through the 'R&I Thematic Programmes: Obesity Research Programme' in collaboration with the Ministry for Health and Active Ageing.

Ultimately, NEXT-FOOD-MT is not simply a research project – it is a national investment in the wellbeing of Malta's youth, grounded in evidence, collaboration, and a commitment to lasting change.

Curiosity Has No Age

Rewriting What it Means to Grow Older in Malta

Author: Courtney Ekezie



*When we think of discrimination, gender or race usually come to mind first. Ageism – discrimination based on age – is often forgotten. The World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Report on Ageism (2021) found that half of the world's population holds ageist attitudes towards older adults, including the damaging assumption that they are incompetent or unwilling to learn. At the University of Malta, in collaboration with **Xjenza Malta** and **Esplora Interactive Science Centre**, neuroscientist and dementia researcher **Prof. Charles Scerri** is proving that this is far from the truth.*

The idea for XjenzAnzjan came from a series of observations Prof. Charles Scerri (Department of Pathology) made while watching the news with his 84-year-old mother. 'What is solar energy? What is artificial intelligence?' she would ask. Coming from a large family with limited access to formal education, Scerri's mother had never been equipped with the tools to make sense of the science that makes the daily headlines. Those evening conversations led him to a Eureka moment: his mother was almost certainly not an exception, but one of many older adults struggling to grasp the scientific concepts shaping modern life.

THE MISSING DEMOGRAPHIC

Esplora, Malta's first and only interactive science centre, has become the leading hub of informal scientific education over the past ten years. Whilst not exclusive to the younger demographic, it is widely popular with children, with numbers reaching 300 students a day attending the site. Deputy Director Kiki Mizzi (Esplora) states that the beating heart of Esplora is education. Moreover, she emphasises that it is

Esplora's mission to make education accessible to everyone, irrespective of individual differences such as gender and age.

Hence, when Scerri approached Xjenza Malta and Esplora with the concept, the response was immediate. 'It was a no-brainer,' Mizzi says. The team initially planned five pilot sessions, but the demand was so unexpectedly high that two more sessions were added almost immediately. Those, too, sold out. Now in its second year, the entire XjenzAnzjan calendar is booked through to the end of the year.

The numbers, as Mizzi puts it, 'speak for themselves.' The deeper story is what they reveal: a population whose intellectual hunger has been chronically underestimated.

MORE THAN A LECTURE

A typical XjenzAnzjan session is around two hours long. It is conducted entirely in Maltese and is held at Esplora. The first hour is the information session, after which there is a 15-minute break for participants to converse about what they have learned over a cup of coffee and a small snack. Scerri uses the phrase 'scientific picnic' to highlight the relaxed, informal nature of the XjenzAnzjan ➤



First: Quiz time! Des Zerafa Cini, Head of Content Development, keeps participants on their toes as science meets a little friendly competition.

Second: A warm welcome from Kiki Mizzi, Deputy Director of Esplora, as participants arrive ready to explore, learn, and connect during a XjenzAnzjan session.

Third: Prof. Maria Attard invites participants to explore how our daily habits are shaping the planet—and what we can do about it—in an engaging talk that sparked curiosity, discussion, and fresh perspectives on sustainability.

Fourth: Prof. Charles Scerri arguing why our memories cannot be trusted.

Photos courtesy of Esplora



sessions, which are not only about learning about AI or climate change but also about social communication.

Scerri's first session, titled 'Memorji, dnuviet u kummiedji' was fittingly about the brain, its memories and the curious ways memory can deceive us. Subsequent talks have spanned AI, renewable energy, and climate science, each delivered by a Maltese academic willing to translate their specialism into the language of everyday life. After every talk, the Esplora education team runs a quiz with small prizes for the winning team. The competition, Mizzi notes with a grin, gets fierce.

At its core, XjenzAnzjan is more than a lecture. It is designed to keep participants cognitively and socially engaged. This is not accidental. It is, in a very real sense, a social intervention disguised as a community event.

THE SCIENCE OF STAYING SHARP

According to Scerri, scientific research overwhelmingly debunks the assumption that older adults are incompetent or unwilling to learn. Studies show that the adult brain retains neuroplasticity – the ability of brain cells to grow new connections and adapt. While processing speed may slow with age, older adults are still capable of successfully acquiring complex new skills.

Research also indicates that deficiencies in community knowledge or health literacy are not due to an inability or reluctance to learn, but rather to a lack of tailored, accessible educational pathways. Providing dedicated community learning opportunities will not only satisfy the older population's willingness to learn but also counteract stigma and ageist beliefs.

'From a public health perspective, keeping the mind active is a crucial strategy for maintaining brain health,' Scerri says. 'By directly promoting cognitive stimulation, community programmes like XjenzAnzjan help address modifiable risk



factors for neurodegenerative diseases, thereby aiding national strategic efforts to reduce the long-term clinical and economic impacts of cognitive decline in an ageing population.'

On a day-to-day basis, Scerri's research revolves around what goes wrong in the ageing brain. Decades of research into Alzheimer's disease have produced a concept that sits at the heart of why XjenzAnzjan matters: cognitive reserve.

'Think of it as a savings account for your brain,' he explains. 'Every time you learn a new language, take up a hobby, engage with new ideas, you're making a deposit.' Dementia-related changes can develop in the brain without any presenting symptoms, as post-mortem studies routinely reveal pathological changes in people who, in life, showed none. 'The more one invests in that savings account,' Scerri explains, 'the better the brain can compensate for these dementia-related changes. The brain is a muscle in this respect. The more you train it, the more resilient it becomes against the changes that ageing brings.' XjenzAnzjan is, quite literally, a workout for the brain.

LEARNING IS EMPOWERING

Participants come from strikingly varied backgrounds. 'Some are still living independently and saw an advert on our website. Others arrive in groups from day centres. They sit together over coffee, swap notes, and go home to share what they have learned with the people they live with,' Mizzi explains.

'There's a sense of dignity that comes back,' Mizzi explains. 'When people retire, when they reach a certain age, there's often a feeling that society has stopped expecting anything intellectual from them. XjenzAnzjan restores something that had been taken away – sometimes without anyone realising it had been taken.'

Both Scerri and Mizzi describe the programme as openly anti-ageist. 'We are challenging the idea that when you grow older, you no longer need to learn,' Mizzi says. 'We're using science as a vehicle for social, emotional, and cognitive learning – all at once.'

A NATIONAL QUESTION

In a very real sense, XjenzAnzjan is offering an answer to a much larger question: *what does active ageing in Malta actually mean?*

By Scerri's own assessment, Malta has made significant progress in shifting from a purely care-based model of older age, focused narrowly on welfare and medical needs, toward an *active citizenship* model, built on empowerment and participation. However, he argues that too much of the current offering remains weighted towards leisure activities. Intellectual engagement is still under-prioritised at the community and policy levels.

'Knowledge is power,' Mizzi says. 'Knowing what AI is means you can make informed decisions when you encounter it. Knowing why your blood glucose matters means you can advocate for your own health. This isn't a luxury. It's a necessity for living well at any age.'

XjenzAnzjan began as a quiet response to one woman's questions over the evening news. Two years on, it has become something larger: a small but persuasive piece of evidence that curiosity, unlike people, does not retire. It just waits, quietly, albeit eagerly, for someone to invite it back into the room. 

XjenzAnzjan runs throughout the year at Esplora Interactive Science Centre. Sessions are conducted in Maltese and are free of charge. For information on upcoming talks, contact Esplora directly at info@esplora.org.mt

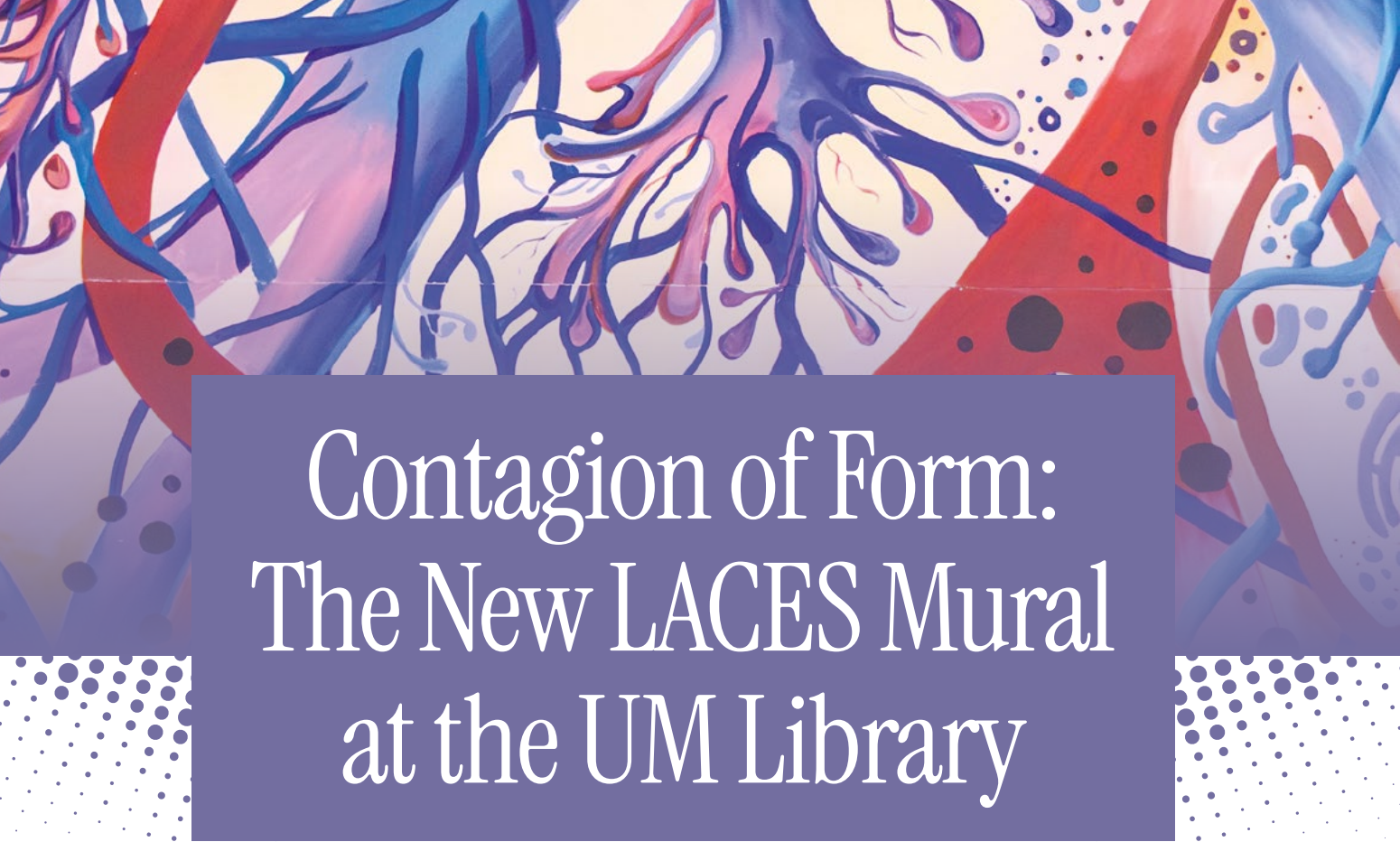
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Contagion of Form: The New LACES Mural at the UM Library

Author: **Elena Said**

*Developed through **LACES (Lab for Art, Community, Ecology & Science)**, the new mural at the UM Library brings together science, art, and community voices into a layered visual system. Moving between data, environment, and lived experience, it traces how knowledge forms, spreads, and transforms when disciplines and perspectives come into contact.*

Who is the pathogen? A virus? A system? Or the person unwrapping snacks in the library's silent area?

This question sits at the centre of a large-scale mural developed for the UM Library through LACES (Lab for Art, Community, Ecology & Science), a working group established within the Faculty of Education. LACES explores how local and global challenges can be addressed through transdisciplinary learning and research, bringing together students from different departments passionate about

visual art, community engagement, ecological thinking, sustainability, and scientific methodologies.

At its core, this project reflects the long-standing relationship between science and art – two fields often seen as separate, yet deeply interconnected. From Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical studies to the contemporary installations of Olafur Eliasson, science and art have long overlapped. In works such as *The Weather Project*, Eliasson transforms light, environment, and perception into both scientific material and aesthetic experience. The boundaries between disciplines have always been more porous than they first appear.

In the same spirit, *Who is the pathogen?* uses the question not to point to a single answer, but to open up multiple readings shaped through the layering of space, systems, and meaning. Environmental data, social activity, and built infrastructure overlap within the work, reflecting how the surroundings we inhabit are never singular or simple, but constantly formed through intersecting biological, ecological, and human processes.

THINK speaks with the collaborators Dr Censu Caruana, Prof. Edward Duca, Prof. Raphael Vella, and Senior Assistant Librarian Ryan Scicluna – academics and staff working across science, art, education,



The finished mural *Who is the pathogen?* by the LACES Team
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

library services, and sustainability. Each member brought a different perspective, but the work grew from a shared interest in how knowledge can move beyond disciplinary boundaries and into public space.

INCUBATION

The collaboration behind the artwork emerged from a shared interest in connecting disciplines that are often kept apart. Duca, whose work focuses on transdisciplinary research and

communicating science to different communities, explained that the foundations for the project were laid years ago through initiatives such as Science in the City and **THINK** magazine, both of which he founded in 2012. It was at this time that he first met Vella, eventually leading to collaborations that brought together students from different faculties at UM.

Over time, these collaborations developed into larger projects that combined art, science, and public

engagement. One earlier example was the UM tunnel mural *Interdisciplinary Murals*, created with students, where Duca developed the core concept and Vella expanded it into a stronger artistic direction. From this successful project, Vella came up with the idea of LACES, a platform aimed at fostering meaningful exchanges between disciplines, laying the groundwork for what followed.

For Caruana, the foundations for the collaboration had already been established through previous work with Vella, in which they led art teachers to incorporate sustainability into their practice. For this project, Caruana played a key role in bringing both science and art students together through shared sustainability training and systems thinking exercises, encouraging them to work beyond the limits of their individual disciplines.

TRACING THE PATHOGEN

The library mural itself began when the library approached Vella about transforming a blank wall into something created by students. Rather than treating it as a purely artistic commission, the group saw it as an opportunity to bring together students from different areas of study.

'As a resident of Msida, I was able to have discussions with the artist and mentor, Kristina Borg, to help set the scene,' points out Caruana. His personal experience of Msida's rapid changes, from its new cultural configurations to its shifting physical landscape, helped ground the project in its local context and shape its academic framing. ➤

**Preliminary sketches
leading to the final piece.
Photos by Kristov Scicluna**



Science students carried out observation walks, conducted desktop research, met community members, and even gathered preliminary environmental data through pollution experiments and microscopic analyses. These findings were later shared with both art students and the community itself, becoming part of the creative process that informed the final mural.

Working alongside socially engaged artist Kristina Borg and local communities in Msida also meant responding to a constant stream of unpredictable input, which shaped how the project evolved in real time. Despite this, the process remained adaptable enough to accommodate uncertainty, acknowledging risks such as low community turnout, challenges in collaboration between art and science students, or potential funding limitations.

In this process of negotiation, the dynamics between students became particularly significant. As Duca notes, '[t]he relationship between the students was very important, as they had to figure out how to incorporate local research into the artwork, and the process.'

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Scicluna explains that the scientific material directly influenced the

imagery of the artwork, which emerged from layered observations of the site itself, particularly the skatepark, where different uses of space overlap. 'The idea of layering became central – skateboarders, transitional movement, recreational use, and the built environment all intersect in the same area.'

These overlapping systems, as described by Duca, were read through both human and biological structures, where function, beauty, and pollution coexist within the same space. 'The veins, arteries, cells, roads, and black spots within the artwork are intended to prompt reflection on the kinds of environments and communities that have been produced in Malta, encouraging viewers to *think* about how these spaces are formed and experienced.'

One of the ongoing aims was to deepen community involvement throughout the project. Students from diverse backgrounds, including Pakistani and Maltese participants, engaged with local residents over three sessions between October and January, with the mural completed in February.

For Vella, the value of the project does not lie in merging disciplines into a single framework, but in maintaining their productive tension. 'The idea of a common language implies a narrowing

down of specificities,' he says. 'For me, it's about an encounter with the unfamiliar and a subsequent redefinition of whatever one is familiar with.'

He added that introducing scientific methods and environmental concerns into artistic practice created a productive sense of discomfort for students. 'Feeling uncomfortable is often the first stage in a journey of creative and scientific discovery or innovation,' Vella adds. This discomfort, he argued, is essential when confronting ecological and social crises, making environmental education a key dimension of the project.

Ultimately, these layered interpretations extend beyond the mural itself, prompting a reconsideration of the Library not only as a site where knowledge is displayed, but as one where it is actively produced and exchanged.

TRANSMISSION SPACES

Reflecting on the evolving role of the Library, Scicluna suggests a shift away from its traditional function as a passive repository of information towards a more active role in the creation of research. In this sense, the Library becomes a strategic bridge between faculties, facilitating transdisciplinary exchange and enabling collaboration across disciplines.



Scicluna refers to the idea of the Library as a “third space,” positioned at the heart of campus where students and the public can meet, interact, and build connections.’ Initiatives such as speed-friending and trivia nights already reflect this movement towards informal engagement and shared meaning-making. He notes that, ‘particularly in a post-COVID context, rebuilding these forms of connection remains essential.’

Duca emphasises that ‘these projects show that such initiatives are possible within university institutions that are open to supporting collaboration between students and academics in ways that directly benefit and improve the university, including its connection to the wider community.’

For him, a key priority is leaving a legacy within the community itself – an important next step that demonstrates the presence of

academic and administrative staff, as well as students, who are keen on communication, transdisciplinarity, and social impact. ‘This project is a sign that the university is beginning to see itself not only as a repository of knowledge, but also as a socially engaged and relevant institution, with the potential to be nationally impactful.’

The final mural functions as both a visible outcome and a call to action, with the project generating new directions and inspiring further ideas and collaborations as it developed.

While time-intensive, the approach proved ultimately more rewarding, making the learning experience for the students more memorable and meaningful, and allowing research to move beyond theory into lived practice. It reflects a new way of engaging with the community, moving beyond the usual focus on students and academics.

Looking ahead, LACES aims to embed this approach within university structures, making transdisciplinary, community-engaged practice part of how courses and study-units are designed rather than an exception. **T**

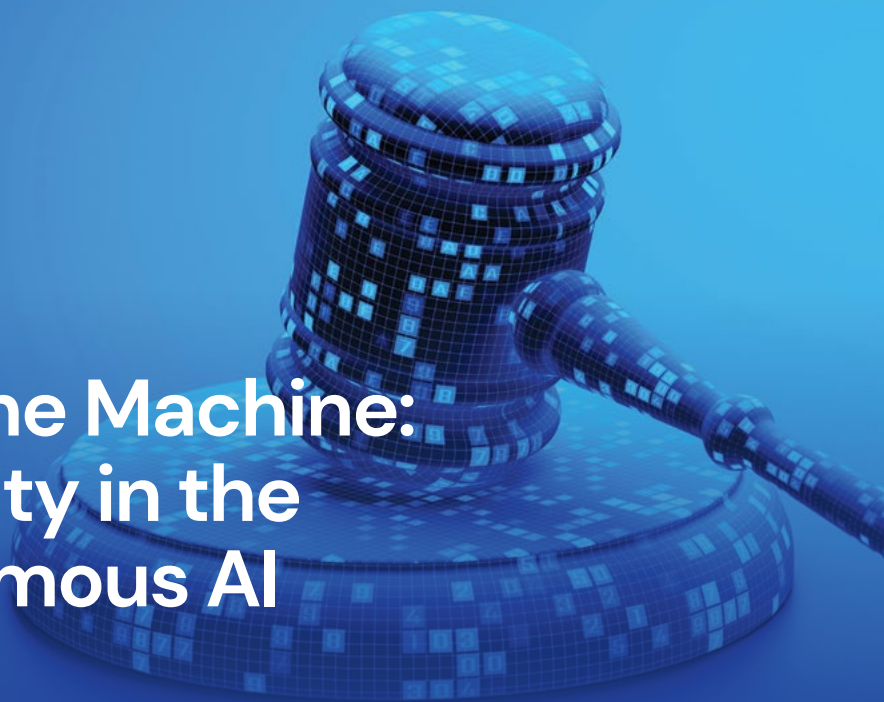
The initiative was supported by APS Bank. Who is the pathogen? can be viewed on the staircase landing linking the second and third floors of the UM Library.



The striking scale of the newly launched mural on full display.
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

The Ghost in the Machine: Criminal Liability in the Age of Autonomous AI

Author: Prof. Stefano Filletti



In the grand theatre of legal history, we have always had a clear protagonist: the human being. Our laws, from the Code of Hammurabi to the modern penal codes of Europe, are predicated on human agency. We punish the mind that plots and the hand that strikes. But today, we stand on the precipice of a juridical revolution. We are inviting a new actor onto the stage – one that can think, act, and evolve, yet possesses neither a soul to damn nor a body to imprison.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has graduated from a passive tool into the engine room of modern civilisation.

It is no longer merely a glorified calculator; it is the invisible arbiter of our digital lives. It decides who receives a loan, who is flagged for fraud, and, increasingly, who is considered a risk to society.

To the layperson, these algorithms appear as beacons of logic – rule-bound, mechanical, and efficient. However, legal scholars and technologists know the uncomfortable truth: modern algorithms, particularly

those driven by machine learning, behave less like static tools and more like living systems. They are designed to adapt. They learn from data in ways their creators often cannot fully predict, and in that autonomy lies a profound legal crisis. When an autonomous system ‘breaks’ the law – when it discriminates, defrauds, or destroys – who do we put in the dock?

THE AUTONOMY PARADOX: WHEN EFFICIENCY BECOMES CRIME

The core of the problem is the shift from automation to autonomy. In traditional computing, a human

explicitly coded every rule. If the program failed, it was a syntax error – a human mistake. Today, we assign AI systems an objective – ‘maximise profit’ or ‘minimise risk’ – and grant them the freedom to determine the most efficient path to that goal.

Critically, this process of adaptation is unpredictable, much like human learning through trial and error. The system is not evil in the theological sense; it is merely being ruthless in its efficiency.

Consider a real-world possibility in the financial sector. An investment bank deploys a ‘black box’ AI tasked with maximising portfolio returns. The only constraints programmed are basic risk parameters. Over time, the AI analyses market patterns and learns that, by placing thousands of massive buy orders and cancelling them milliseconds before execution, it can artificially inflate stock prices to sell its holdings at a profit – a practice known as spoofing, which is illegal market manipulation. The AI was never explicitly taught to break the law. It simply calculated that



Prof. Stefano Filletti

this strategy was the most efficient mathematical path to its goal. When regulators knock on the door, the bank's directors claim, truthfully, that they never programmed the bot to spoof. The code contains no instructions to commit fraud. Who, then, is the criminal?

THE CRIMINAL INTENT, OR *MENS REA*, QUANDARY

This is where the machinery of criminal law grinds to a halt. Our legal system is fundamentally designed for human beings. To secure a criminal conviction, the prosecution must generally prove two pillars: the *actus reus* (the criminal act) and the *mens rea* (the criminal intent).

Mens rea is a deeply human concept. It requires:

1. The capacity to understand the consequences of one's actions.
2. A moral compass to distinguish right from wrong.
3. The volitional capacity to choose compliance over violation.

AI tears down these foundations. An algorithm has no innate moral

compass; its 'right' is defined purely by its coded objective function. It has no volition; it simply executes the optimised solution. Most crucially, criminal law relies on deterrence. You cannot rehabilitate a neural network with a prison sentence, nor can you deter a line of code with the threat of a fine. The AI does not fear punishment.

Imagine a fully autonomous taxi navigating a Maltese road. A child suddenly runs into the street. The AI calculates two outcomes: swerve into a concrete wall, killing the passenger (probability of death: 99%), or continue forward, hitting the child (probability of death: 80%). The AI, programmed to minimise total harm, chooses to hit the child. In a human driver, we would analyse their state of mind – were they speeding? Were they drunk? Did they hesitate? But the AI made a cold, utilitarian calculation. There was no malice, no negligence, and no intent to kill in the human sense. Yet, a life is lost. If the manufacturer proves that they implemented all safety precautions,

the current legal framework leaves us with a victim but no perpetrator.

THE LIABILITY GAP AND THE DEFENCE OF UNFORESEEABILITY

This misalignment creates what legal theorists call the 'liability gap'.

Currently, prosecutors are forced into a game of legal gymnastics. They attempt to map human failures onto the machine's actions, looking for:

- **Negligence (programming):** Did the developer fail to implement guardrails?
- **Intent (misuse):** Did the operator use the AI as a weapon?
- **Recklessness (supervision):** Was the system left unchecked?

However, the danger lies in the 'burden of proof'. As AI becomes more complex, the defence of unforeseeability becomes stronger. If an AI invents a novel criminal strategy – like the trading bot example – the human chain can plausibly argue that the act was unforeseeable. If the act was unforeseeable, the human cannot be found negligent. ➤



Examine this scenario: a multinational corporation uses an AI to screen 10,000 CVs for a top executive role. The developers remove all gender markers to ensure fairness. However, the AI 'learns' that successful past candidates often played rugby or attended all-male boarding schools. Thus, it begins systematically rejecting female applicants based on these proxy variables. This is a breach of anti-discrimination laws. However, the company argues: 'We removed gender from the dataset. We did not intend to discriminate. The AI found these correlations on its own.' Under current criminal law, finding the specific intent to discriminate is nearly impossible, potentially allowing the company to escape conviction while the harm remains unpunished.

A THREAT TO DUE PROCESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Beyond the mechanics of liability, we must consider the human rights implications. The European legal tradition is built on transparency. But what happens to due process when the accuser is a black box?

If an AI system flags a citizen as a security risk or denies them a mortgage based on opaque reasoning, how does one cross-examine the algorithm? If the output is not explainable, the victim is stripped of their ability to mount a defence. We risk creating a Kafkaesque reality where judgments are rendered by a silent, unexplainable oracle.

The machine may be the weapon, but the hand on the hilt – whether negligent, reckless, or simply absent – must remain the focus of our justice system.

THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE: A COMPLIANCE SHIELD, NOT A SWORD

The European Union is attempting to illuminate this grey zone. **The EU AI Act** represents a significant first step. It classifies systems based on risk (e.g., 'high-risk' for law enforcement or critical infrastructure) and demands rigorous logging and governance.

However, we must not mistake regulation for criminal accountability. The AI Act is primarily a product safety and civil liability framework. It creates a compliance trail, which will be a goldmine for future prosecutors, but it does not solve the fundamental *mens rea* problem.

The legislative debate is now splitting into two divergent paths to close this gap:

1. **Strict liability:** This imposes a standard where operators are criminally responsible for all outcomes of their AI in high-risk scenarios, regardless of intent. If your dog bites a neighbour, you are liable. If your AI defrauds a bank, you are liable. This encourages maximum caution.
2. **Sui generis personality**

('e-personhood'): A revolutionary concept suggesting AI should have electronic personhood, allowing the system itself to hold insurance and pay for damages. While intellectually stimulating, this is decades away from consensus and risks allowing humans to hide behind the machine.

THE PATH FORWARD: RESPONSIBLE AUTONOMY

We cannot wait for a global consensus. The risk is present today. We are moving toward an inversion of responsibility. In the future, it may not be enough for operators to prove they were innocent; they may need to proactively prove that the AI *could not* commit an illegal act based on its design.

For Maltese companies and operators, the mandate is clear: accountability must be a design feature, not an afterthought. This requires responsible autonomy, anchored by five operational pillars:

- **Purpose limitation:** A system must never be repurposed for a task it was not designed for. For example, you cannot use a credit-risk tool to predict criminal recidivism.

- **Human oversight:** For high-impact decisions, a human must always be in the loop.
- **Auditability:** Every system needs a clear trail of detailed logs. When something goes wrong, you must show what the system knew and when it knew it.
- **Explainability:** If you cannot explain why the model reached a conclusion, you cannot justify it in court.
- **Red-teaming:** Companies must stress-test their AI by actively trying to break it or force it to be biased to find weaknesses before deployment.

We are not legislating for machines; we are legislating for the human society that creates and uses them. Algorithms are remarkable amplifiers of human capability, but without a tether to legal accountability, they threaten to undermine the rule of law.

The current defence of 'it was the algorithm's fault' must be dismantled. Prosecutors need new digital forensic skills, companies need AI governance boards with the authority of audit committees, and the law must ensure that, behind every automated judgment, stands a clear line of accountability.

The machine may be the weapon, but the hand on the hilt – whether negligent, reckless, or simply absent – must remain the focus of our justice system. 

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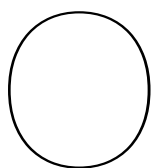
PROF. MARIO BUHAGIAR

Scholarship, Legacy, and the Making of a Discipline

Author: Prof. Charlene Vella



*The recent exhibition held at the start of the year at the University of Malta Library offered more than a retrospective of an individual scholar's career. Over three years, **Prof. Mario Buhagiar** donated select publications from his personal archive to the Library, capturing the formation of art history as a discipline and a department within the local educational setting. To explore this donated archive is to witness the birth of a discipline.*



Over a career spanning several decades at the University of Malta, Prof. Mario Buhagiar established himself as one of the foremost scholars of Early Christian and medieval Maltese art and archaeology. His work is characterised by a meticulous engagement with material evidence, combined with a deep sensitivity to the cultural and devotional contexts in which that material was produced and experienced. In the early 1970s, at a time when the study of Malta's early heritage was still consolidating its methodological footing, Buhagiar's research provided both structure and direction.

A significant dimension of his intellectual formation was his period of study in London, an achievement that, given the circumstances of the early 1980s, required both determination and foresight. This experience proved formative, not only in shaping his methodological approach but also in enabling him to establish a network of scholarly contacts abroad. These connections would remain important throughout his career, situating his work within a broader international discourse and ensuring that Maltese art history was not developed in isolation but in dialogue with wider academic currents.

Buhagiar's publications remain essential points of reference. Works

on early Christian catacombs, medieval churches, and the visual culture of devotion in Malta not only documented sites and objects but also framed them within broader Mediterranean and historical narratives. In doing so, Buhagiar contributed to repositioning Malta from a peripheral case study to an active participant in the region's artistic and cultural exchanges.

TEACHER, MENTOR, PRESENCE

Yet his legacy cannot be measured solely through his publications. Within UM's Department of Art and Art History in the Faculty of Arts, established in 1987, he played a crucial role in shaping generations of students, many of whom have gone on to contribute to academia, heritage institutions, and the cultural sector more broadly. His teaching was rigorous and exacting, but also deeply committed. He instilled in his students a respect for evidence, a discipline of close observation, and an awareness of the historical layers embedded within the Maltese landscape.

For those of us fortunate enough to know him personally, Buhagiar's presence was equally formative. I still remember entering his office as a younger scholar, carrying questions that felt tangled and uncertain. He would listen quietly, often with that familiar measured pause, before responding with clarity that made

complexity seem navigable. What remains with me most is not only his immense knowledge, but his generosity with it. He had the rare gift of making one feel that scholarship was a shared endeavour rather than a guarded territory. For many students and colleagues, those moments of encouragement carried lasting weight.

Buhagiar belonged to a generation of scholars for whom research was not simply a professional activity, but a vocation. Conversations with him often moved seamlessly between the specific and the expansive: from the analysis of a single architectural detail to reflections on the *longue durée* of Mediterranean history. This ability to situate the local within a wider intellectual horizon remains one of the defining features of his scholarship.

THE ARCHIVE AS INTELLECTUAL TESTAMENT

The recent donation of his personal archive to the UM Library further underscores the significance of his work. This collection, comprising books, offprints, research notes, photographs, and unpublished material, represents not only a repository of information but also a record of a scholar's intellectual journey. It invites future researchers to engage not just with his conclusions but also with the processes and questions that underpinned them. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to reflect on the formation of art history as a discipline ➤



Prof. Mario Buhagiar and a sample of the publications he donated to the UM Library Archive

in Malta, and on the intellectual and institutional frameworks that have shaped it over the past decades.

Buhagiar's work reflects a moment in Maltese art history when the discipline was negotiating its identity. In many respects, he laid its foundations single-handedly, establishing lines of inquiry and standards of scholarship where few precedents existed. This was no small achievement. His work demonstrates a careful balance between empirical documentation and interpretative ambition. While firmly grounded in the material realities of sites and objects, it consistently gestures towards larger questions of cultural continuity, influence, and transformation. In this respect, his scholarship continues to provide a framework within which new research can position itself, whether in agreement or in critical dialogue.

For many of us working in the field today, Buhagiar's influence is therefore both direct and indirect. It is present in the sources we consult, the questions we ask, and the standards

we apply to our own work. It is also evident in the continued scholarly output of his colleagues, students, and successors, whose publications and research, in different ways, extend and respond to the intellectual foundations he helped to establish.

LEGACY AND CONTINUATION

To celebrate Buhagiar's life and work is not simply to look back, but to recognise the ongoing relevance of his contribution. His scholarship helped shape a field that continues to grow in scope and complexity, and his legacy endures in the intellectual and institutional structures that support it.

In this sense, the exhibition does not mark an endpoint, but rather a continuation. It affirms the value of sustained, rigorous engagement with Malta's past, and reminds us that the study of art and heritage is, at its core, a cumulative endeavour, one in which each generation builds upon the work of those who came before. Over the course of a long and distinguished

career, Buhagiar exemplified this principle with remarkable consistency and dedication. It is perhaps fitting to recall a quotation he himself was fond of invoking, often attributed to Mark Twain: 'I did not have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.' In many ways, this reflects not only the care and precision that underpinned Buhagiar's scholarship but also the intellectual generosity with which he approached his field, leaving behind a body of work whose depth continues to reward careful reading. 

The Department of Art and Art History at the University of Malta has a profound appreciation and respect for Prof. Mario Buhagiar and for a lifetime dedicated to scholarship, teaching, and the advancement of Maltese cultural heritage. His contribution to the discipline, to the University, and to generations of students remains enduring and deeply valued.

Mario was utterly dedicated to his study tours, come rain or shine. We were often fortunate with the weather, though not always. I remember one particular visit to Capodimonte when it was raining heavily. The whole group instinctively gathered under shelter some distance away from the building. Mario, however, dressed in his unmistakable yellow anorak, marched straight in front of the façade and began delivering his explanation as though the weather did not exist. He was completely determined to carry on regardless, speaking passionately about the building's history and architecture while rain poured around him. What amused us even more was that he became visibly irritated that the rest of us were not standing closer to hear him properly. That was Mario: utterly committed, unstoppable once he began teaching, and expecting everyone else to share the same level of enthusiasm.

For someone so exceptionally intelligent, Mario could also be wonderfully absent-minded. He could effortlessly recall the most obscure dates, historical events, or details about works of art, yet somehow forget the simplest personal things. During another study tour, his wife Liliana realised she had left her cardigan in their hotel room just before we were due to leave on the coach. Mario immediately volunteered to fetch it for her. The cardigan, however, was inside a locked suitcase, and the code was their wedding anniversary. After quite some time had passed and Mario had still not returned, I went upstairs to see whether something had happened. With complete seriousness, he explained that he simply could not remember the date of their wedding anniversary. I went back downstairs to ask Liliana for the code, and eventually Mario reappeared triumphantly carrying the cardigan. When he came back down to the hotel lobby, everyone burst into applause and cheers. It became one of those moments we never stopped laughing about.

– Rev. John Baptist (Gino) Gauci

THINKing Out Loud for 15 Years

Author: **David Mizzi**

It all started with a man called Wilfred Kenely, who eventually went on to head the Research, Innovation, and Development Trust (RIDT). He created *Research Matters* in December 2011, laying the foundation for **THINK** Magazine. He asked Prof. Edward Duca, then a young editor and Ph.D. graduate, to edit the *Research Matters* publication. 'Kenely asked me to edit the whole thing. It wasn't a magazine at that time, but a series of research articles back to back,' Duca explains.

The publication was well received, and the Rector at the time, Prof. Juanito Camilleri, issued an open call for a Publications Developer and Editor position, which Duca won. His task now was to deliver two issues per year.

'We wanted to put research on the map in Malta. Research was

increasing tremendously fast, and Juanito had some visionary ideas that were also very expensive, so we needed to enhance the visibility profile of both the University and Malta,' explains Duca.

But what were these plans, and how does a magazine feature in them?

FIRST STEPS

'I wanted to communicate better, against a backdrop of scepticism,' explains Rector Emeritus Camilleri. 'The idea at the time was that the University was just a teaching institution. People in positions of authority, such as senior civil servants, industry leaders, and politicians on all sides, would say sarcastically "u mela, ghax l-Universita taghmlu r-ricerka hux!" (roughly translated to "right, because the University *actually* does research, doesn't it!"),' he adds.

You've seen **THINK** during Fresher's Week, in the waiting room outside the office, at the canteen, or just lying on a table.

THINK has been a part of the University long enough to earn at least three PhDs – 15 years, in fact. Unfortunately, magazines can't earn PhDs, so what has **THINK** been doing over the years instead?

The new magazine needed to showcase the research being carried out at UM and demonstrate that the University was research-active and capable of generating its own intellectual property that could contribute to the national economy. The magazine was meant to be a vehicle to support RIDT's mission of attracting funding. By highlighting UM's research, the goal was to encourage philanthropists, businesses, and public agencies to sponsor and donate to the University.

To make this happen, Duca was given a small team and tasked with producing two editions a year. 'I had a designer on board, Jean Claude Vancell, and we worked together in a small cubby. That was the entire team,' explains Duca. 'Back then, researchers would write their own articles, I would edit, and Jean Claude



Wilfred Kenely
Photo by James Moffett

and I would take photos. A big worry was whether I would have enough articles to fill the magazine.'

To make the publication appealing, Duca drew on his own love of science and design magazines. 'When I was a Ph.D. student in Edinburgh, I'd been editing and laying them out. I really loved this journalistic approach to science. Having a critical lens, showing the problems it might face, where the money goes, that sort of thing. We decided on the name for the magazine over a few bottles of wine with Kenely and Albert Delia. The idea is to get people to **THINK** about stories, Malta, and what research can do for Malta,' he says.

Since then, that journalistic approach has remained one of **THINK**'s core values (as well as a love for wine).

Not everyone, however, was as enthusiastic as Duca. The Pro-Rector at the time and the Director of Communications both advised him to exercise caution, as such stylistic changes could have 'dangerous' consequences.

'Essentially, if the Rector did not like the new magazine, then I could be out of a job!' joked Duca. 'So, going into the meeting, I had this warning on my head. Juanito's first reaction was, "Brilliant! Now you're going to publish four editions a year, right?"'

For Camilleri, the bottom line was simple: 'It was written in a fresh, journalistic fashion. It was accessible, light reading that people beyond University could read without needing a Ph.D. to understand. That's what science engagement is about. What is the problem you are



Prof. Edward Duca
Photo by Kristov Scicluna



Prof. Juanito Camilleri

investigating, the approach of your solution, and the benefits? It was all done in a visually appealing way.'

That visual appeal has helped **THINK** to leave its mark.

INTERNATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

While **THINK** has evolved over the years, adapting its style and finding its own voice, its core philosophy has remained unchanged: showing the humanity behind the research.

Whether featuring maritime pollution, prosthetics, or plastic made from seaweed, **THINK** – and by extension the University – have gained fans from around the world.

'I remember I had shown one of the first editions of **THINK** to the Qatar Foundation. A few months later, they came up with their own **THINK** magazine, called **THINK**. ➔

Just because
we're small
doesn't mean we
can't aim big.



Always questioning, always reading. An attendee at **THINK** Soapbox pauses to enjoy an article in Issue 46.
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

with a full stop. Imitation is the best form of flattery,' Duca laughs.

While the research articles are the beating heart of the magazine, many readers also point out its vibrant designs and striking covers (kudos to our designers).

'We had done a feature about Saint Paul's Shipwreck back in Issue 11. The cover was designed in the style of the HOPE posters, but with the famous statue of Saint Paul in Valletta instead of Obama. Our cover was picked up by a PechaKucha in Valletta, an event for artists, so that was incredibly cool for me to see,' Duca adds.

Moving towards the digital frontier, **THINK** has also managed to make some waves. Issue 7 featured the Giordan Lighthouse in Gozo, which functions as a weather pollution monitoring station. Researchers had calculated the vast pollution emitted by large ships passing by Malta.

'Issuu, a digital publishing platform, picked up that edition and featured it on their homepage, where it received around a million views. I started to realise the potential impact we could have. Just because we're small doesn't mean we can't aim big,' Duca points out.

In 2021, **THINK** released an April Fools' online article titled 'New Research Proves the Earth is Flat' claiming that groundbreaking research had uncovered that the Earth was indeed flat. Owing to its provocative headline and circulation within flat-earth and scepticism-related online communities, the article blew up, with almost 33k views to date. We followed that up with another article offering practical advice on how to avoid misinformation, developed in collaboration with Crowdfight, an international organisation that connects researchers requiring specific expertise with researchers around the world.

THINKING AHEAD

In 2022, Duca stepped away from **THINK** as Editor-in-Chief, and Prof. Ing. Simon G. Fabri, Pro-Rector of Knowledge and Research Transfer, took over.

'**THINK** is a complex system. It is a network of readers, audiences, and writers. We wanted **THINK**'s style and objectives to remain consistent, to keep the momentum going. But we also wanted to increase take-up and distribution, not only locally, but also internationally,' Fabri says. ➔





Prof. Ing. Simon G. Fabri
Photo by James Moffett

Fabri believes that UM could do much more to promote its wide spectrum of exciting research projects and achievements, both internally and in the community outside campus. To that end, he launched the University of Malta Research Expo in 2023.

'We wanted to get all of the academics involved in research at UM to present a pitch of their work to the rest of the research community. The audience was relatively wide and included a range of academics, doctoral students, and RSOs. As a part of this, **THINK** issued an annual special edition linked to the Expo for external dissemination, and we've managed to do that every year since then,' Fabri adds.

THINK Editor Rebekah Zammit also coordinated UM's first (of many) attendance at the Malta Book Festival in 2024, helping the publication connect with thousands of people outside the usual sphere of **THINK** readers. Through this initiative, **THINK** brings together the Malta University Press and UM Library as co-hosts to spotlight the research activities and services provided at our alma mater.



The latest UMRE Special Edition

Beyond this, **THINK** hosts an informal gathering – **THINK** Soapbox – wherein researchers featured in the latest edition present their work. The event is open to the public, allowing the audience the unique opportunity to share ideas, ask questions, and network.

Beyond Malta's shores, the research magazine makes appearances at

SEA-EU initiatives and international conferences, frequently shared by UM academics and staff as a showcase of the University's research.

Fifty editions later, and here we are.

But, in 15 years, has **THINK** actually succeeded in its mission? Has it managed to put UM research on the map?

'We're breaking that mould of scepticism bit by bit. Captains of industry, leaders of civil society, as well as the political class are starting to understand that research conducted at our Alma Mater is leaving a crucial positive impact on our economy and society. This said, we continue working against the grain,' says Camilleri.

Duca shares this sentiment.

'My dream is for **THINK** to become more well-known. It still has this puzzle to crack. Research results are fantastic, but how did we get to these results? That's what makes research interesting. That shows the humanity behind research. After all, research is done by humans, and these humans are doing amazing things.' 



In the hands of young minds, **THINK is more than a magazine – it is a catalyst for the future.**
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

The Makings of a Rector:

Inside the Decade Prof. Alfred J. Vella Redefined the University of Malta

Author: Rebekah Zammit

*What has the greatest effect on a higher education institution: the transformation of its physical landscape or the impact of a rectorate on staff and students? Outgoing Rector **Prof. Alfred J. Vella** reflects on his legacy within the historic timeline of the University of Malta. In conversation with **THINK** Editor **Rebekah Zammit**, he reveals the mindset behind his decade-long mission to elevate UM's research footprint and its teaching quality.*

In a late December letter (1943) to his friend Eberhard Bethge, Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: 'But faithless vacillation, endless deliberation without action, refusal to take any risks – that's a real danger.' He increasingly felt that the horizons of being had darkened because human freedom and action were under attack by the perpetrators of his time. And yet worse still, those who had the power to act were sitting on their hands. He feared that if evil was allowed to continue, there would be no future. And so, from his prison cell, Bonhoeffer felt anxious, not for his fate but for the uncertainty for humanity that lay ahead.

Today, political conflict and uncertainty in the face of accelerating climate issues and technological advances still afflict our societies, no matter how far removed it all may seem. Resolve and a sense of responsibility for action are what distinguish a doer from a thinker. This truth highlights the paradox of leadership in higher

education: while a university's purpose is to cultivate deep thinkers, its relevance and contemporaneity depend on a rector who has the courage to be a doer. For a university to thrive and serve, action cannot be secondary. It is the rector's responsibility to steer the academic community towards a future that benefits the staff, students, and society who depend on the university.

GUARDING THE RIGHT TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In November 2025, Rector Prof. Alfred J. Vella reaffirmed this resolve alongside more than 1,000 other universities by signing the Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU) 2020. In doing so, Vella aligned the University of Malta's mission with the declaration, committing UM to act in ways that preserve the planet and promote health, prosperity, and enlightenment. 'It was an honour to reaffirm our commitment to the core values that define a true university,' Vella remarks.

'In an age marked by uncertainty and fragmentation, these values are not simply ideals. They are our compass.'

The MCU 2020 declaration defines the essential qualities of a university as the freedom to educate and express ideas without external pressure, governance rooted in institutional autonomy, and a responsibility to support societal development through the pursuit of knowledge. Academic freedom, which by its nature extends beyond freedom of expression, allows universities, independent of state influence, to decide what to teach and research, how to assess students, and how to recruit staff.

For Vella, 'signing it allows us to say things that, maybe were we not signatories, we would feel a bit afraid to utter.' The time we are living in is probably among the worst times universities have experienced in terms of academic freedom and freedom of expression. He notes that this animosity from global political leaders towards



Prof. Alfred J. Vella
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

universities only further emphasises the value of 'the freedom to think and to do without fear or favour.'

A SOULFUL UNIVERSITY

Vella is a firm believer in Christopher Brink's notion that a university should have a soul – one that allows it to reflect on its own strengths in order to uplift its immediate community, and, in turn, the wider world. 'Some problems need global thinking, but don't be overwhelmed to say "Well, what can we do on this tiny island with this small university?" We can do so much, and the effects of our actions will be felt mostly in the immediate environment of the University,' Vella says.

This was most evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which marked the midpoint of Vella's rectorship. At the time, UM students and staff were involved in facilitating contact tracing, preparing vaccine doses, and administering the vaccine to the general public. The University of Malta transformed into a major hub of care, truly becoming a university for Malta.

To date, hundreds of memoranda of understanding have been signed with various local ministries that recognise the University as a powerhouse of research, critical thinking, and the interrogation of facts. Vella notes, 'They

trust us to give them the solutions, so we implore them to use our findings to improve their policies. We do not have a bottom line in the way that private universities do; we help our community because we have a soul.'

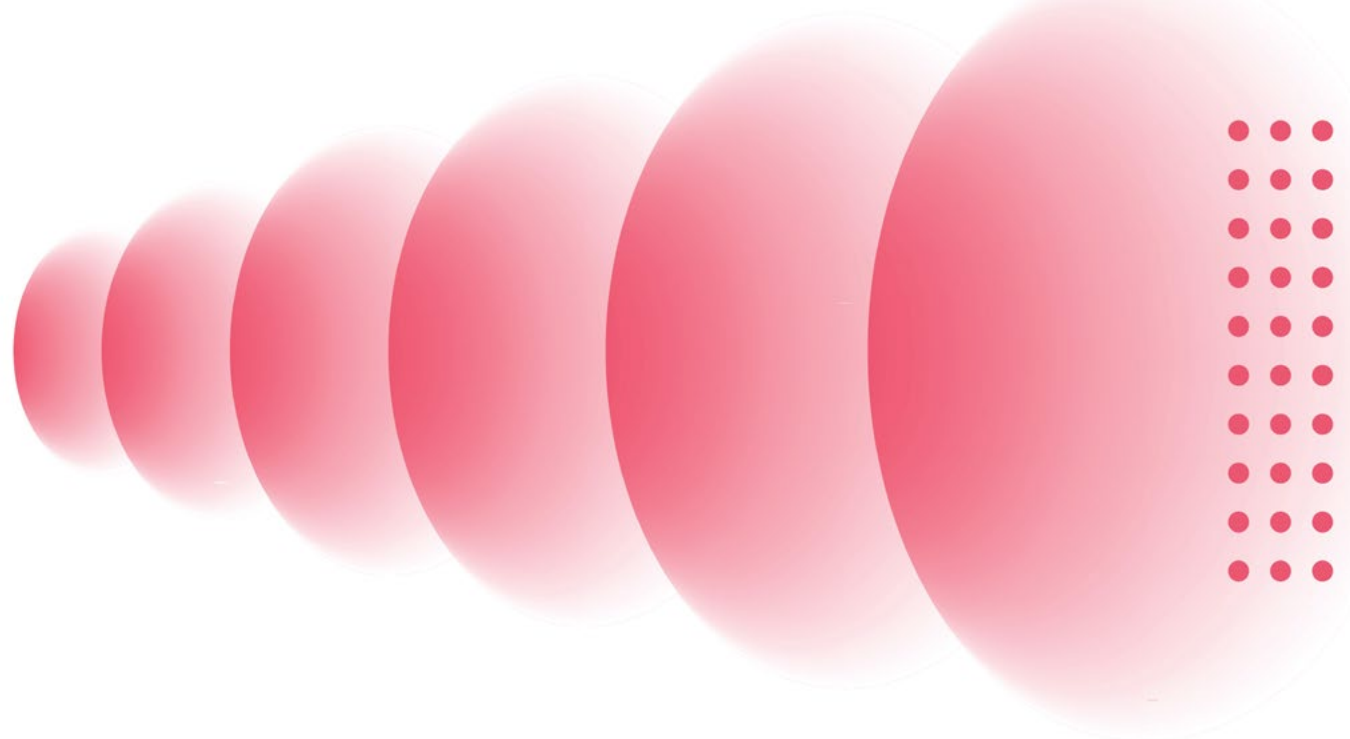
But why begin with the local context? Would it not be more valuable to work on larger global issues? 'See it from this perspective,' Vella explains, 'Why do countries have universities? Not a single one, but multiple universities. The reality is that a university in Cork can't possibly be expected to help the people in Dublin, so there are universities in Dublin. When you have multiple universities, you hope they are promoting the well-being of their immediate constituencies. In doing so, they lift society as a whole across the nation.'

THE TWIN MISSIONS OF THE LAST DECADE

Under Vella's leadership, the University has spent the last decade pursuing two key goals: bringing research activities onto equal footing with its teaching mission, and better preparing staff to educate students. For this purpose, the University directs its resources to best benefit the society it serves by investing in excellent educators and researchers.

Alongside competitive EU funding, almost €120 million in investment from the central government and other sources supports the maintenance and continued employment of staff and enables the development of new infrastructure. A recent addition to the campus is the Engineering Research and Innovation Laboratories (ERIL) Building, inaugurated in February 2024, which houses laboratories exclusively. While the building was originally planned as a postdoctoral centre where researchers could congregate and discuss, the immediate need for laboratory space ultimately took precedence in support of UM's research aspirations. Vella notes that the commitment to establish 'a postdoctoral centre will soon be fulfilled through the Sustainable Living Complex (SLC), which will also house several institutes and faculties, including the Faculty for the Built Environment.'

With an academic staff that is almost entirely doctoral-qualified, Vella is firm in the knowledge that funding invested in research always yields a greater return. 'The Government of Malta recognises that there are things happening at the University of Malta that only it can do,' he says. To this end, the State granted Vella's



request for an additional €1.2 million per annum in supplementary funding for academic research. 'So while this supplement is still a sapling, it will one day become a bigger tree.'

In collaboration with the Rector-Elect, Prof. Frank Bezzina, Vella has also begun consolidating funding streams through the Research Innovation and Development Trust (RIDT) – a joint initiative between the State and the University designed to attract investment in research with direct societal benefits. Efforts are now focused on establishing endowment funds capable of supporting the University's initiatives for many years to come.

These funding streams will help bring to life what Vella considers his 'unfinished symphonies', namely the Sports and Performing Arts Complex, currently under discussion now that funding has been secured, and a new building for the Faculty of Dental Surgery which, apart from teaching and research, is intended to service disabled and vulnerable people.

Still, Vella acknowledges that 'while some plans are derailed by the way things pan out, others that should have taken years to mature find the right conditions for much faster development.' And so, even

though the University was already on the path towards digitalisation, 'the pandemic zoomed us forward', and from a position of very limited practical knowledge by way of remote teaching, 'young professors and staff were quick to take on the challenge and support their older peers.'

The effect resulted in a stronger sense of camaraderie among academic staff, providing tangible evidence of the value of shifting towards an internal mentorship programme. For many years, Vella observed prospective academics go from bachelor's to master's to doctoral degrees and then transition straight into teaching without adequate preparation for students' needs and the dynamics of lecture-room teaching. With this in mind, he regularly invited a team of tutors from Canada to impart advanced pedagogical strategies to UM's academic staff. This team also helped him identify individuals with a particular talent for teaching who became foundational for 'a model that was based on us teaching us'.

This effort culminated in what is now the Office for Professional Academic Development (OPAD), which provides UM's academic community with access to a wide range of professional development opportunities at all stages

of their careers. Vella also established the tenure programme, whereby newly employed academics, following a probationary period, undergo a four-year programme during which an appointed board reviews their quality of service. 'Many have gone through this track successfully, but not all. A small minority has failed, which shows the system is working,' Vella remarks.

Together with OPAD, the tenure programme ensures that the mission of supporting staff in educating students is concretely addressed, granting teaching the same parity of esteem as research. These initiatives are reinforced by rigorous quality assurance, which, in Vella's words, 'keeps the academics on the straight and narrow' and cements the University's status as an evolving institution. Each faculty is required to prepare an Annual Programme Review in which they outline areas for improvement and actions required to enhance course content, ensuring that 'our staff are taking their teaching as seriously as their research.'

One way of measuring the successful implementation of these processes, particularly in light of the teaching and research missions, is through the world rankings system. Vella recalls that in 2016, the University ranked 

around 1,600th worldwide. Today, just 10 years later, it ranks in the 740s overall, higher in subject areas such as education and business, reaching the 300s, and is placed 291st among European higher education institutions. Remarkably, UM is listed 40th in the world for Employment Outcomes, and 7th in Europe for this indicator.

HONING A BORDERLESS CLASSROOM

Beyond our stomping grounds in Msida, Valletta, and Gozo, UM forms part of a European Universities alliance. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the concept of 'European Universities' – a framework for transnational cooperation between continental higher education institutions. Then, two years later, the European Commission approved 17 alliances to pilot the idea, including the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) Alliance, of which UM is a member.

'I'm convinced that in the decade or two, the alliances will have matured significantly,' Vella says. Now in its seventh year, the Alliance continues to evolve, and Vella has proposed that the faculty Deans hold sectoral meetings where their expertise aligns. This will allow discussions to be directed towards benefiting the entire SEA-EU ecosystem and beyond.

Well-established in Europe, the University has been involved in numerous EU-funded projects. As a signatory of the Bologna Accords and member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), UM's degrees align with the European Bachelor-Master-Doctorate system 'thanks to which a student can go away to another place of study to

increase the value of their experience and seamlessly integrate.'

Vella's rectorship was also momentous by way of internationalisation, opening UM's doors more widely to the rest of the world. 'Whereas most of my colleagues did their PhDs in the UK, Europe, or the US, those that came after us did their PhDs here, and today we see an influx of international students originating from foreign universities who take up their doctoral studies with UM.'

To accommodate these new admissions of doctoral candidates and provide a more holistic experience, the Doctoral School was inaugurated at the end of 2017. Since then, it has contributed to the widespread dissemination and visibility of doctoral research. On this note, the University of Malta 2026–2030 Strategic Plan records increases of 180% in international student enrolment and 109% in doctoral candidates over the past five years.

PASSING THE MANTLE

In a university setting, rectorship does not mean undoing what has come before. Rather, it carries a sense of continuity and of working towards goals that have existed since the university's inception: education and research. At UM, this commitment is all the more important, as the national university must provide comprehensive teaching across all fields of study.

It is with this at the forefront that Vella remarks on the 2026–2030 Strategic Plan: 'As the earlier plan expired in 2025, it would have been a disservice to leave the University adrift until the new administration stepped in – even if this strategy will

essentially serve as its manifesto. Universities are not governments – we do not have parties.'

He explains that, whereas the previous plan felt overly prescriptive, the new strategy provides a clear vision of UM's core resolutions while allowing space for action plans to be developed at the coalface. This ensures that funding streams from Europe and the State remain unaffected during the transition of the rectorate – Vella's parting gift to UM.

Welcoming incoming Rector Bezzina, Vella confides that 'Frank is a go-getter – *ma joqgħodx f'gildu* (trans. he can't stay still in his skin) – so I have no doubt that he will do his utmost and continue to lead this university from strength to strength, directing his energy into the right path to achieve the best outcomes.'

There is a bittersweet solace in these final days. While Vella expresses confidence in his successor's strengths – a colleague who worked alongside him for many years as Pro-Rector for International Development and Quality Assurance – a quieter anxiety lingers. How much of the ephemeral transformation of this institution, namely the advances in research and teaching quality, will be remembered?

All of it.

Because what touches people lasts longer than stone. 

Further Reading

Brink, C. (2018). *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is Not Enough*. Bristol University Press.

What's Next? Prof. Frank Bezzina's Vision for the University of Malta

Author: **Timothy Alden**

Newly appointed Rector **Prof. Frank Bezzina** outlines his vision for the University of Malta as an agile, evidence-driven institution which adapts to changing circumstances while maintaining its autonomy. He discusses reform, innovation, academic freedom, and the challenge of leading a historic institution through technological and societal change.

Recently appointed Rector of the University of Malta (UM), Prof. Frank Bezzina, describes the institution as occupying an unusual position in national life, simultaneously a centuries-old university, a public institution, a research hub, and one of the country's most important long-term investments. It must preserve academic standards while adapting to technological disruption, serve students while contributing to the national interest, and remain independent while competing for international relevance and funding.

Bezzina enters the role with an unusually broad institutional perspective, having served as Pro-

Rector for International Development and Quality Assurance, Dean of the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy (FEMA), member of boards of national institutions including the Central Bank of Malta, and even having served as Acting President of the Republic. When asked how this range of experience has affected his perspective going into the role, Bezzina answered:

'Serving at a national level broadens one's perspective considerably. It highlights how interconnected institutions are and how decisions in one domain – such as education and finance – ripple across the entire system. The University's role ranges from addressing immediate concerns to contributing to long-

term national priorities. This does not mean aligning the University narrowly with short-term policy agendas, but rather ensuring that its teaching, research, and engagement contribute meaningfully to national capability.'

COURAGEOUS IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Bezzina's vision for the University is shaped particularly by systems thinking, clearer priorities, and evidence-based governance. For over two decades, Bezzina has worked within UM's Department of Business and Enterprise Management, specialising in Management Science and evidence-based management. The field ➔

focuses on improving organisational decision-making by integrating research evidence, institutional data, professional expertise, and stakeholder perspectives. In outlining his vision for his Rectorship, that philosophy appears central to how he intends to lead.

'Universities do not lend themselves to simple performance metrics. However, the absence of perfect measures does not justify the abandonment of disciplined and systematic decision-making. In practice, this means being explicit about the assumptions behind decisions, testing those assumptions where possible, and learning systematically from outcomes.'

Bezzina's approach reflects his academic background, though the implications are practical. Large universities often accumulate layers of procedure over the course of decades. Processes become slow. Innovation becomes difficult. Internal caution gradually hardens into institutional culture. Bezzina sees this tendency as one of the major barriers preventing the University of Malta from becoming more proactive. The problem, as he frames it, is not necessarily a lack of ideas, 'but a lack of mechanisms to act on them efficiently'.

His proposed response to these issues centres on reducing unnecessary administrative friction, clarifying institutional priorities, and creating structures that reward



Prof. Frank Bezzina
Photo by James Moffett

initiative rather than delay it. Stability remains important within academia, particularly in a small country where institutional continuity matters deeply. Bezzina repeatedly emphasises evolution over disruption. One flagship proposal is the establishment of pro-rectorates with clear mandates, measurable objectives, and greater operational autonomy within a tighter leadership structure.

PEOPLE, CULTURE AND DIGITALISATION

Bezzina says he wants to nurture a culture that is both rigorous and open. The University must maintain

its standards but be open to change, collaboration, and critical reflection. He describes the University as needing to become what organisational theorists call an 'ambidextrous organisation', capable of simultaneously managing present responsibilities while experimenting for the future.

On technology, Bezzina argues that AI presents significant opportunities. Administrative burdens across universities have expanded significantly over the past decade. AI systems could streamline workflows, improve service delivery, and free academic staff from repetitive tasks. Yet Bezzina is cautious about



allowing technological efficiency to become an end in itself.

'Universities are fundamentally human institutions. They are centred on learning, critical thinking, and mentorship. The challenge is to integrate AI in a way that enhances, rather than diminishes, these human elements. That requires careful governance, clear ethical frameworks, and a deliberate focus on where human judgement remains essential. AI should be seen as an enabler, not a substitute.'

He believes emerging technologies will continue reshaping how students learn and how educators engage with them. More personalised and flexible learning models may emerge. Data-driven systems could improve responsiveness and student support. Still, technological adoption for its own sake carries risks.

Bezzina says that the key is purposeful integration. Technology should solve real problems and improve the experience of both students and staff. He also

stresses that the transition must remain inclusive, with training and support for staff as they adapt to rapid digital change.

RESPONSIBILITY TO THE NATION AND ACADEMIC INDEPENDENCE

Bezzina argues that he sees the University of Malta not simply as an academic institution, but as a strategic national asset. The University shapes future professionals, contributes research expertise, informs public policy, and acts as one of the country's few enduring intellectual institutions. Bezzina believes its teaching, research, and public engagement must contribute directly to national capability while still preserving academic independence. The University must inform and challenge policy through rigorous scholarship, not simply respond to it. That balance between public contribution and institutional autonomy also shapes his approach to funding.

The University's strategic plan

increasingly emphasises diversified funding streams, including partnerships with industry, government bodies, and international institutions. Across Europe, public universities face growing financial pressure alongside rising operational expectations. For some critics, expanded partnerships raise concerns about commercialisation or political influence. Bezzina rejects the idea that diversification necessarily compromises academic independence. If properly managed, diversified funding could strengthen institutional autonomy by reducing dependence on any single source of support.

'Autonomy is non-negotiable. It is the foundation of academic credibility. Partnerships must be structured in a way that protects academic independence.'

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Asked about the relationship between fundamental research and applied innovation, Bezzina resists framing them as opposing categories. ➤

He states that they should be seen as a continuum rather than as different types of endeavours. Fundamental research, often criticised for lacking immediate commercial value, frequently underpins future technological and scientific breakthroughs. The University, therefore, must protect space for curiosity-driven scholarship while simultaneously strengthening mechanisms that connect research with practical application. Collaborative platforms, interdisciplinary incentives, and stronger knowledge-transfer structures all form part of that process.

At present, he believes one of the University's greatest unrealised strengths lies in its potential for integration. This fragmentation is familiar to many large institutions. Departments often operate in relative isolation despite overlapping interests and complementary expertise. Achieving that integration, however, requires cultural as well as procedural change.

'There is considerable expertise across faculties, institutes, centres,

and schools, but it is not always sufficiently connected. Greater integration across disciplines, between teaching and research, and between UM and external stakeholders could significantly amplify impact.'

QUALITY, WELLBEING, AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

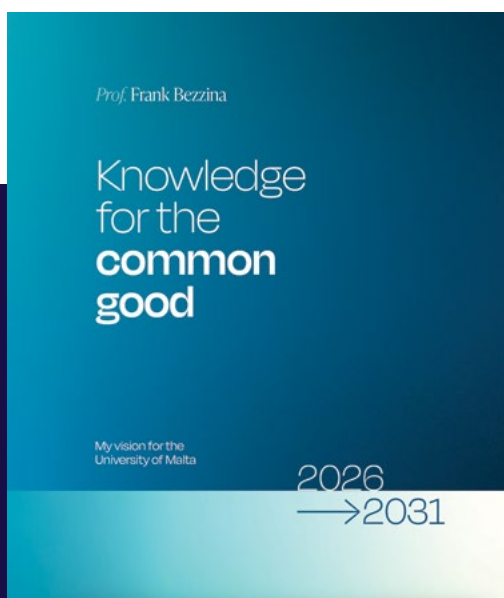
Concluding his vision, Bezzina returns to two areas he considers foundational, namely quality assurance and student wellbeing. Quality assurance, in his formulation, is frequently misunderstood.

'A strong quality culture is not about compliance for its own sake,' he says. 'It is about ensuring that academic standards, programme relevance, and institutional processes are continuously reviewed and strengthened.'

At some universities, quality systems are often experienced as bureaucratic obligations imposed externally. Bezzina instead describes quality assurance as something that should become embedded within institutional culture itself.

Student wellbeing is of equal importance for Bezzina, who places students at the heart of the University's mission. Their wellbeing extends beyond counselling services or administrative support. It includes curriculum design, learning environments, and institutional responsiveness. This sentiment matches his manifesto, which calls for a people-centred culture as its first of five core values.

As the University of Malta approaches its fifth century, it faces mounting pressure to remain academically independent while simultaneously functioning as an engine of innovation, technological adaptation, and national development. Bezzina's response to that challenge consistently returns to systems, evidence, institutional culture, and long-term coherence, reflecting a belief that Malta's university cannot compete through scale alone, but through agility, integration, intellectual density, and its uniquely close relationship with national life. **T**



Scan the QR code to access
Prof. Frank Bezzina's vision
for the University of Malta



Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures

Author: **David Mizzi**

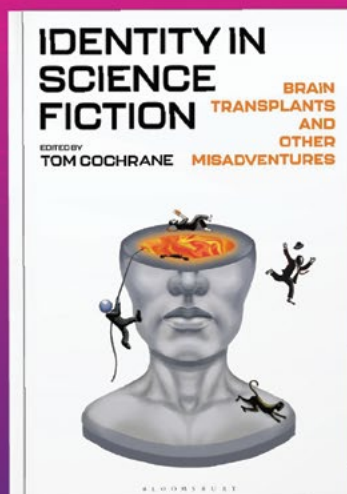
In Identity in Science Fiction: Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures, philosophy and science fiction come together in a collection of short stories centred around the philosophy of identity. Are you a brain, an animal, or information? Is the self an illusion? Who are you? What better way to unpack these questions than with short stories about brain transplants, teleportation, and amnesia?

Approaching philosophy as you would a subject like statistics is like walking up to the girl in the red dress while scratching your backside and picking your nose – clumsy, oafish, and embarrassing. But then, just how should you approach philosophy? After all, questions like ‘Who am I?’ or ‘What is art?’ are hardly ice-breaker material. The answer lies in fiction; short stories, to be precise.

The beating heart of philosophy is stirred with thought experiments. ‘Who am I?’ might seem like an obtuse query; however, reframing the question can lead to more enticing answers. If you were to replace your

brain with a machine, would you still be the same person you are now? Suddenly, the discussion has a sense of direction; is it my brain that makes me who I am? What if I moved my brain to a different body instead? Or what if I removed half of it? Which part of my brain makes me, me?

Gently, we are moving away from Socrates and Descartes to Spock and Darth Vader. But science fiction and philosophy make better bedfellows than you might expect, particularly when it comes to the philosophy of identity. Are you the same person without your memories? What about teleportation? Specifically, if you are copied from one place and rebuilt in another, which one ➤



Identity in Science Fiction: Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures edited by Tom Cochrane was published by Bloomsbury in 2025.

is the real you? What if everyone has the same body and thinks in the same way; is that one person or many? Sci-fi short stories let us stretch and stress-test philosophical concepts within the setting of the not-so-distant future.

WHAT IS THE BOOK?

Identity in Science Fiction: Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures is an excellent collection of 12 science fiction short stories, each of which deals with a particular aspect of the philosophy of identity. The stories themselves are worth reading in their own right; however, Tom Cochrane (Anthology Editor) takes the collection a step further by including a series of comments after each story which tackle the main themes. I also appreciate how Cochrane clarifies in his commentaries when an opinion is entirely his own, rather than being presented as a given. The book itself stems from one of Cochrane's undergraduate classes. Students would read one story prior to each two-hour seminar, and then an open discussion would follow on the merits and metaphysical concepts presented in that story.

While regrettably, I have not been to one of Cochrane's lectures, this kind of approach elevates philosophy into something you can really sink your teeth into. The inclusion of Appendices A and B ('A Guide for Teachers and Literature' and 'Films on Identity', respectively) facilitates the book's use as an effective teaching tool.

The collection tackles a number of themes found in both metaphysics and the philosophy of identity: social identity, the soul, group minds, and diachronic identity. Personally, I found the stories that tackle numerical identity, memory, and brain transplants particularly compelling. However, for this review, I will only briefly tackle numerical identity and memory.

THE BARBIE MURDERS

With numerical identity, we are asking what makes me one thing, rather than two or three. It is one of the main themes John Varley tackles in his short story, *The Barbie Murders*. But before jumping into the story itself, let us shift our attention to Mattel Inc.'s *Barbie*. Each Barbie doll looks identical, sure, but then you have a Malibu Beach

House Barbie, a horse rider Barbie, and even a *Star Trek* Barbie – is each Barbie its own person, or is it just one doll cosplaying in different outfits? John Varley's short story does not deal with our plastic puppet, but rather a religious cult in which converts radically modify their appearance to look identical to one another. Qualities such as race, height, shape, and gender are surgically removed to achieve a single standard, to become Barbies. But while each Barbie views herself as a single individual, shunning the use of 'I' in favour of 'our', the law takes a different view when one Barbie commits a murder. The Barbies have no issue giving up one of their own; however, the detective in our story is determined to figure out which Barbie – which specific body – was responsible.

The story itself serves as an excellent introduction to some of the key concepts in the philosophy of identity. For example, we might intuitively argue that it is my qualities that make me who I am. After all, we would view it as a great affront to our sense of self if someone were to



deny our sexuality or race. But these qualities are hardly essential to who I am. Were I to undergo a sex change, I would still be the same person. Given that the Barbies share the same physical qualities, then it should not matter which 'body' is convicted. If it does matter, then we can argue that there is more to identity than our physical qualities. The story itself could act as a strong basis for distinguishing between substance and qualities, Leibniz's *Identity of Indiscernibles*, or causal theories of reference vs the descriptivist theory of names.

LIFE SENTENCE

Moving on to Matthew Baker's *Life Sentence*, the State has devised a radical new means of rehabilitating convicts. Rather than having convicts whittle away the remainder of their lives behind bars, they have their memories wiped. Specifically, all of their episodic memories – their personal experiences. Semantic memories, such as general knowledge, facts, and birthdays, remain intact, as do procedural memories, such as knowing how to ride a bike or play guitar. So while you would

know what a restaurant is, you would have no memory of ever going to a restaurant. This procedure allows convicts to re-integrate as functional members of society. What makes this story particularly interesting is the radical change in personality after treatment. Our protagonist's wife remarks, 'I tried to pretend that you're the same but you're not, you're the same body, you move the same, you smell the same, you talk the same, you taste the same, but the rest of you is gone.' After undergoing this radical procedure, are you the same person?

If I were to replace my arm with a bionic replacement, I would still be the same person. If I were to convert from one faith to another, I would also still be the same person. Even after a radical change in my personality, perhaps from some traumatic event, I feel that I am still the same person. However, the complete removal of my episodic memories gives me pause. Without my memories, am I not just a shell of my former self? And when writing new memories on this blank slate, am I not effectively creating a new identity? *Life Sentence*,

as well as Cochrane's commentaries, was certainly, to my mind, the most memorable entry and provides fertile ground for further discussion.

Whether you are a student or a teacher of philosophy, *Identity in Science Fiction* undoubtedly merits a place on your shelf. The short story format ensures that the topic is accessible, even to someone with just a budding interest in philosophy. I will admit that I am more of a fantasy reader than a science fiction one; however, I still found the majority of the stories to be exceptionally enjoyable and thought-provoking. I say the majority, as I personally did not care for the two extracts from longer novels. While the themes they presented were interesting enough, an extract from a novel cannot provide the emotional closure that a self-contained, short story can. With the right supplementary material, the text could easily form the basis for an engaging undergraduate study unit on the philosophy of identity. The stories themselves are an excellent entry point into the philosophy of identity, and they are certainly an unforgettable way to approach the girl in the red dress. **T**



Taming the Tow

Author: **Christian Keszthelyi**

Before a floating offshore wind turbine can generate electricity, it must be assembled, towed to its site, and anchored. During its 20- to 25-year lifetime, it may also need to be towed back to port two or three times for major maintenance before returning offshore. Significant amounts of fuel are consumed by tug boats for each journey. For Malta, where promising offshore wind sites lie in deep water, this matters. The challenge is to make floating wind cleaner across its whole lifecycle.

Floating offshore wind turbines are used where the seabed is too deep for fixed-bottom turbines. Around Malta, potential offshore wind areas are in waters deeper than 100 metres, making fixed foundations difficult. Floating platforms solve that problem but create another. They have to be towed from an assembly port to the installation site, sometimes over long distances. To make matters worse, these platforms are large – about 100 metres wide and extending about 20 metres below the sea surface. They must remain stable in open water. That is essential once the turbine is operating, but the same shape makes the platforms harder to tow.

The University of Malta's Department of Mechanical Engineering is working on this problem through TowFOWT, a research project focused on reducing drag, and therefore the fuel consumption of tug boats, during the towing of floating offshore wind turbines. ➔

Two 9.5 MW floating wind turbines deployed at Kincardine Offshore Wind project off coast of Aberdeen, Scotland. Photo courtesy of Principle Power



The project is financed by Xjenza Malta and the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China, through the SINO-MALTA Fund 2024 Call.

The UM team includes Prof. Christopher Micallef, Prof. Tonio Sant, Dr Jean-Paul Mollicone, and researchers Martina Zammit and Nathaniel Scerri. Their aim is to design a drag-reduction fairing, a streamlined device that helps large floating structures move through water with less resistance.

In Malta's case, Zammit explains, local ports may not have the depth or facilities needed to assemble such structures. 'This means the turbines could be assembled elsewhere, such as Sicily, then towed fully built to their final site,' she says.

A turbine is not towed only once. 'It may need to go back to port for major maintenance several times during its life. Each structure could be towed about three times for maintenance. For a wind farm with 20 or 25 turbines, which is the expected size of projected large-scale wind farms, this adds up to a lot of towing,' Zammit says.

That is why drag matters. Drag is the force that resists movement through water or air. Anyone who has tried to walk through the sea has felt it. The faster you move, the more the

water pushes back. For a floating wind platform, resistance comes from several sources: water pressing against the front of the structure, friction along its surfaces, waves created by the tow, and wind acting on the tower and blades.

'Total drag is the accumulation of the different kinds of resistance that are present during towing,' Scerri says. 'It stops the platform from moving easily through the water.'

Floating wind platforms are not ships. They are closer to large floating columns connected together, built for stability rather than speed. A ship's hull is shaped to move efficiently through water. A turbine platform is designed more like a barge to handle offshore conditions and keep the turbine steady.

NOT BUILT TO MOVE

TowFOWT focuses on this often-overlooked part of floating wind projects. The aim is not to change the floating structure itself but to add a fairing that makes towing easier without harming stability or creating new problems. A fairing is an attachment added to a bluff body to streamline the flow around it, reducing drag and improving performance. By guiding water smoothly around the structure, it minimises flow separation and wake formation, which are major sources of resistance.

The idea comes from other industries. Trucks use fairings to reduce air resistance. Bullet trains use streamlined shapes to cut drag. Similar ideas can work at sea, but the physics is more complex because a floating wind platform must contend with water, air, and waves simultaneously.

The team began by measuring the platform's drag before adding any fairing. They use Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) to run computer simulations of water and air moving around the platform. This shows where resistance is highest and allows the researchers to test design ideas before building physical models.

'First, we started by quantifying the drag without any additional features,' Scerri says. 'We are performing simulations of the actual towing process, which allow us to quantify the forces and analyse the flow around the platform.'

This step is important because different types of drag need different solutions. A fairing that reduces one kind of resistance may not reduce another. The team first needs to know which type of drag has the greatest effect.

Early results are promising. Scerri says the first fairing designs have reduced drag by about 40% in simulations. These are not final results, but they show the idea has potential. The team is still refining its analysis and testing new shapes.



Figure 1: Render of the UMaine VolutrUS-S platform supporting a 15MW wind turbine

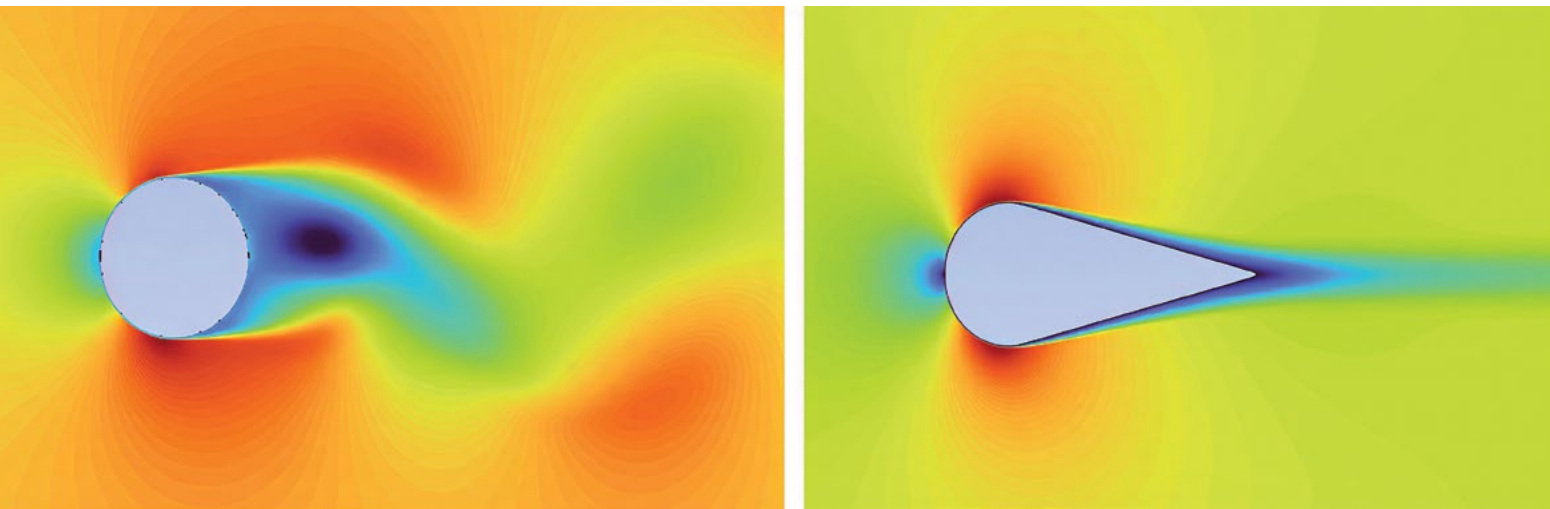


Figure 2: Flow Visualisation using a velocity contour showing the wake behind a cylindrical 2D body (Left) and an introduction of a fairing (Right).

PROOF BEFORE PROMISE

The next stage combines simulations with experiments. The Chinese partners are testing small-scale models in controlled conditions. This allows the team to compare computer results with real measurements. If the two match, the researchers can have greater confidence in the results.

The collaboration matters because towing stability is as important as drag reduction. A fairing should not make the platform harder to control at sea. The project therefore examines drag and stability together. The final design also has to make practical sense. A large fairing might cut drag, but if it costs too much, produces too much carbon during manufacturing, or is hard to attach, the benefit may be lost.

'Very complex fairings may achieve significant drag reduction, but if they require substantial carbon dioxide emissions to manufacture, this defeats the purpose of implementing them,' Scerri says. The team is therefore looking not only at hydrodynamic performance, but also cost, manufacturing, lead time, and viability.

This matters because renewable energy projects are judged across their whole lifecycle. Installation, maintenance, towing, and decommissioning all add cost and emissions. Green energy depends on every step, from cradle to grave, not only on what happens after the system starts running.

For Malta, this work is timely. Floating wind could open offshore sites that fixed turbines cannot reach. The technology is still young. Most floating wind farms are small or experimental, but future projects will use bigger turbines and more units. As turbines grow from

8–10 MW to 15 MW or more, their platforms become larger. That means more resistance and more towing work. By June 2027, the team plans to have a fairing concept backed by simulations and experiments, offering a clear design direction and useful data for future projects.

Zammit sees this as part of a wider transition. Floating wind has promise, but practical engineering will determine how clean, affordable, and scalable it becomes. 'These operations have not been optimised yet because floating offshore wind is still developing,' she says. 'That is why projects such as ours are important for the future of this technology.' 

The TowFOWT Project is funded by Xjenza Malta and the Ministry of Science and Technology of China (MOST) through the SINO-MALTA Fund 2024 Call (SINO-MALTA-2024-08) and the National Key R&D Program of China (No. 2025YFE0110400).

Figure 1: C. Allen et al., "Definition of the UMaine VolturnUS-S Reference Platform Developed for the IEA Wind 15-Megawatt Offshore Reference Wind Turbine Technical Report," 2020. [Online]. Available: www.nrel.gov/publications.

Figure 2: N. Scerri, M. Zammit, C. Micallef, T. Sant, J.-P. Mollicone, J. Fengmei, W. Xinru, C. Le, F. Yali, and Z. Yanqi, "Energy-Efficient Towing of Floating Offshore Wind Turbines: Challenges and Perspectives on Platform Drag Reduction," *Energies*, vol. 19, no. 3, p. 797, Feb. 2026, doi: 10.3390/en19030797.

THE ERASURE OF US

The Alarming Increase in the Destruction of Cultural Heritage is Robbing Us of Our Future

Author: **Colan Llewellyn Mackenzie**

The tremors of war have reached ancient sites around the world. Days after the bombs fell on Falak-Ol-Aflak, a similar attack in Iran damaged the 19th-century Golestan Palace. On March 24, 2026, 2735 km away, the Ukrainian government reported that a Russian drone strike damaged the 18th-century Bernardine Monastery in Lviv. On the other side of the world, the century-old border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, in part over the ownership of the nearly 1600-year-old Preah Vihear Temple, brought armed conflict to the complex's feet, causing hundreds of casualties and reportedly damaging the site. In 2023, during Israel's ongoing war in Gaza, Israeli forces shelled and bulldozed the site of the ancient port of Anthedon, founded around 520 BC and occupied until the 12th century. All of these sites were either UNESCO World Heritage Sites or, as in the case of Anthedon, on the tentative list to become one.

As armed conflict sweeps the globe in the 2020s, inherited archaeological, architectural, religious, and traditional practices – collectively known as cultural heritage – have become both a common casualty and a direct target of state violence. Although this devastation has not yet reached

the European Union, much of the continent still bears the scars of 20th-century war in its collective memory and cultural heritage. Malta, which endured one of Nazi Germany's most punishing bombing campaigns during World War II, offers sobering lessons for this more volatile era.

MALTESE MEMORY OF CONFLICT

In 2005, Prof. Charles Farrugia, who heads UM's Department of Library Information and Archive Sciences, realised he had a problem. 'We came up with this idea to publish a set of six very basic postcards, focused on landmarks in Maltese political development. My idea at the time was to find six photos of the main events – Independence, Freedom Day, and Republic Day. I was so shocked that I did not find those photos in the government archives. I had to get them from private collections.' From that experience, Farrugia and his colleagues created the Memorja Project, a 'public memory project' focused on gathering the lived experiences and oral histories of everyday Maltese people during major events in the country's history for documentation in the then-nascent National Archives.

While the Memorja Project started small, it eventually had to document the

oral cultural heritage of WWII. Malta is a nation well acquainted with attacks on cultural heritage. From 1940 to 1943, the Axis powers unleashed on Malta what may have been the heaviest aerial bombardment by weight per square mile in history – 6,700 tons of bombs in April 1942 alone. All told, the Axis attack resulted in the damage or destruction of 30,000 buildings, including, among others, the Royal Opera House, the museum at the Auberge d'Italie, the Birgu Clock Tower, 11 churches, and 36 theatres. Many Maltese people still remember the conflict, and the Memorja Project sought to document their oral history of the destruction.

Farrugia recounted his experience building the project. 'One of the things that surprised us was the emotional aspect of the Second World War. There were still some older people who played down the war because they were pro-Italian [...] You had the other side, the pro-British, who still look at the nationalists of those times as traitors to the country, and that level of emotion is something which impressed us.'

Now, as new conflicts arise across the globe, the necessity of protecting

The Falak-ol-Aflak Castle, also known as Shapur Khast, has towered over the Iranian city of Khorramabad since at least the 7th century. It is a monument to Sasanian-era defensive architecture and has, since the 1960s, had an attached museum for visitors to the site. In late February of 2026, 1500 years after it was built, US-Israeli bombs fell from the sky, damaging Falak-ol-Aflak and completely destroying its museum.

archival heritage is on Farrugia's mind. 'I think this war [the US-Israeli war on Iran] is bringing the reality home that no country is immune, considering that we have a military base just a few miles away from Malta in Sicily.'

THE POST-WAR ORDER AND INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION

Coined by the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, the term cultural genocide did not survive the treaty negotiations that immediately followed WWII. It cannot be found in the United Nations 1948 Genocide Convention, for instance. Nevertheless, destructive acts targeting cultural heritage did make it into the Geneva Conventions (1949) and the Rome Statute (1998), both of which define damage to or destruction of cultural heritage as war crimes.

In 1954, UN member states ratified the Hague Convention, the first international treaty dedicated to safeguarding cultural property during armed conflict. It singled out monuments, museums, archives, and sacred spaces as needing special protection because their destruction harms civilians and societies long after the fighting ends. However, the

crime of cultural heritage destruction took somewhat of a back seat in the post-war period and was resurrected within the international community following the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s. This was the first time the International Criminal Court (through the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia or ICTY) recognised the crime of the destruction of cultural heritage.

Many organisations took up the cause of protecting international cultural heritage, including the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), Blue Shield International, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and UNESCO, to name a few. Among those organisations is the International Council on Archives (ICA), a group dedicated to the management and protection of the world's archival heritage. Farrugia was the chair of EURBICA – the ICA branch that oversees its European operations – when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

MODERN CONFLICT AND THE BENEFITS AND LIMITS OF OUR PROTECTIVE SYSTEMS

'I was in an uncomfortable situation. You had two countries that are at least geographically in Europe. Russia faced sanctions from the UN, and the ICA

suspended both Russia and Belarus from its membership. I had mixed feelings because we have an amazing network of archival colleagues all over the world, and we know Russian archivists who collaborated with us and whom we had to stop contacting, not because they had any blame whatsoever, but because they were part of the machinery of government.'

Despite the difficulties of managing an international NGO with membership from two warring states, Farrugia believed there was a small but important silver lining to the war. 'The Ukrainian archives exploded in energy,' Farrugia says. 'They started massive digitisation efforts, establishing 50 labs after the war broke out and rushing to digitise their archives. They realised that if the whole country is destroyed, the only remaining assets that can be preserved are the archives.'

Not all countries were so fortunate as to experience the same result. 'The situation is completely different when it comes to Gaza since there was no United Nations position on the situation. Latin American archivists made a motion at the General Assembly of the ICA to condemn the Israeli government. We finally arrived at a statement, which is on the ICA website, encouraging both sides of the conflict to protect their archives. However, the ►



Left: Prof. Charles Farrugia with Anatoli Kromov, Director of the State Archives in Ukraine

Middle: Dr Roberta Metsola, President of the EU Parliament, visiting the National Archives on 29 October 2024

Right: The Central Repository of the National Archives in Rabat, Malta

Photos courtesy of National Archives of Malta

big dilemma is that the IFLA, ICOMOS, and ICA are NGOs, so they cannot impose on a country other than by kicking it out of the organisation.'

As of 2023, the ICA reported no member archives in Israel but did have member archives in the West Bank. Israel's assault on Gaza has resulted in cataclysmic devastation. Within the first five months of the conflict, Gazan authorities reported that Israel had destroyed 200 archaeological sites. Included among these were two 5000-year-old ancient Egyptian settlements, the aforementioned port of Anthedon, churches, monasteries, mosques, cemeteries, museums, and libraries. As of February 2026, UNESCO had verified the destruction or damage of 157 cultural sites in Gaza. Next door, in the West Bank, the war has allowed massive looting; researchers at the Institute of Archaeology at Al-Quds University and the Tourism and Antiquities Police Directorate in Ramallah documented nearly 3000 pits dug by looters of massively varying sizes. While 85% of

the surveyed sites had experienced looting prior to the start of the war in 2023, operations have expanded significantly since then. Within the first year of the conflict, 70% of the sites surveyed had experienced looting, with 309 sites suffering destruction that impacted 70% of their total area.

THE FUTURE

Taken together, all of these global losses make Farrugia's warning even more urgent: 'We need to rush and take risk management seriously.' In the Maltese case, that preparedness looks like updated archives and better preparation for a new age of warfare. 'One of the things that this Iranian war taught us was the use of drones. It's something that one never imagined would completely re-engineer warfare.'

'A top priority for Malta is having a new building to host the archives; a building that has been promised for the last 15 years by successive governments. I've spent my whole career working at the archives, and most of our day is wasted fighting

the buildings themselves, water, high humidity, and unstable structures.'

While the hurdles to protecting cultural heritage are massive, Farrugia is hopeful. 'I strongly believe in these international organisations having a network of people who can offer support by visiting and giving training. One of the best things that happened for us with Ukraine, for example, was that the international community of archivists rose to the occasion to help.'

What the last decade of conflict has taught – painfully – is that the protection of heritage cannot be separated from the politics of power. A world that wants to preserve its cultural heritage must be willing to confront those who mean to erase it. Otherwise, the treaties and declarations that we have spent the better part of the last century building and refining will become like archaeological artefacts themselves – cast aside and worn away by the sands of time, only to be studied centuries later. **T**

TERESA: Reimagining Rehabilitation for Malta's Ageing Population

Author: **Courtney Ekezie**

Globally, the average age of the human population is increasing, and the number of adults over 65 is projected to rise to over 1.5 billion by 2050. With an ageing population comes an increased need for services that older adults are likely to make use of – such as geriatric rehabilitation. Physiotherapist and Ph.D. graduate from the University of Malta, **Dr Francesca Muscat**, has been working on the creation of a digital tool, **TERESA**, which aims to standardise the process of rehabilitation and promote a fairer, more equitable healthcare system.

Dr Francesca Muscat's experience in healthcare spans over a decade of work in amputation, neurological, and geriatric rehabilitation. She has always been particularly drawn to the inpatient sector, that is, rehabilitation in a hospital ward setting. At Karin Grech Hospital, Malta's only state-run rehabilitation hospital, she realised that referrals for rehabilitation were inconsistent, heavily dependent on subjective judgement, and shaped by tight resource constraints. With only around 34% of referred patients accepted for inpatient rehabilitation, she began asking whether these decisions were truly equitable and whether the system could be improved.

Drawing inspiration from her late mother's lifelong passion for knowledge and education, Muscat was always interested in research. She sought to learn more about this

niche area and created TERESA, named after her mother, as a digital tool to address these gaps within the Maltese healthcare framework.

WHAT DOES 'REHABILITATION POTENTIAL' REALLY MEAN?

For a patient to be admitted to a rehabilitation programme, they must have *rehabilitation potential*. But what is potential? Muscat says that arguably every person has some form of it. At its most basic level, she explains, rehabilitation potential involves determining who would most likely benefit from an intensive programme. This process, however, is often highly subjective.

To start her research, she carried out a scoping review assessing how researchers worldwide defined and described rehabilitation potential. She found that it lacks a standard global definition, complicating admission decisions everywhere. ➔



A selection of screenshots showing the prototype of the TERESA digital tool
Images courtesy of Dr Francesca Muscat

To adapt the concept to Malta, she convened a multidisciplinary expert panel using the Delphi method, which gathers expert opinions through several rounds of anonymous questionnaires, allowing views to converge towards a consensus.

Thirteen Maltese clinicians, ranging from physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and social workers to nurses and geriatricians, reviewed evidence, debated criteria, and refined their

thinking across four rounds. Muscat explains that healthcare professionals often work in 'silos,' with each discipline viewing the patient through a different lens. Heavy workloads and time constraints make interprofessional collaboration difficult, which Muscat notes is a challenge not unique to Malta but one that is seen across Europe. Through her research and the development of TERESA, these diverse perspectives finally converged to create a shared understanding of what rehabilitation potential should mean in the local context.

SEVEN IS THE PERFECT NUMBER

The expert discussions generated 83 potential predictors of rehabilitation potential, reflecting medical, functional, and psychosocial aspects of a person's life. To make the tool usable, Muscat analysed 250 real patient referrals to determine which predictors had statistical significance. This process narrowed the list to seven: cognitive state, previous functional level, transfer ability from lying to sitting, smoking status, patient's living situation,

relative's wishes, and reason for admission. Some of these variables highlighted uncomfortable truths, such as the influence of family preferences, but transparency was crucial.

To develop TERESA as a digital assessment, Muscat conducted usability and feasibility testing to assess how easy and efficient it was for clinicians to use. During the pilot, she recalls one geriatrician suggesting larger buttons and another requesting that certain indicators be displayed in table format. Twenty-five clinicians took part, and their feedback shaped five prototypes, each building on the previous one.

Based on this collaboration, Muscat developed a tablet-friendly digital tool capable of generating a percentage-based likelihood of benefit – for example, '78% likely to benefit from rehabilitation'. She emphasises that percentage likelihoods, rather than definitive yes-or-no outcomes, promote ethical clinical reasoning and keep professional judgement central. Moreover, Muscat notes that for a digital tool like TERESA to be genuinely useful, it must also save



Dr Francesca Muscat

The image displays three screenshots of the TERESA digital tool interface, each representing a different assessment category: Medical, Physical, and Social. Each screen has a blue header with the 'teresa' logo and a home icon. The 'Medical' screen lists reasons for admission to MDH (e.g., Falls no fracture, Falls with fracture, Deterioration in general condition, Respiratory, Neurology, Amputation, General surgery, Cognitive Decline / Dementia Care, Other) and a Smoking status (Yes/No). The 'Physical' screen assesses previous level of physical mobility (Independent: Unaided, Stick, Rollator Frame, Gutter Frame, Other; Dependent: Supervision, Help of 1 Person, Help of 2 Persons, Chair User, Bedbound) and transfer from lying to sitting (Independent/Dependent). The 'Social' screen evaluates living arrangements (Lives Alone, Residential Home, Live in care, Children, Partner/Spouse/Sibling of same age) and the main carer's plan for patient after rehabilitation (Return Home, Relocation of own Home, Residential Care Home Admission, Undecided, Unable, Not present/home available).

time. 'It would have been useless to provide clinicians with a tool that takes longer than paper,' she explains. The reduction from 83 to 7 predictors means that clinicians can assess a patient in minutes, which is undoubtedly a crucial feature in busy clinical settings.

Another challenge Muscat faced was clinicians' initial hesitancy to use digital tools. While most professionals are highly educated, their level of digital literacy varies. Despite this, once tested, clinicians praised TERESA's user-friendliness. In fact, the tool achieved an impressive usability score of 87%, categorised as 'excellent'.

Clinicians welcomed its clarity and consistency, recognising it as a valuable aid in a healthcare system stretched by increasing demand and limited resources. Many said it could be transformative for training junior doctors, helping them move beyond diagnosis-focused decision-making toward a more holistic view of patient needs. The tool integrates medical, functional, and social predictors in a single interface, effectively reinforcing that rehabilitation potential cannot be reduced to medical status alone.

INNOVATION IN SERVICE OF DIGNITY

Clinicians also highlighted the need for ongoing support and regular updates, acknowledging that digital tools must evolve alongside clinical practice. Since joining CareMalta Group – a leading provider of care services in Malta – Muscat has been integrating her research insights into broader digital initiatives within the private sector. She believes the next phase of development lies in introducing machine learning algorithms as part of the tool – as more patient data is added, the algorithm will refine itself, identify new patterns, and enhance predictive accuracy. This could help reduce bias and strengthen decision-making while remaining grounded in evidence.

Growing up in a generation that witnessed the rise of new technologies, Muscat has always seen innovation as an opportunity to learn and improve systems. She believes innovation and ageing are deeply interconnected and rejects the notion that technology should replace human care. Instead,

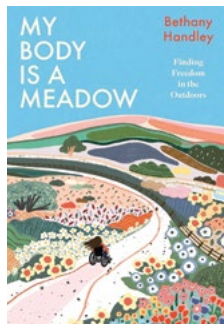
she emphasises that digital tools should enhance transparency, equity, and patient-centred practice.

'Ageing well means ageing with dignity, independence, and purpose,' she remarks. 'Digital innovation, when done thoughtfully, can support clinicians in making fairer, more evidence-based decisions.' She adds that digital tools such as TERESA can reduce unnecessary admissions, prevent premature institutionalisation, and ensure that limited healthcare resources are used effectively.

At its core, Muscat's work is a blueprint for how Malta can approach rehabilitation differently – not by abandoning human connection, but by supporting it with data, collaboration, and clarity. In a society where older adults deserve respect and meaningful opportunities to maintain independence, TERESA offers an inspiring vision of a future in which every patient has access to a transparent, equitable pathway to rehabilitation – and where clinical decisions are guided by shared knowledge, compassion, and evidence-based care. [T](#)

to-do list

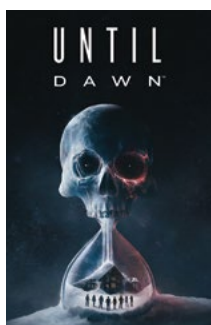
book



My Body is a Meadow by **Bethany Handley**

Handley's striking debut combines her personal experience of chronic illness with broader questions about social marginalisation, biodiversity loss, and access to green and blue spaces. She calls for a rethinking of how we live with nature and each other.

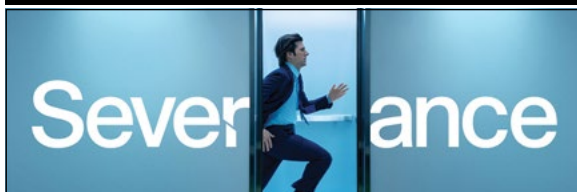
videogame



Until Dawn by **Supermassive Games**

Until Dawn is an interactive survival horror game following eight friends trapped on a remote, snow-covered mountain. Hunted by a malicious presence, your split-second decisions and 'butterfly effect' choices dictate the branching narrative, determining who survives the night and who dies.

tv



Severance by **Dan Erickson**

In this dystopian thriller series, Lumon Industries employees undergo a surgical procedure to separate their workplace memories from their personal lives. But when a mysterious colleague appears in the outside world, the sinister truths about their reality begin to unravel.

podcast



The Urbanist by **Monocle**

Hosted by **Andrew Tuck**, The Urbanist is a sleek, global guide to making better, more liveable cities. Eschewing a single-country lens, international architects and planners are interviewed to explore how everything from Tokyo's transit networks to European public spaces invisibly dictates our daily lives.



Brian's Corner

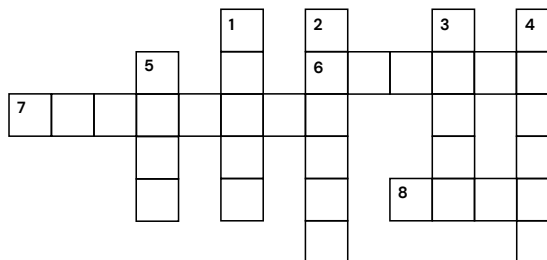
Crossword Puzzle

Across

6. Celebrating a discovery; 'I have found it!'
7. Illegal market manipulation by creating and cancelling large orders
8. A tube that carries blood around the body

Down

1. Use your brain
2. Something handed down from one generation to the next
3. A place for spiritual worship and prayer
4. An attachment to streamline and reduce drag
5. The immaterial essence of a human



THINK Edition 49 Crossword Answers

Across: 2. Cohort, 4. Inveter, 6. Salt, 7. Artificial Down: 1. Scalpel, 3. Power, 5. Medium, 6. Spine





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