We believe this special issue, the first of its kind locally, represents an important milestone in the history of sport and physical activity (PA) in Malta. Its main aim is to promote academic and scientific research for the continuing development of Maltese sport and PA, from a distinctly Maltese perspective. Mainly through the creation of locally-contextualised knowledge, this issue aspires to make a valid contribution, in its own right, to specific matters in sport and PA today. But more importantly, it is intended to form part of a greater movement in the sector, towards increasingly rigorous and evidence-based approaches to developing the realistic and effective solutions Malta needs, both now and in the future. With more platforms to showcase their work, it is our hope that more local experts will turn their scholarly attention to the unique challenges that matter the most to stakeholders in Maltese sport and PA.

In “Investigating modifiable health behaviours in MCAST students”, Johann Zarb and Linniker Grech open the issue with a presentation of results from an extensive survey carried at MCAST on PA participation and other lifestyle habits among the student body. The study is rooted in a growing “exercise for health” movement at the college which strives, duly informed by on-going applied research, to improve standards in the provision of exercise and fitness services in the Maltese islands and promote these as an important and inclusive public service for all ages, genders, levels of ability and states of health. The relevance of this line of research is duly punctuated by the on-going and widely publicised local physical inactivity and obesity problems. Mapping the modifiable root causes of such adverse health-related phenomena remains a top priority for local researchers in related fields.

In “Sporting excellence in Malta viewed through an ecological systems lens: A qualitative investigation into athletes’ attitudes, aspirations and feelings”, and “The fairy tale of professional Maltese sport: Exploring obstacles and hindrances in local elite sports development”, Roberta Argento, Mark Holland, Stephan Lawrence and Tony Myers, as well as Andy Grech, Tynke Toering and Dave Collins, consider parallel challenges in the competitive sports arena in Malta. Various key management and administrative issues are considered, with a special focus on the “under-performance” and “devaluation” problems. Under-performance refers to the tendency for local athletes to under-achieve in international competitive events (even in comparison to other microstates), and devaluation refers to the claim that a fundamental and deep-seated rejection or lack of appreciation for sport and PA persists in the local collective psyche. Devaluation simultaneously accentuates one of the key problems that appears to stifle continuing progress, that of conceptualising via distinctive administrative and funding policies, competitive sport on the one hand and recreational/health-related PA on the other. Various local researchers have argued in favour of a more unified approach to sport and PA, and a far broader regulatory framework with adequate support and an ultimately effective capacity for safeguarding standards across the board.
Meanwhile, understanding the unique psychological factors affecting local participants represents a crucial step in the drive for locally-contextualised, real-world solutions in Maltese sport and PA. In “The effect of mindfulness training on sport injury anxiety during rehabilitation”, by Bernice Sant, Mark Nesti and Martin Eubank, and “The perceptions of PE teachers and LSEs on the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities during PE lessons”, by Elvira Buttiġieġ and Amanda Dimech, local sport psychology practitioners and researchers present some of their most recent work. While Sant, Nesti and Eubank investigated mindfulness and its role in decreasing injury anxiety during rehabilitation, the latter paper explores inclusion, sport, physical activity and education, since the sports and active pursuits promoted in schools, and the degree to which all children are actively included, must constitute essential features of any prospective paradigm shifts in the future.

Whatever the future holds, we know that the story of Maltese sport and PA has been a long one, the decoding and thorough analysis of which incidentally constitutes yet another enticing area for greater scholarly attention. The history and sociology of Maltese sport and PA remain underdeveloped scholarly fields in which we hope to promote greater participation through the publication of this locally-contextualised project. Against the dramatic backdrop of Malta’s ancient pre-historic temples, it is likely that ritualistic dance was among the very first forms of structured human movement on the islands. In “The impact of body image on advanced female dancers”, Dorianne Caruana Bonnici and Amy Emily Galea pay homage to this legacy, albeit with a distinctly contemporary scope. In focusing on the effects of body image on the health and fitness of dancers, the pressure to conform to some elusive “ideal” is foregrounded, and helps define a broader dichotomy of real and ideal in the deeper philosophical context of local sport and PA.

In, “Towards new heights: An interview study on psychological characteristics in Danish elite climbing”, Nikita Beiskjær and Andreas Küttel prompt some searching questions in this regard from the perspective of the local reader. Rock climbing in Malta, despite a fitting landscape, continues to garner arguably only limited appeal among locals. As is similarly the case with scuba diving, which just so happens to be among the most lucrative of Maltese active recreation sectors, we appear to be in the peculiar situation whereby the availability of abundant natural resources does not seem to correlate with which sports actually get practiced, and to what extent. The same can be said of most sports practiced in the sea. While rock-climbing, scuba diving, and a range of water sports do exist locally, the more compelling question is, how many locals actually participate or benefit from these activities, financially or otherwise?

Considering that many modern sport organisations can trace their histories back to the British colonial era of Maltese history, early sporting infrastructures on the islands appear to have been constructed around games popular among colonial administrators, and not necessarily those that would have evolved organically according to the preferences and orientations of the local population, as well as the unique characteristics of the local environment. Just as a new generation of sport shooters have, for instance, successfully parlayed a controversial local hunting tradition into the more humane practice of clay shooting (and in the process into perhaps Malta’s closest “shot” at an Olympic medal so far), it is interesting to speculate, from a more indigenous perspective, what other sports might have afforded the Maltese that special home advantage or competitive edge over the years. Indeed, in contemplating colonial-era British servicemen racing Tunisian horses or British racing cars on Maltese soil, for their own recreation, it remains just as poignant to ask today, in any study of local sport or PA; First, who gets to play? Second, who benefits and in what way? And third, how, exactly, do natural and freely available resources affect both our capacity to play, as well as the broader implications for society, public health and
the environment? A more meaningful engagement with the sociological dimension of local sport and PA may very well yield valuable insights into the background and underlying causes of some of the fundamental challenges facing Maltese sport and PA today, and a potential resolution of the under-performance and devaluation problems. From the Danish perspective, Beiskjær and Küttel meanwhile explore some of the psychological characteristics and skills needed by elite athletes in niche sports, in small countries.

The special issue ends with a series of papers on Malta’s, and indeed the world’s, most popular sport of all. In “Proposed increase in foreign player quota in top-tier Maltese football: An in-depth investigation of local attitudes”, Josef Mifsud explores a controversial proposal for the increase of foreign football players quota emerging in Maltese elite football. In “A critical evaluation of the use of social media by Maltese Premier League football clubs”, and “An analysis of goals scored in the Maltese Premier League 2018-2019”, Mauro D’Amato, as well as Charles Sciberras, Karl Attard, Matthew Muscat-Ingloitt and Renzo Kerr-Cumbo, take us to the cutting-edge of local sport in terms of deepening syntheses with science and technology. The former examines the use of social media in local sport, while the latter reflects the growing reliance on data in sport, using statistics and match analysis techniques to investigate scoring and shooting trends in Malta’s top-tier league. And finally, in “The coach-created motivational climate in professional football”, Ivan Woods and Rob Parry present an insightful study of motivational strategies used by professional football coaches, a key factor in coaching science that looks to build a more evidence-based, contextualised practice, from the ground up.

So, in continuing pursuit of meaningful progress in the field of Maltese sport and PA, and in a bid to curb reliance on ineffective imported or off-the-shelf solutions, it is our honour and privilege, in the spirit of the pursuit of locally-contextualised knowledge, to introduce this first special issue of the MCAST Journal of Applied Research & Practice, dedicated exclusively to sport, exercise and health. We hope that the selected papers, together with their overarching scope, present an interesting set of categories for future research and development in local sport and PA, and ultimately provide some valuable and compelling insights for all readers.