Proposed Increase in Foreign Player Quota in Top-Tier Maltese Football: An In-Depth Investigation of Local Attitudes

Josef Mifsud
Corresponding Author: Josef Mifsud, Josef.Mifsud@mcast.edu.mt
Institute of Community Services, MCAST

Abstract: This exploratory study focused on the Maltese men’s football Premier League in light of a proposed increase in the foreign player quota. Currently, there seems to be two main diverging fronts vis-à-vis this development: those in favour, as represented by top clubs, and the players’ union, which is largely against. The research paradigm chosen to investigate the attitudes around this quota increase consisted of a web-based survey (N=436). Maguire’s (2011) theoretical framework based on three points of conflict between clubs and national federations, with regard to prioritising winning and commercialisation over player development, was used as a basis for the study. Data analysis involved a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics to test a series of hypotheses, using the respondents’ role in local football as the independent variable, and attitude towards the foreign quota proposal as the main outcome of interest. The findings indicated general scepticism towards any positive effects resulting from a foreign quota increase, with the “parents/guardians” being the category least supportive of a prospective increase. Results generally suggested that the foreign quota should not be viewed in isolation, but as one of a set of important decisions needed to overcome several perennial problems of Maltese football. Most respondents considered Maltese players to be at a disadvantage vis-à-vis foreigners, with a majority also considering that foreign influx has had a positive spillover on the level of local players. Moreover, it is unlikely that a quota increase would improve the league’s competitive balance or attract more fans at stadia. In line with the literature reviewed, findings indicated that the identification of a roadmap that satisfies all stakeholders is unlikely.

Keywords: Maltese football; migration; homegrown; foreign quota; player development; national federation; clubs

Introduction

Context

In recent years the phenomenon of labour migration has been a prevalent sport research topic (Özmen 2019). This is particularly apparent in football, described by Royuela and Gásquez (2019: 718) as the “most globalized sport in the world”. This study builds on this research area, as it aims to analyse how foreign influx has impacted a small country like Malta in this regard. Presently, the main stakeholders of Maltese football are contemplating the possibility of increasing the foreign quota (FQ) in Malta’s top-tier league, from the current limit of seven (already among the softest in Europe) to nine in upcoming seasons (Camilleri 2018; UEFA 2019b). There seems to be two main diverging arguments vis-à-vis this development: the Premier League Standing Committee (PLSC), which is pushing for this change (Vella 2018), and the players’ union (MFPA), which is largely against (MFPA 2018). The local governing body, the Malta Football Association (MFA), seems to be acting as a mediator between the opposite standpoints.
The research philosophy applied in this study focused on an inductive approach which was pragmatic and exploratory in nature (Maarouf 2019). The researcher aimed at gathering insight through a combination of primary and secondary research whilst concurrently contributing towards suggesting “practical solutions that can inform future practice” (Saunders et al. 2019: 144). The research paradigm chosen for primary data collection consisted of a “concurrent mixed-method approach” (Creamer 2018) comprising a qualitative analysis involving five semi-structured interviews with “experts” of Maltese football, and a web-based survey aimed at gathering quantitative data with regard to general reactions, attitudes, and perceptions around this impending rule and other related factors (Mifsud 2020). This article focuses exclusively on the data emerging from the quantitative dataset.

Secondary data analysis consisted of comparative and contextual statistical data available from a recently published MFA (2019) report, which uncovered several endemic characteristics of small footballing nations like Malta. Fundamentally it includes percentages on playing time of domestic/foreign players, their wages, and effects on the national team, among others. Secondary research also consisted of an extensive literature review aimed at analysing similar scenarios overseas. In this regard, a study by Maguire (2011) identifies three points of conflict in relation to the FQ which correspond with the objectives of this research. These have formed the theoretical framework on which the various stages of this study were developed:

- **Success of clubs versus success of the national team.**
- **Short-term interest of clubs versus long-term focus of federations towards sustainability.**
- **Commercialization of sports in form of a media product versus fostering local player development** (Özmen 2019: 39).

**Overview of Maltese Football**

In a recent study of seven small European countries with similar market dynamics (Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Faroe Islands, Luxembourg, and Northern Ireland), Malta was highlighted by UEFA as “the only country where both the number of domestic players in the top league is decreasing and the number of national team players playing abroad is falling” (MFA 2019: 75). This statement perfectly encapsulates the perpetual difficulties of Maltese football with regard to a constant debate questioning why Malta (443,000 inhabitants; FIFA ranking – 175th), has not improved like other countries with a similar population (Iceland – 344,000 inhabitants, ranked 62nd; Luxembourg – 639,000, 93rd; Faroe Islands – 53,000, 123rd; Andorra – 77,000, 155th) (FIFA 2021; Sansone 2017).

This seemingly lack of holistic response has gradually contributed to a steady detachment by fans and Maltese footballers alike.

A relatively new contributor to this “detachment phase” has been the gradual increase of the FQ in recent years. In fact, the FQ has increased from an allowance of two foreigners in the 1990s to seven as from 2015/2016. Critics of this development argue that this resulted
into less playing time for homegrown players. Locals started feeling inferior and became disillusioned by the lack of playing opportunities. Conversely, club owners, argue that they prefer foreigners as these are “cheaper, more professional, more driven and of higher quality” (MFA 2019: 88). This distinction between locals and foreigners is evident from statistics presented in MFA’s recent publication, which shows that whereas all foreigners have full-time contracts (intended as the national monthly minimum wage of €750), only 56% of Maltese players have such contracts. Moreover, there’s a significant discrepancy in the average monthly wage of domestic players (€1,290) and foreigners (€1,986). These differences, coupled with other elements, such as an average wage-to-revenue ratio for local clubs of 86% (UEFA recommends 70%), 79% of players reporting late payments (FIFPro 2016), and the absence of sustainable revenue streams, lead to arguments stressing that a FQ increase would further complicate the sustainability of clubs.

Lega-pro Development

One of the main pillars with regard to a “technical overhaul” for Maltese football, promoted in the manifesto of the newly appointed MFA president Bjorn Vassallo (2019: 17), was to have “a senior and a youth team composed mainly of Maltese players to participate in a foreign professional league”. The three-pillar technical reform would include a reorganisation of MFA’s technical centre and the restructuring of academy football. In fact, in February 2020, MFA announced that plans to have a Maltese team playing in the Italian Lega-Pro (third tier of Italian football), were at an advanced stage. MFA revealed that the squads would consist of ten Maltese players for the senior team and around twenty players (aged 16-19) for the youth team (Busuttil 2020; Diacono 2019). However, in May 2020, MFA announced that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these plans had to be postponed (Camilleri 2020).

A Global Concern

The current debate regarding FQ is not just a local issue. UEFA (2019a) highlights that across Europe there are nationality-based restrictions built around three different elements: season squads, matchday squads, and starting line-ups. UEFA highlights that in 2018 alone, eight countries reinforced rules concerning “homegrown” and “club-homegrown” players. Restrictions on foreigners range from a very lenient approach in the Turkish Süper-Lig, allowing fourteen foreigners in the matchday squad, to a highly conservative approach in the Montenegrin First League, allowing three foreigners to be fielded at any given time. UEFA also highlights that there are fourteen countries which have specific limits concerning non-EU nationals.

Incentivising Use of Local Players

Locally, MFA confirmed that FQ discussions are ongoing. It appealed to the clubs’ reasonableness, highlighting that since clubs are the most powerful stakeholder according to the MFA’s constitution, they are even more accountable for the future of Maltese football (Busuttil 2020). At the start of 2019/2020, MFA confirmed an increase in incentives for clubs fielding homegrown players (MFA 2019a). However, as the season progressed, it became clear that this has done little to improve the use of domestic youth players. In fact, Maltese players (below 24 years old) only played 16% of total playing time in 2019/2020 (Malta Football Statistics 2020).

Rationale for the Study and Aims and Objectives

MFA (2019) reports a general lack of research around Maltese football. It emphasizes the importance of maturing an informed decision vis-à-vis the change in FQ and that any strategic direction chosen will be pivotal for the future of Maltese football. For these
reasons, this study pursued one main objective: to identify the main reactions, attitudes, and perceptions towards the impending quota change and other implications linked to this phenomenon according to one’s role in football.

**Literature Review**

*The ‘Sporting Global Village’*

In recent decades, labour migration has become a salient feature of the “sporting global village” (Maguire 2011: 1042). Various studies have described this phenomenon as “a complex and multi-dimensional process”, having several implications on domestic sport organisations, policies, and athletes (Madichie 2009: 27). Examples of such studies are numerous and take different approaches. These range from historical investigations to policy-making reviews, with others focusing on social inclusion/exclusion due to ethnicity, to others providing commercial considerations (Houlihan and Malcolm 2016). The context of these studies also varies. They range from traditional American sports (baseball, basketball, American football, and ice-hockey), to British sports (rugby union, rugby league, and cricket), and other sports (athletics and handball). However, most studies concern football. These alternate from research concerning Europe’s top leagues, to others investigating secondary/emerging footballing realities (Russia, Norway, USA, and China, among others).

A common claim present in most research depicts sport as a “reflection of society”. This is particularly evident in today’s transnational nature of sport, dominated by “global flows” (Lin, C. et al. 2009). Allison (2005: 5) portrays this as the “myth of autonomy” of sports. In fact, despite the self-governing notion commonly ascribed to sport organisations, sport today is clearly intertwined with external “political” decisions (Freeman 2012). This is evident in the way labour migration of professional athletes has evolved across the global sport landscape. Another common denominator in most studies in line with the research objectives is a recurrent investigation on whether foreign influx is a positive or negative development for domestic sports. The answer to this query is obviously multifaceted and depends on many factors (Radoman 2017). These are discussed in the following sections.

*Bosman Ruling*

The flow of migrants in European football was revolutionised in 1995 through the ‘Bosman Ruling’. Kornbeck (2017: 310) comments that this verdict, which aimed at eliminating discrimination based on nationality, “changed everything”. A new era of liberalisation provided new opportunities for athletes originating from countries where professional sport careers were limited. Molnar (2006) argues that, for migrants, migration was not an economic choice but rather a life investment decision. Gardiner and Welch (2011b: 776) highlight that in the post-Bosman era, “player squads had become increasingly cosmopolitan”. Whilst acknowledging the legal framework behind the Bosman ruling, leading to a more open market amongst EU/EEA nationals, Madichie (2009: 28) highlighted other less positive consequences, namely a decrease in player loyalty and increased possibility for the richest clubs “to buy the best players with global impunity”. Additionally, foreign influx also rapidly resulted into fresh nationalism sentiments (Taylor 2006). This is confirmed by a post-Bosman online survey by UEFA (2019b) which had highlighted how 80% of fans were concerned with the “local identity” of clubs.

*‘Homegrown’ Rule*

The Bosman ruling led to the abolishment of quotas (Vasilakis 2017). In the pre-Bosman era, quotas were present, however, these did not make any distinction between EU/non-
EU nationals (Duval and Van Rompuy 2016). In trying to limit the negative implications on domestic players whilst preserving the ethnic roots of clubs, FIFA and UEFA, in 2008/09, proposed a change in rules based on nationality (Siekmann 2012). FIFA proposed the “6+5 rule”. This decree would have required each club to field six domestic players in their starting line-up. However, this was rejected by the EU as it went against the motives behind the Bosman verdict. Similarly, UEFA had proposed the “homegrown rule” which aimed at encouraging “the local training of young players and increase the openness and fairness of European competitions” (UEFA 2019a). The ruling demanded clubs to have 4 “club-trained” and 4 “association-trained” homegrown players within their 25-man squads. Contrary to FIFA’s proposal, this decree was accepted by the EU as it did not discriminate according to nationality (Bullough et al. 2016). Dalziel et al. (2013: 109) comment that there is evidence of “a significant increase in the number of homegrown players in first team squads and starting XIs” since the rule was introduced. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that this trend will be sustained if the rule is not improved, a view which is supported by Bullough and Coleman (2019: 209) when describing UEFA’s homegrown rule as, “weak in terms of its ability to influence positive change in its current format”, especially vis-à-vis youth investment.

**Spillover Hypothesis**

Various studies have analysed this phenomenon through the “spillover hypothesis”. This incorporates an enquiry on the long-term effects of foreign influx on domestic athletes, clubs, leagues, and national teams. Debates are ongoing but two diverging standpoints are evident (Alvarez et al. 2011).

On one side, scholars argue of a positive spillover as the level of homegrown talent improves through practice with more talented players, irrespective of nationality. Interestingly, a study by Lago-Peñas et al. (2019) comparing the rankings of 243 countries in relation to migratory trends highlighted that, “it takes at least 4 years before the positive effect” is palpable in national team performance. This perspective also insists on the positive contribution of migrants to overall league quality, hence boosting attendances, revenues, and the country’s image (Li et al. 2019). Gardiner and Welch (2011b: 774) perfectly encapsulate the philosophy behind this stance by stating that, “playing quotas are an anathema to the good of the game”. Conversely, critics assert that migration triggered the marginalisation of domestic players. Medcalfe and Smith (2018: 313) argue that irrespective of whether clubs are “win-maximisers or revenue-maximisers”, youth investment is no longer commercially viable. Similarly, Maguire (2011) contends that with sports’ increased commodification and the disastrous consequences of sporting failure, clubs prefer short-term solutions (ready-made foreigners). This results in domestic players assuming secondary roles and playing less, consequently negatively affecting the pool of players eligible for national team selection.

Lago-Peñas et al. (2019) argue that the success of the homegrown rule is debatable as the impact has been different in “donor” and “host” nations. Numerous studies have tried to quantify this impact both with regard to national team performances and that of clubs (Allan and Moffat 2014; Marcén 2016; Poli et al. 2018; Royuela and Gásquez 2019). Findings seem to indicate that, generally, clubs with more foreigners perform better internationally. However, the impact on the national teams of host countries is not as clear. Additionally, countries of lower-quality clubs that manage to export their players to better leagues perform better at national team level in the long-term.

**The Maltese Reality**

Milanovic (2005: 829) argues that globalisation improves, “the outcome for ‘poor’ countries”, in terms of both their resources and capabilities. Malta can indeed be classified as a “poor”
country, not economically but more in terms of the, “nature and depth of the existing sport culture” (Houlihan and Zheng 2015: 334). A look at Malta’s performances in recent years does not fully support this position. In fact, there seems to be a noticeable discrepancy in the level reached by domestic clubs as opposed to the national team. Malta currently occupies 51st position in FIFA’s (2021) rankings of the 55 European member federations. Conversely, the aggregate score of Maltese clubs in European competitions ranks them a more respectable 45th (UEFA 2020). This seems to indicate that foreign influx is resulting in better performances by clubs than the national team. Muscat (2017) highlights that Malta’s perennial inability to export local talent to foreign professional leagues is a crucial variable which should not be underestimated.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

A general lack of local scientific research on the effect of migration is evident. In fact, a rigorous search of local literature found only three scientific studies in this area: MFA’s (2019b) publication discussed earlier; Muscat’s (2017) doctoral study which investigated the reasons why Maltese fail to make it to foreign professional leagues; and an undergraduate study which focused on the challenges faced by foreigners when playing in Malta (Paris 2016). Concurrently, studies which aimed at investigating the difference in opinions on foreign quotas, according to one’s role in football seemed to be a largely unexplored area, even in international research.

Summary

Solutions to the impasses created by foreign influx revolve around arguments suggesting that providing “opportunities for national talent involves more than simply limiting the number of foreign players in domestic leagues” (Hardman and Iorwerth 2014: 153). Despite acknowledging that foreign influx undeniably restricts playing time for locals, most studies suggest that governing bodies should adopt a bottom-up approach which urges a holistic conversation among stakeholders whilst encouraging youth development through capping of transfer fees, better redistribution of funds, and incentives related to productive academies (Gardiner and Welch 2011a).

Methods

Research Paradigm

Charyev (2016) argues that most research around migration has focused excessively on secondary data and reiterated the importance of having more empirical research. Additionally, the literature review highlighted the absolute lack of scientific research around local sports. For these reasons, a pragmatic, exploratory case study design was deemed most appropriate to gather more insight, as this allows for a more holistic and in-depth inquiry into the understanding of complex social phenomena (Yin 2018).

Data Collection - Web-based Survey

Data collection consisted of a web-based self-completed questionnaire uploaded on Google Forms. The survey’s link was distributed electronically through social media platforms, such as “Football-In-Malta” (2020) (17,000 followers), over a three-week period from 3rd July 2020 to 26th July 2020.

Sampling involved a “convenience sample”, defined by Matthews and Ross (2010: 164) as a sample chosen “on the basis of ease of access” from the following groups: domestic/
foreign/youth players; administrators; coaches; game officials; sport journalists; parents; “avid fans” (regular attendees); and “passive followers” (non-attendees, vigilant observers) (Swayne and Dodds 2011: 104). As a result of the researcher’s contacts, the survey was also forwarded to MFA staff, member associations, club administrators and members of the players’, coaches’, and referees’ unions. To establish face validity, reliability and a high response rate, the survey was kept short, was disclosed early, and was discussed with a research colleague also involved in local football.

The web-based survey observed “netiquette” procedures to ensure anonymity and optional participation (Brusco 2011). Respondents were asked to provide their consent. Essentially, the survey involved three main sections. The first section made respondents aware of the aims of the study. A second part involved basic demographic questions. Finally, the main part included a total of thirteen closed questions, with respondents being provided with a list of alternative answers on a five-point Likert-style rating scale (DeVaus 2014). In the main research question, asking about their opinion on the FQ development, respondents were presented with a 7-point Likert scale to capture more detailed data. Participants were also given the option to place any additional comments at the end of the survey.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The main aim of the web-based survey was to explore attitudes around the impending rule change and other interrelated factors. Moreover, the study aimed at testing if there were any statistically significant hypothesized differences between groups as independent variables, with the attitudinal Likert data as the dependent variables. At least twenty responses from each category were targeted to achieve sufficient statistical power (Dawson 2019).

The survey analysis consisted of a series of phases. Firstly, data was exported from Google Forms and was cleaned up and transformed to raw data. Subsequently, the ordinal level data collected was categorised in a specific rank order (according to category indicated). The data was then imported into R Studio statistical analysis software (version 1.3.1056) (Komperda 2017). The next phase involved a descriptive statistical analysis using the median as a measure of central tendency, therefore representing the broad general sentiment for each item and inter-quartile range (IQR) as a measure of spread. The next step involved the testing of a few hypotheses through inferential statistics. Before going through the different hypotheses, a Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test was carried out to test whether the null hypothesis, intended as the population being normally distributed in relation to the dependent variables, was valid (Sánchez-Hernández 2018). Since the results confirmed that none of the dependent variables data were normally distributed (p<0.05), the Kruskal Wallis and Dunn Multiple Comparison Test with Bonferroni Adjustment were preferred as non-parametric alternatives to Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Tukey tests (Bagramian et al. 2019; Sheard 2018).

Sample

The web-based survey attracted a significant number of respondents (N=436). As expected, the top three categories were fans/observers (25%), local players (17%) and administrators (12%). With regard to fans/observers, it was interesting to note that only 18.7% indicated they attended league matches regularly. This finding is in line with the current attendance crisis in the Maltese Premier League (Said 2020).

Survey respondents were predominantly male (86.2%). The largest group of respondents were aged 30 to 40 (40.8%), with the median age being 37. Most respondents (64.9%) indicated they had completed ‘Higher Education’ (EQF Level-5 or more). An initial analysis of the results, with regard to statistically significant differences in relation to these
demographics (sex, age, level of education), did not produce noteworthy results. The analysis therefore focused on “category” as the main independent variable when testing a series of hypotheses.

**Results**

**A Pivotal Decision - Positive or Negatively Perceived?**

When asked whether the FQ is a positive development for Maltese football, a 21-year-old Challenge League footballer survey respondent expressed his concern that a FQ increase would produce a domino-effect on multiple fronts. He argued that locals would find fewer playing opportunities in Premier League clubs, hence they would revert to playing in lower divisions. This would damage not only the national team but also current lower division players who would end up with fewer playing opportunities themselves. Additionally, a 36-year-old Member Association Administrator acknowledged that with the current scenario, the increase is probably inevitable; nonetheless, he stressed a key theme of this study, in that the “MFA needs to make sure that local talent is safeguarded”.

The negative outlook towards the FQ increase was supported by the survey results. In fact, 54.8% of respondents disagreed with the increase. Conversely, only 10.1% indicated a strong agreement (Figure 1). This produced the first significant finding of this study: general scepticism towards any tangible positive effects resulting from the FQ increase.

![Figure 1: Survey Question – An increase in foreign quota in the Maltese Premier League from the current limit of seven foreigners to nine or eleven in the upcoming seasons is a positive development for Maltese football](image-url)

Interestingly, a detailed analysis of these results per category showed that the highest medians (indicating agreement) were recorded in the foreign player, game official, senior coach, and sports journalist categories. The lowest support was amongst parents/guardians and administrators. The administrators category had the highest IQR value (5), indicating variety in responses. In fact, a more in-depth analysis showed Premier League administrators as being strongly in favour of a FQ increase (Median=7). This contrasted with the opinion of National Amateur League and Youth administrators (Median=1). The result of Premier League administrators is a rather anticipated outcome, as it is in line with the PLSC’s stance in favour of this development. This theme was tested through the first hypothesis which...
aimed to highlight any statistical differences in opinion on the FQ increase according to one's role in football. The Kruskal-Wallis test (df=10) showed sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis (p<.01). Results revealed one major statistical difference that related to parents/guardians being significantly less in favour of the FQ increase than senior coaches (p=.02). This may suggest that whilst parents/guardians are concerned with future playing opportunities for their children, coaches, who are judged by results, believe that with more foreigners they can achieve better results.

**Context Around Maltese Football**

Since literature suggested the importance of not looking at the FQ in isolation, the researcher asked which were the other key factors worthy of consideration. These are analysed in the following sections.

**Limitations of Maltese Football**

Survey respondents were asked whether Maltese players have sufficient opportunities locally to become professionals. Only 11.5% strongly agreed, compared to 30.5% who indicated a slight disagreement. A detailed analysis of these results per category revealed a rather surprising result, as youth players obtained a median of ‘3’ (neutral position), showing that they are not completely disheartened by the present situation. However, the IQR registered (3) was rather high, indicating an important variance in responses. Interestingly, local players, parents/guardians, and youth coaches were the categories obtaining the lowest medians (2 – slightly disagree). The youth coaches’ opinion is quite meaningful as it suggests a level of helplessness from these coaches who do not see feasible long-term opportunities for their players, something which might affect their motivation for their job. This theme was tested through a second hypothesis which aimed at uncovering any statistical differences in opinion according to the participants’ role in football, as to whether talented youths currently have sufficient opportunities locally to become professionals. The Kruskal-Wallis test (df=10) showed sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis (p<.001). The Dunn Test revealed that the major differences were all related to foreign players. This finding is due to this category being the only to obtain a median of ‘5’ (strong agreement), whereas none of the other categories registered a median above ‘3’. This is an interesting finding which seems to be in line with the different perspectives of migrants and locals on what are the minimum requirements needed to shift to a professional status (Littlewood et al. 2011).

In general, the findings emphasised the importance of analysing the FQ issue from a local perspective. Survey results showed that, generally, local stakeholders do not feel there are sufficient opportunities for locals to turn professional. Moreover, Mifsud (2020) also highlights that data emerging from the corresponding qualitative dataset showed that stakeholders questioned the financial viability surrounding most youth nursery projects around Malta.

**Working Conditions for Maltese Players Versus Foreigners**

Survey respondents were asked whether “foreign players are more professional, more motivated and of higher quality than locals”. The results demonstrated a general neutrality towards this statement. However, interestingly, foreign players (Median=4.5) and local players (Median=2 [slight disagreement]) were the only two categories which moved away from this neutral position. This seems to indicate that local players are hesitant in accepting the label of not being as professional as foreigners. This was also confirmed in Mifsud’s (2020) qualitative dataset which showed that local players tend to perceive an element of discrimination in terms of their value when compared to foreign players. This theme was also tested through a third hypothesis which aimed at uncovering any statistical
differences in opinion towards superior professionalism and motivation among foreigners in comparison to locals, according to one’s role in football. The Kruskal-Wallis test ($df=10$) showed sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis ($p<.001$). The Dunn Test revealed statistically significant differences between local players and four other categories. This is linked to the median registered for local players (2 [slight disagreement]), the only one below the midpoint threshold (3).

In another question related to this theme, respondents were asked whether they consider locals to be disadvantaged when compared to foreigners. Interestingly, a substantial majority (78.6%) felt that the conditions of locals are not at par with foreigners. Additionally, low IQR values across most categories indicated consistency in responses. This theme was tested through a fourth hypothesis which examined any statistical differences in opinions on whether Maltese players are disadvantaged compared to foreigners, according to the respondents’ role in football. The Kruskal-Wallis test ($df=10$) showed sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis ($p<.01$). The Dunn Test revealed one major statistically significant difference that related to administrators being significantly less keen than local players on accepting the notion that locals are disadvantaged. This finding was in line with a comment made by a club administrator, who argued that locals are not ready to become professionals, irrespective of what clubs offer them. The reason could be that locals are aware of the dismal financial situation of clubs, and do not feel confident enough to turn fully professional. This is in line with what Engh and Agergaard (2015) discussed in relation to different expectations on acceptable working conditions in different countries.

**Lega-pro Development**

Survey respondents were asked whether the Lega-Pro development justified the FQ increase. Results did not indicate any clear preference. A detailed analysis of these statistics per category demonstrated consistency across all categories, despite relatively high IQR values. Interestingly, a specific analysis of Premier League Club-Administrators’ responses indicated a median of ‘4’ (slightly agree). This result, which is higher than all the median values registered in all categories, is in line with the position taken by the PLSC.

**Success of Clubs Versus Success of National Team**

Survey respondents were asked whether the constant FQ increase in past years has contributed to Malta’s downfall in FIFA rankings. Only 30.9% of respondents disagreed with this statement. A detailed analysis of these statistics per category demonstrated a general tendency towards accepting the FQ as a contributor to the negative performances at international level. In fact, only foreign players rejected the FQ as a contributor to Malta’s steady decline in FIFA rankings.

A second survey question pertaining to this theme asked whether a FQ increase would help Maltese clubs perform better in UEFA competitions. Only 19.3% disagreed with this statement. A detailed analysis of these statistics according to category demonstrated consistency across different categories. However, unsurprisingly, foreigners, in what appears as an attempt to justify their importance, recorded the highest median (5 [strongly agree]). In contrast, the lowest medians (3) were registered with local players and parents/guardians. This suggests a strong statement by locals, advocating the contribution of Maltese players in the success of clubs.

**Short-term Interest of Clubs Versus Long-Term Focus of Federations**

Maguire (2011) clearly outlines the difference between national federations and clubs in respectively having development as a priority as opposed to winning. Comments gathered
from the survey confirmed this mindset. A *youth-coach* commented that “clubs do not
care for national team success”. Similarly, a *46-year-old observer* argued that clubs are only
interested in “quick-fixes”. A *30-year-old fan* also expressed his concern that: “foreigners
will not help clubs on a long-term basis, it’s not healthy for clubs to have 5/6 new players
every year.”

Regarding this theme, participants were asked whether foreign influx had a positive
spillover on locals. Interestingly, 35.8% remained neutral. However, those claiming that
Maltese benefitted from such influx was considerably higher (43.1%) than those who
disagreed (21%). A detailed look at these statistics per category indicated that the highest
median (4.5) involved *foreign players* (foreigners justifying their importance). Equally, the
fact that *parents/guardians* generally agreed (median=4) is also noteworthy, particularly
since this category was the least in favour of a FQ increase. This finding clearly indicates
the complexity of the FQ decision. On the one hand, playing opportunities for homegrowns
generally decrease with a FQ increase; contrastingly, as indicated by Royuela and Gásquez
(2019: 720), locals generally benefit from “knowledge spillovers” when training with better
players, irrespective of nationality.

Another survey question related to this theme asked respondents whether youth investment
was still viable for clubs in the current footballing landscape. Results did not indicate any
significant trend. A detailed analysis of these statistics per category, revealed rather high
IQR values across most categories, demonstrating variances in opinion. In fact, a look at
the median obtained by *club-administrators* from different tiers showed an interesting
trend (*Premier League* = 4; *Challenge League* = 3.5; *National Amateur League* = 3). This
seems to indicate that clubs are more reluctant to field youths in top-tier leagues, where
more is at stake and there is less margin for error. This theme was also tested through a
fifth hypothesis which aimed at uncovering any statistical differences in opinion towards
the viability of youth investment, according to one’s background. The Kruskal-Wallis test
(*df=10*) did not show sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis (*p*=.46). The Dunn
Test confirmed this conclusion by showing no significant interactions whatsoever.

**Commercialisation Versus Fostering Local Player Development**

**Attractiveness of the Maltese Premier League**

Foreign influx has often been regarded as an excellent tool to produce more attractive
leagues (Li et al. 2019). However, findings indicated that this is not the case locally. Results
indicate that there are other elements which are more pertinent to the persistent decline
in attendances. Results showed a significant 31% remaining neutral. However, the largest
cohort (40.6%) disagreed. A detailed analysis of results per category revealed that the
category concerned most with attendances (*fans/observers*) produced a median of ‘2’
(slightly disagree) with a relatively low IQR value (1.5), essentially disapproving the notion
that FQ is a contributor to the decline in attendances. This theme was also tested through a
final hypothesis which aimed at uncovering any statistical differences in opinion towards
the viability of youth investment, according to one’s role in football. The Kruskal-Wallis test
(*df=10*) did not show sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis (*p*<.01). The Dunn
Test revealed that there was one major statistically significant difference that related to *local players* being less inclined at considering the FQ as a contributor to
the decline in attendances than *fan observers* (*p*<.01).

**Competitive Balance of the Maltese Premier League**

Foreign influx often increases competitive balance (Ramchandani et al. 2018). Findings
demonstrated general scepticism that this is the case locally. In fact, only 37% agreed that
a FQ increase would make the league more balanced. A detailed analysis of results per category showed that despite rather high IQR values, game officials (Median=4 [slightly agree]) and foreign players (Median=3.5) were the only two categories to register a median above the mid-point threshold. Interestingly, it seems that “fan-observers” were neutral on this issue. This shows that for fans it is unlikely that a FQ increase would have any effect on the league’s quality, hence potentially boosting attendances.

Incentives Promoting Use of Local Players

One survey question aimed at gauging respondents’ opinion on whether the FQ increase in recent years has resulted in less opportunities for locals in Malta’s top tier. An absolute majority (68.4%) indicated agreement, whereas only 18.3% disagreed. A detailed analysis of results per category revealed that no category rejected this claim. It is noteworthy that local players were the only category to register a median of ‘5’ (strongly agree).

Respondents were asked for their opinion on MFA’s ‘development pot scheme’, intended to incentivize clubs to develop youth players. Results showed that 41.1% remained neutral on this issue. This might indicate a lack of knowledge about the details of the scheme, as it is not strictly a public domain matter but more of an administrative one. A detailed analysis of results per category demonstrated general low IQR values, suggesting consistency in remaining neutral on this issue. Nonetheless, a more in-depth analysis of club-administrators provided interesting results. Whereas the median of Premier League and Challenge League clubs was ‘3’ (neutral), that of National Amateur League club administrators was ‘4’ (slightly agree). This finding is in line with results presented earlier, in that low-tier clubs are happier with the current scheme. Conversely, an increase in funds allocated is probably necessary for Premier League and Challenge League clubs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to build on the MFA’s (2019b) plea on the need for more empirical research around local football, whilst serving as a catalyst for future research. The area selected dealt with what is largely considered as a pivotal decision for the future of Maltese football, the foreign quota. The current proposal being pushed forward by the PLSC is insisting on increasing the FQ from the current limit of seven (already one of the softest in Europe) to nine. Although this study does not provide an answer to all facets related to the FQ, it focuses mainly on providing an overview of the general attitudes towards the quota increase and other related implications resulting from a potential increase.

Maguire’s (2011) theoretical framework, based on three points of conflict between clubs and national federations, with regard to prioritising winning as opposed to development, was used as the basis for this research. Findings were generally in line with the literature reviewed, in that the national federation’s mission of promoting domestic talent, in spite of foreign influx, “is reliant on the philosophy and actions of individual clubs” (Bullough and Coleman 2019: 205). In this regard, the first major finding of this study highlighted the importance of applying a local perspective as an antecedent to analysing Maguire’s three points of conflict.

Survey results indicated general scepticism among the local football community towards any positive effects resulting from a FQ increase, with only 33% agreeing with the rise in FQ. Parents/guardians were the category least supportive of this development. In the main hypothesis test, the only statistically significant difference registered indicated that parents/guardians were significantly less in favour of the FQ than senior coaches. This suggests that whilst parents/guardians are concerned about future opportunities for
their children, senior coaches believe that with more foreigners they can achieve better results. Other major findings indicated that local players are generally regarded as being at a disadvantage with regard to foreigners (79%) and that foreigners further decrease opportunities for locals in the Maltese Premier League (68%). Results also revealed that top-tier clubs are more reluctant to field youth players, with the main argument being that there is less margin for error. In this regard, MFA’s development scheme, aimed at incentivising the use of local players, does not seem to be affecting decisions of top-tier clubs, contrary to low-tier clubs. Conversely, survey results indicated a widespread belief that foreigners produce a positive spillover on local players. Finally, it seems unlikely that a FQ increase would significantly alter the league’s competitive balance or have any effect on the league’s popularity.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations are principally linked to the use of “convenience sampling” as this resulted in a significant variance in the population of different categories/sub-categories. Furthermore, due to the exploratory nature of this research and the multidimensionality of the topic, the author acknowledges the complexity of the topic.

Recommendations for Further Research

There has been very limited previous research on the effect of migration on Maltese football. The exploratory nature of this research provided an overview of several aspects linked to this topic. It is suggested that areas for further research and investigation include:

- Targeted research which builds on this study through a bigger sample or viewpoints of specific stakeholders.
- A statistical study which looks into data available in the MFA’s (2019b) publication regarding top Maltese Premier League performers in various categories (assists, dribbles, tackles, etc.), aimed at verifying if foreigners are truly performing better than homegrown players.
- A study that reviews best practices of other countries with similar dynamics and their strategies in relation to FQ.
- Gain the perspective of clubs and what can stimulate youth investment.
- A study to evaluate the best approach for the development of local players: centralisation or decentralisation.
- A study which evaluates the possibility of introducing “salary/transfer capping” in Maltese football.
- The potential impact of the Lega-Pro development on Maltese football.

In addition, further studies should also expand further on various themes emerging from Mifsud’s (2020) qualitative dataset. In fact, data presented in this research indicated that, in Malta’s case, foreign influx seems to have benefitted clubs more than the national team. However, findings suggest that improvement at club level does not necessarily imply overall positive consequences for Maltese football. This research concluded that the identification of a suitable roadmap which satisfies all stakeholders is extremely difficult. The main recommendations revolved around limiting the number of non-EU players and the number of foreigners that can be registered by clubs per season, government grants, incentivising youth investment, and rewarding clubs which make use of club-homegrown players. Nonetheless, findings suggest that with the current system, any improvements are unsustainable in the long-term. Interviewees agreed that the national federation and clubs need to work in synergy in developing a common long-term plan that safeguards the interests of all stakeholders, especially the identification of the right development path for local youth players.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Endeavour Scholarships Scheme Programme for financing my studies at Leeds Beckett University. Thank you to my research supervisor Dr Ian Richards and to Dr Matthew Muscat-Inglott for their assistance in carrying out this study.

References


Mamo, C. and Polidano, C. 2014 ‘Why Attendance within the Maltese Football Premier Division Is Low and How Can a Proper Marketing Mix Campaign Be Beneficial to Improve the Situation?’, Interdisciplinary project, University College of Northern Denmark, Aalborg, Denmark.


Proposed Increase in Foreign Player Quota in Top-Tier Maltese Football: An In-Depth Investigation of Local Attitudes


