

**ACTION RESEARCH: PREPARING MALTESE FOOTBALL
PLAYERS FOR MIGRATORY BASED TRANSITIONS**

Adele Muscat

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Declaration

Some of the work conducted has been presented at national/ international conferences and is listed below:

Invited Symposia

Challenges faced by Maltese players when migrating to play professional football overseas – Malta Youth Football Association Annual Seminar, Malta - September 2014

Preparing Young Players for Migration. An Action Research Study – Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology National Sports Conference, Malta - April 2016

Preparing Young Footballers for Migratory Transitions. An Action Research Study – Institute for Physical Education and Sport Annual Conference, Malta – February 2017

Conferences

An examination of Maltese Players Psychological Health and Well-Being in the Migratory Transition to Playing Professionally Overseas – Department of Psychology, University of Malta, Malta - November 2013

Examining the development of young Maltese National Team football players in preparation for within-career transitions - Counselling Research Conference, Department of Counselling, University of Malta, Malta - February 2014

Small Island Mentality: Implications for Maltese Footballers experiencing a Migratory Transition - 4th International Conference on Qualitative Research in Sport, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK - September 2014

Small Island Mentality - Education through Sport – Institute of PE and Sport, University of Malta, Malta - April 2015

Small Island Mentality - 11th International Small Islands Conference Globalisation, Identities and Island Cultures – The Small Islands Cultures Research Initiative (SICRI), in partnership with the University of Malta, Gozo (Malta) – June 2015

Preparing young football players for migration to professional leagues overseas - The Role of Psychology in Maltese Society – Department of Psychology in conjunction with BetaPsi, University of Malta, Malta - November 2015

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Abstract

The thesis outlines a collaborative research project that was undertaken between the Malta Football Association (MFA), the Malta National Sports School (NSS) and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). Drawing on transition frameworks, models and contemporary literature (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova 2003; Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2015; Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2016; Richardson, Littlewood & Gilbourne, 2005; Richardson, Littlewood, Nesti & Benstead, 2012), the research adopted an action research methodology to examine the psycho-social and cultural challenges that young Maltese football players and parents experienced within migratory based transitions. The author adopted the role of practitioner-researcher to understand, plan and support a range of key stakeholders during the transition process. Specifically, Study One (Reconnaissance Phase) examined the challenges experienced by Maltese footballers that had migrated to European professional football. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 male Maltese players who had experienced migration to a foreign club. Results evidenced that players experienced homesickness and lacked psycho-social knowledge and skills for an effective transition. Players also experienced culturally based challenges. The findings are framed around a unique and deeply embedded Maltese cultural identity. Study Two (Reconnaissance Phase) utilised a focus group methodology with parents of players from the Maltese Football Association (MFA) Academy, parents of young players that had previously experienced migration, head coaches from top Maltese nurseries, and coaches from the National Sports School (NSS) and MFA. Findings of Study One were disseminated to facilitate reflection, discussion and to identify issues that required consideration in order to better prepare young players for future migratory based transition. Study Three (Action Planning) used focus groups to disseminate the findings of Study One and Two with the Headmaster of the NSS, and parent representatives of the school. A number of change strategies were developed to improve the school's programme of preparation for students who may migrate to foreign clubs. A separate action meeting was conducted with the Technical Director of the MFA to discuss and highlight change strategies to improve the MFA's programme of preparation for young footballers seeking a career abroad in professional football. The Implementation and Monitoring phases focused on applying the action strategies agreed. These were; (i) to experience migration and independent living, (ii) psycho-social and cultural support and development of young players, and (iii) parental education. Regular evaluation of change strategy activities evidenced positive change and also continued to enhance the efficacy of the strategies being implemented. Young players who have migrated overseas over the past year and who had engaged in a programme of preparation prior to migration have coped well with the challenges they have so far faced.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Literature Review

1.0 Introduction

For many people, football is not just a game, it forms a great part of their identity (Harris & Elliott, 2015). Playing professional football provides a high social status and few careers provide comparable opportunities for attaining and exercising values and skills. In addition, it is also recognised that there are few occupations that one can “play” to earn a living (Bourke, 2003). Indeed, it is these reasons that have influenced why, over the past decades, the movement of athletes (for the purposes of work), within and between nations and continents, has significantly increased. This is now a recognized feature of the global sports (specifically association football) industry (Maguire & Stead, 1996). The increase in athlete (player) migration has created intense media and scholarly interest in recent years, especially since it has been recognised that to improve career prospects, athletes (players) may need to migrate for the purposes of work (Bourke, 2002; Coakley, 1998; Magee & Sugden, 2002). However, when players move from one country to another to play football, the transition has been described as complex and challenging (Bourke, 2002; Richardson et al., 2012).

Although research into sports labour migration developed from the early work of Bale (1982), it has been argued that subsequent studies have not focused enough on the daily ‘lived’ experiences of the players (Littlewood, 2005; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Most research has tended to focus on the top football leagues in Europe, or on the top football nations (Darby, 2007a; De Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Littlewood, Mullen & Richardson, 2011; Richardson et al., 2012). In that sense, it has neglected the experiences of individuals from smaller, or peripheral nation states, such as Malta in the context of the present thesis.

On the Mediterranean island of Malta, one of the smallest states in the world with an estimated population of 429,344, and which covers just over 316km squared (National

Statistics Office, Malta, 2016), football is a national obsession. It is even the case that, in Malta, people make sure they do not get married on the same day as some big football match. Political rallies are shifted and parliament has sittings adjusted to the international football calendar (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). Football is therefore an embedded feature of the country's cultural identity.

Small nations like Malta have been able to enhance their national teams, at both a youth and senior level, thanks to globalization of the game. Countries also considered as small nations, such as Iceland, also have a number of players playing in top European leagues that has helped their national team performances to improve. In fact, in the European Championships of 2016, Iceland were the most talked about team, especially after they beat England to reach the quarter final stages of the tournament.

However, according to Armstrong and Mitchell (2008), moving from Malta has proved problematic, as players in Malta are described as being used to an “easy life”, where playing football is amateur in nature, and players show little desire to pursue their career elsewhere. In fact, the Maltese player Michael Mifsud, who started off with Kaiserslautern Football Club (Germany), before joining Lillestrom Football Club (Norway) and eventually Coventry City Football Club (England), was rumoured to have left Germany because of repeated trips to Malta. Mifsud grew up on the tiny island of Malta where everyone is sociable and he has many friends. When he moved to Germany he struggled to cope. He explained “if I’m bored here I go home, if I am bored there I go swimming, if I get bored swimming, I go to Paceville” (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008, p. 155). Thus, the lack of Maltese players with experience of other cultures means that the national team has not developed in the same manner that other small nations like Iceland have (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008), as it has been seen that other things being equal, national teams consisting of players with experience of playing abroad should be more

successful in World Cup and European Championship tournaments than teams consisting (mainly) of players from the respective domestic league (Frick, 2009).

In light of this context, the thesis aims to critically explore the migratory-based transition experiences of non-professional players from the small island nation of Malta to playing professional football in nation states that are physically much larger in size and professionalism. It also aims to examine the role and function of the ‘host’ and ‘donor’ nation cultures, and how these may subsequently impact the transition process of players. Armed with this knowledge, and through a participatory action research methodology, the researcher engaged in a number of strategically developed change strategies that aimed to support young Maltese players for a more effective migratory-based transition.

1.1 Literature Review

The literature review aims to give the reader an insight into migratory processes in football throughout the world. Reference is made to the Bosman Ruling and how this has helped players move more easily from one country to another within Europe. The transitional challenges players face during migration are further discussed with reference to contemporary empirical research by various researchers. The need for support and career assistance programmes to prepare young footballers for migratory transitions are emphasized in the final part of the literature review.

1.2 Football Labour Migration

There has been a significant rise of professionals in various industries that have become more internationally mobile, and their presence and activities have influenced the very growth and structure of globalization developments (Dezaley, 1990). From the early nineteenth century, travel and mobility has been central to the business and culture of

music, dance and theatre. Entertainers travelled along particular routes to different countries in order to perform and earn a living highlight the point with respect to the international appeal for “talent” (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2015). Global labour migration, in fact, has become routine throughout the world and has also affected the sporting world (Lee, 2010; Maguire, 1999). It has been suggested that the migration of athletes takes place at three levels; within nations, between nations in the same continent, and between nations in different continents and hemispheres (Maguire & Falcous, 2011). More and more elite athletes are now selling their labour outside their home country and the international movement of athletes has become an important feature of contemporary sport (Maguire & Bale, 1994).

The movement of football talent, fuelled by the financial resources of clubs within the stronger professional leagues in Europe, is typically referred to as football labour migration (Maguire & Bale, 1994; Maguire & Pearton, 2000a; Maguire, 2004). When explaining global football labour migration, one must also look at wider societal processes to further understand this complex phenomena. Many factors influence the decision to migrate and play abroad, with a consistent factor being the personal goal for a greater experience in the sport, the opportunity of experiencing a full time professional career, and the commitment that this involves. In smaller, and often less professional leagues, players recognize that there are few full time professional employment opportunities, due to the sport industry becoming commercialized and globalized, thus acting as a driver that fuels migration (Lee, 2010).

The migration of footballers dates back hundreds of years (Maguire, 2004) and involved lots of instability due to political and economic processes, government restrictions and regulations of federations (Maguire & Bale, 1994). Institutional or structural factors have also been instrumental in helping to shape historical and contemporary

migration patterns. In 1931, the English Football Association (FA) introduced a two-year residency qualification for non-British players in top competitions. This meant that foreigners could only play as amateurs. In Germany, the federation banned foreign players and managers when Hitler came to power in 1933. In France, in 1932, clubs were allowed to have up to five foreign players in every match. In Italy, non-nationals were banned but those with dual citizenship and from South America were allowed, whilst the American Soccer League made no restrictions (Taylor, 2006). When Italy lost to North Korea in 1966, the Italian federation did not allow foreigners for over 15 years. In France and Spain, between 1962 and the early 1970's, the borders were closed, whilst in England in 1978, the prohibitive residency qualification was finally removed. The pattern on these restrictions has significantly affected migration over the years (Berry, 1997) as it provided the opportunity for players to move to different countries for professional reasons.

In 1993, the English Professional Footballer's Association called for better controls on the playing credentials of foreigners as home-grown players were facing difficulties in finding their place within the team. However, the England team's poor performance in the 2000 European football championships was still linked to the presence of more than 180 foreign players in the Premier League clubs. England remains one of the biggest buyers of elite football talent thanks to the increased economic power of Premier League clubs since their coalition with Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV network (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). Tony Banks, Labour Government's Minister for Sport, (1997) even got to the extent of stating humorously that he was proposing to extend English nationality to non-English residents regardless of their nationality, so as to improve the performance of the national team (Magee, 1998).

When the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) attempted to remove restrictions on foreign players in European leagues, professional players

threatened to strike. In fact, in Italy, in March 1996, Serie A players led by Gianluca Vialli conducted a strike asking for a limit to be placed on the number of foreigners contracted to Serie A as well as an abolition of the transfer system (World Soccer June 1996:20). At the same time, however, Vialli used the Bosman case to move freely from Juventus to Chelsea at the end of the season. Former Italian U21 coach Cesare Maldini moreover stated that football at youth level was getting worse in Italy since the number of foreigners has increased and taken the place of Italian players (Powell, 2013). There was also a fear that their top Italian players would move to other leagues in other countries (Magee, 1998).

The Bosman Ruling came about in 1995; Jean Marc Bosman, a Belgian citizen, took the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) to court over the European football transfer system. His contract had expired at Liege Football Club and he wanted to move to French club Dunkirk. However Liege asked for a transfer fee which Dunkirk could not afford. Bosman won the case and thanks to the Bosman ruling the three plus two rule was eradicated. UEFA had previously stated a quota which limited the number of foreign players in domestic European Union (EU) leagues (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). This rule allowed European clubs to play no more than three foreign and two assimilated players during matches. Assimilated meaning foreigners who had been playing uninterrupted for five years including three as a junior in the relevant nation (Littlewood, 2005). From then on, EU players could work in any country of the EU without restriction and thus, European football, continued to change after the Bosman ruling because players made the most of their freedom and moved across countries to find the best wages (Magee, 2002). However, those players not within the EU must have played in three quarters of their country's competitive international matches over two years to be able to play in the EU.

However, the Bosman rule did not go down well initially. Some sport labour unions in Europe tried to protect indigenous players by arguing for quotas and qualification thresholds to be applied to potential migrants (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). Questions emerge about the playing opportunities and progression of home grown players in professional football since career opportunities for indigenous talent in domestic club football are not so easy to come by (Maguire, 1999; De Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009). Young home grown players will find it hard to keep their place in the academy and make a first team appearance with more and more foreign talent coming in (Richardson, et al., 2005; Richardson et al. 2012). As a result, national teams stand to suffer due to underdevelopment and lack of exposure given to local young talent in elite level domestic club football, an obvious progression route (Littlewood, 2005; Maguire & Bale, 1994). UEFA, in fact, believes that freedom of movement has brought on a lack of local identity within teams, teams without eligible national players. However, fans are not bothered about their team not having indigenous players as long as their team is successful (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). Migration has been seen to involve the de-skilling and ensuing impoverishment of donor countries. So less developed countries that have invested in the production of athletic talent lose it to countries with more economically secure leagues (Klein, 1991). What happens is that some countries lose their quality players in international matches due to clashes with European leagues (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). The Malta Football Association (MFA) too, opposed the Bosman ruling to try and protect local footballing talent. In that regard, Armstrong and Mitchell (2008, p6) suggested that, “for them, the image of an egalitarian space of Europeanised football is dangerous; an opportunity for the more powerful footballing nations to consolidate their position, at the expense of Malta”. They continued to suggest that this way of looking at it comes about from a post-

colonial society living on the edge of Europe, where experiences of equality and congruence between those who have power and the powerless have often been negatively associated with times of great hardship and violence.

Still, top class players will not come to Malta (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008); foreign migrants want to go to the English Premier League (EPL) and other top leagues in Europe (Lanfranchi, 1994; Maguire & Stead, 1996; Maguire, & Pearton, 2000a; Magee, 2002; Magee & Sugden, 2002). It is now easier to move too, since football clubs are constantly facing financial concerns (i.e. buying and selling of players, sponsorships, economic rewards etc.). This has pushed the clubs towards investing in “ready-made” (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a) or more “finished” players, as they are more likely to be equipped and ready to immediately impact upon first team success (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, & Richardson, 2010).

In the 2010/11 season in the EPL, each club needed to have at least eight home-grown- players – registered for at least three seasons at an English or Welsh club between the ages of 16-21 years. Other European countries, too, put their own quotas however the legislation brought about by UEFA encouraged clubs to begin recruiting young talented players at an even younger age (Richardson, Littlewood & Gilbourne, 2005). Clubs recruit at the ages of 15-16 or even younger to ensure players are eligible for home grown status by 18-19 years of age (Littlewood et al., 2011).

However, UEFA introduced a ban on any player under 18 making an international transfer or first registration of non- nationals, within Europe so as to protect young players and their clubs. However, the Bosman ruling prevents this proposal from being enforced and workers within the EU can move freely (Richardson et. al., 2012). FIFA too, in 2001, adopted a rule that forbade transferring football players under 18 years of age from other countries. However, thanks to the liberalisation and globalisation of the football labour

market, such transfers started taking place in the late 1980's and this was boosted after 1995. Many clubs looked for cheap talent in the Third World. Prohibition created a way that prompted an 'exception' status or, otherwise, develop an international black market for young players. Abuse took place since there were three conditions where transfers of players under the age of 18 could take place. These included: when players' parents move abroad for reasons not linked to football, when the transfer is across EU countries and when a teenage player is living close to the border of a foreign country (Andreff, 2011). In fact, a Maltese player by the name of Myles Beerman was recently at the centre of a controversy. The 17-year-old's move from Floriana to Manchester City was being reviewed by football's world governing body, with claims that it could breach rules concerning the transfer of underage players. Beerman had been at City since 2014. City, however, stated that everything had been done above board (Robson, 2016).

Managers will also look overseas for ready-made players, influenced primarily by the significant financial status that clubs possess. In addition, a manager is reported to only last approximately two years in a club and thus, it may not be possible to work on long term youth development strategies. Instead, acquiring ready-made players gives managers, and subsequently the club more chance of instant success. As a result of the Bosman ruling, the value of promising young domestic players in the big leagues has been inflated as clubs are afraid of losing them on free transfers and thus offer long and attractive contracts. Hence, the economic attractiveness of foreign imports increases and if they come from smaller EU leagues (such as that in Malta) or from outside the EU they come cheaper (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a).

1.3 Football Labour Migration: A Maltese Perspective

Armstrong & Mitchell (2008) state that the migratory processes that have had an influence on Maltese football have occurred in four stages. The first came about with the

beginning of the game in Malta by the British servicemen who were on the island and who eventually joined Maltese teams. The post 1961 participation of Maltese clubs in Europe saw foreigners begging local clubs to take them on, so as to escape the Communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc. The third stage came about, from the post-colonial circumstances of the 1980's. Some clubs took on well-known players whilst others looked further afield. Such former England Internationals as Paul Mariner and Peter Barnes played for Maltese clubs. Others came as coaches such as Former Arsenal player Alan Sunderland as well as Brian Talbot who tried his luck in club management (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). In the 1980's, the then President of Malta, visited Bulgaria to seek trade relations with the Eastern bloc. This brought in Bulgarian players and coaches to Malta. In the last years, cheap football labour has been brought from Africa in the hope of selling the players on at considerable profit to other European clubs. However, very often these players become Maltese in the way they approach the game. According to Victor Zammit, the first football club President to bring a Nigerian to Malta, "The standard here is too poor – you know, walking football. They need more competition. It's the way we live, the climate, our mentality is all against succeeding" (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008, Pg. 151).

In the case of Malta, the Bosman Ruling was perhaps the most significant consequence of the nation's EU membership for footballers and professional clubs. Malta has had few football migrants since, up until the 1st May 2004, Malta was not a member of the EU. The restrictions imposed by UEFA, a limit of three non-EU players at every club in the EU, provided challenges in terms of Maltese player's mobility within the European context (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). Prior to EU membership, Maltese players required work permits to play in other European countries; where permits could only be obtained by playing 75% of the nation's international matches. The Maltese national team

standard was also considered poor and thus it has been seen by the Malta Football Association (MFA) as necessary for Maltese players to play abroad so as to improve the level. However, the poor level of Maltese players has made playing in other countries difficult (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008) (See Appendix A1 for table of Maltese players who have played abroad). Also, Maltese clubs still make it difficult for players to leave once their contract has finished. In fact, in May 2016, Bosman himself was in Malta as a guest of the Malta Football Player's Association (MFPA), the latter's mission being to abolish transfer fees for out-of-contract Maltese players. The Belgian looked visibly annoyed when talking about this issue stating:

Malta is obviously one of the few countries in Europe that doesn't respect the Bosman ruling, I met Carlo Mamo (MFPA general secretary) at the FIFPro Congress in Amsterdam last December. When he told me this (that players are not entitled to a free transfer at the end of their contract) I was astonished, I couldn't understand why it was still like this... it was like going back to the nineties (Az-zopardi, 2016; "MFA Rules", last para).

In Malta, in 1994, the then MFA President, implemented the 'two foreigners' only rule for Premier Division teams as he believed foreigners were stopping the progress of local talent. In the 1995/96 season there were 26 foreign born players in the First Division teams (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008), whilst in 2015/16 the average number of foreign players in each of the top Premier League clubs in Malta was 11. The Maltese Premier League Clubs are now allowed to field up to eight foreign players on the pitch with a further three on the substitute's bench in every match and there are no restrictions on the maximum number of registered foreign players.

At times, however, promising players are imported by agents, given poor contracts and are then released if they do not manage to succeed at playing regularly at top level.

National federations are concerned about this and some have put in place youth development policies (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). The following section will look at the transitions young players may go through and will present various theoretical perspectives put across by researchers.

1.4 Career Transitions: A Theoretical Perspective

According to Wylleman and Lavallo's (2004) Developmental Model of Transition, early migration can bring on detrimental social, physical and psychological consequences. Indeed, the period between 17 and 21 years of age is seen as one of the most critical periods of the players' development, and one which will have a direct impact on their professional career in sport (Richardson et al., 2005). At a time when young players are still developing, learning to deal with many life issues, including relationships with a variety of stakeholders, they are also trying to manage the fact that they are gifted and could have a future in professional football (Richardson et. al., 2004). The transition from amateur to professional status, and to high achievement and adult sport, has been described as one of the hardest periods of athletic development (Stambulova, 2000). In that respect, and according to Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallo (2004, p. 8), a transition has been defined as the "occurrence of one or more specific events that brings about a change in assumptions about oneself, but also a social disequilibrium that goes beyond the ongoing changes of everyday life". Transitions can be of two types; normative, characterized by events that are predictable and are expected to happen (moving from the youth to the senior environment) and non-normative, being unpredictable events such as injuries (Stambulova, 2000; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté, 2009). Below we will explore existing models of transitions which are designed to explain the process of change.

Schlossberg's (1981) Human Adaptation to Transition Model (Fig 1.1)

explains transitions that occur not just in sport, but in other areas of an individual's life too.

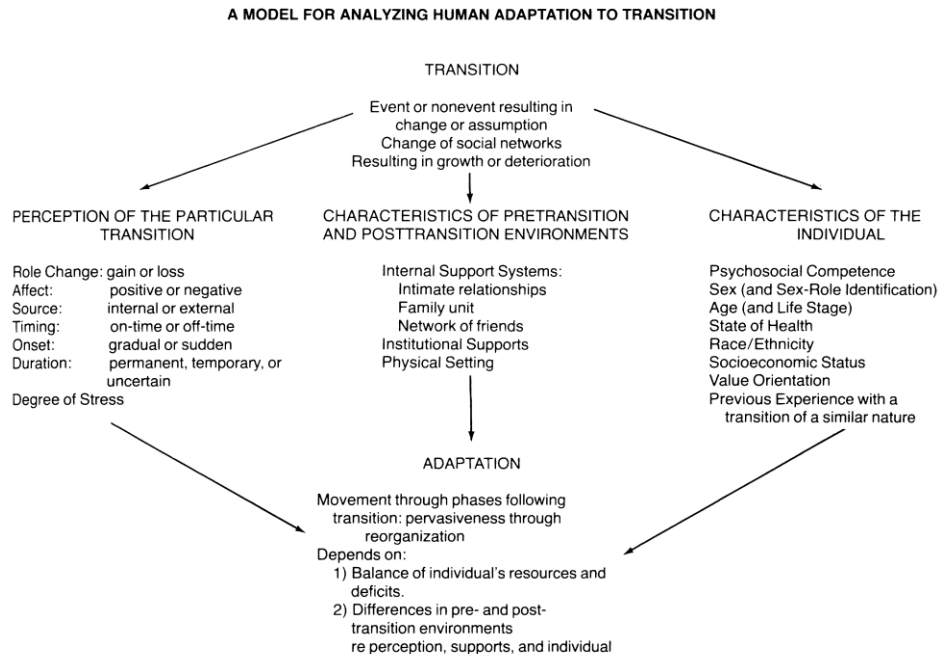


Figure 1.1: Schlossberg's Human Adaptation to Transition Model (adapted from Schlossberg, 1981)

In this model the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition, the perception of the particular transition and the characteristics of the pre and post transition environments were all thought to interact during a transition. The transition demands and resources interlink to create a transition outcome. The model focuses on change as a process, rather than one particular event as there are a tremendous amount of variables which may affect the outcome of the transition on the individual. However, the model does not describe sport specific factors associated with such changes, such as the influence of coaches (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Schlossberg (1981) believed that it is not the transition that is of utmost importance, but how that transition fits in with an individual's situational context at that time. Individuals differ in their ability to adapt to change. For example, if a player has an

opportunity to migrate for professional reasons it might be seen as a great opportunity, or else, to others, as a loss of identity and support. The same person may also react differently to a similar type of change occurring at another period in his life. The model represents a framework in which transitions of all kinds, whether positive or negative, can be analysed and possible interventions formulated.

On the other hand, Stambulova (2003) and Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) defined transition as a coping process with possibly positive or negative outcomes. **Stambulova's Athletic Career Transition Model** (2003)'s explains the process of a single transition that could be applied across sport careers (e.g., youth to senior) (Fig 1.2).

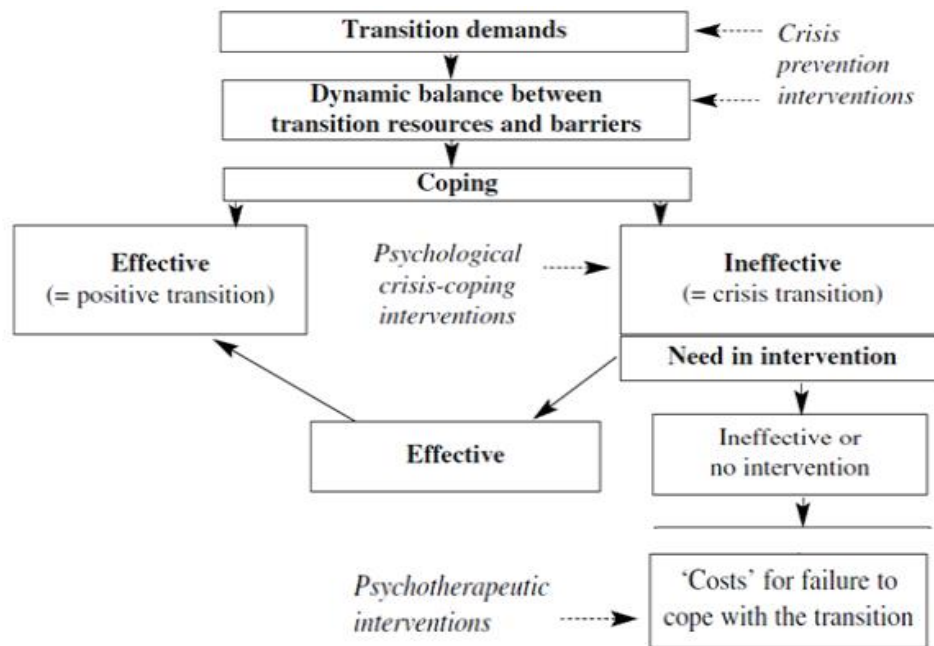


Figure 1.2: Stambulova's (2003) Athletic Career Transition Model (adapted from Stambulova & Hvatskaya, 2013)

Stambulova (2003) suggested that a transition is the athletes' ability to deal with specific demands which pose a conflict between "what the athlete is" and "what he or she wants or ought to be" in their sport career. She proposed that transitions come with challenges which need to be overcome in order to have a successful transition. How

effective athletes are at coping with the challenges depends upon transition resources and barriers they come across. Barriers interfering with coping processes can be internal and include a lack of knowledge or skills, lack of preparation for transition, and interpersonal conflicts. External barriers include a lack of financial and social support, and difficulties in combining sport and education or work commitments (Stambulova, 2003). Stambulova's (2003) model appears to offer a good explanation of the factors associated with the youth to senior transition, including demands, resources, and barriers associated with the change. Additionally, this model also offers suggestions as to the likely outcomes of transitions, and the possible intervention that could be used to help in the transition.

Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) came up with the **Development Model (Fig. 1.3)** to explain that there are a number of transitions that athletes experience (e.g., the youth to senior transition) during their careers. They suggested that the model is useful for sport psychologists working with athletes if they take a holistic approach to the study of transitions that individuals' experience, incorporating other important transitions in their life, and not just their sport career, because research has shown that changes in other areas of life may influence an athletic career (Ewing, 1998).

Age	10	15	20	25	30	35
Athletic Level	Initiation	Development		Mastery		Discontinuation
Psychological Level	Childhood	Adolescence		Adulthood		
Psychosocial Level	Parents Siblings Peers	Peers Coach Parents		Partner Coach		Family (Coach)
Academic Vocational Level	Primary education	Secondary education	Higher education		Vocational training Professional occupation	

Figure 1.3: A developmental model on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational level (adapted from Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004)

This model appears to give the most complete picture of the transitions that athletes may experience throughout their lives. It demonstrates this by including different normative transitions athletes go through at athletic, psychological, social, academic and vocational levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). These factors are presented in four layers.

Psychosocial Level- Coaches, parents and peers are very important to an athlete's support network. Wylleman & Lavallee (2004) have shown that the athletes' social network is determined by the stage of their athletic career. Until approximately 13 years, parents are seen as the most influential people. Between the ages of approximately 13 and 22, the relationships with peers become more important. Relationships with coaches at this time is also important whilst parents do not remain so influential. Between the ages of 22 until 29, it is the athlete's partner, and the relationship with the coach which is the most influential. When athletes are entering into the discontinuation stage, the relationship with family is then of primary influence.

Academic Vocational Level- The model looks into the transitions into (a) primary school at around six years of age (b) secondary school at the ages of 12 or 13, (c) higher education at around 18 and (d) vocational training or a professional occupation around the age of 22.

Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) highlighted that non-normative transitions were difficult to predict and thus these were not presented in the model. They also stated that some of the normative transitions which are predicted or hoped for may not always occur (known as a non-event) such as when the athlete does not continue his/her studies after high school. They also suggested that there may be more than one transition at one time and this could have an adverse effect on athletic development. For example, when athletes are moving from the youth to the senior team they may also be experiencing transitions at an academic level.

This model helps us appreciate the developmental, interactive and interdependent nature of transitions. Still, it is not specific enough to help us understand the unique social and cultural features of many sports. In fact, whilst previous research focused on the role of parents, coaches and peers and their influence on an athlete's career and transitions (Côté, 1999), later studies have also considered the role of worldwide-social factors such as the sport system and culture (Stambulova, Stephan, & Jarphag, 2007).

In fact, **Ryba, Stambulova and Ronkainen (2016)** came up with a **temporal model of cultural transition**. Their research on “The work of Cultural Transition: An Emerging Model” provide support providers such as sport psychologists with a framework for improving the psychological wellbeing and adaptabilities of migrant workers.

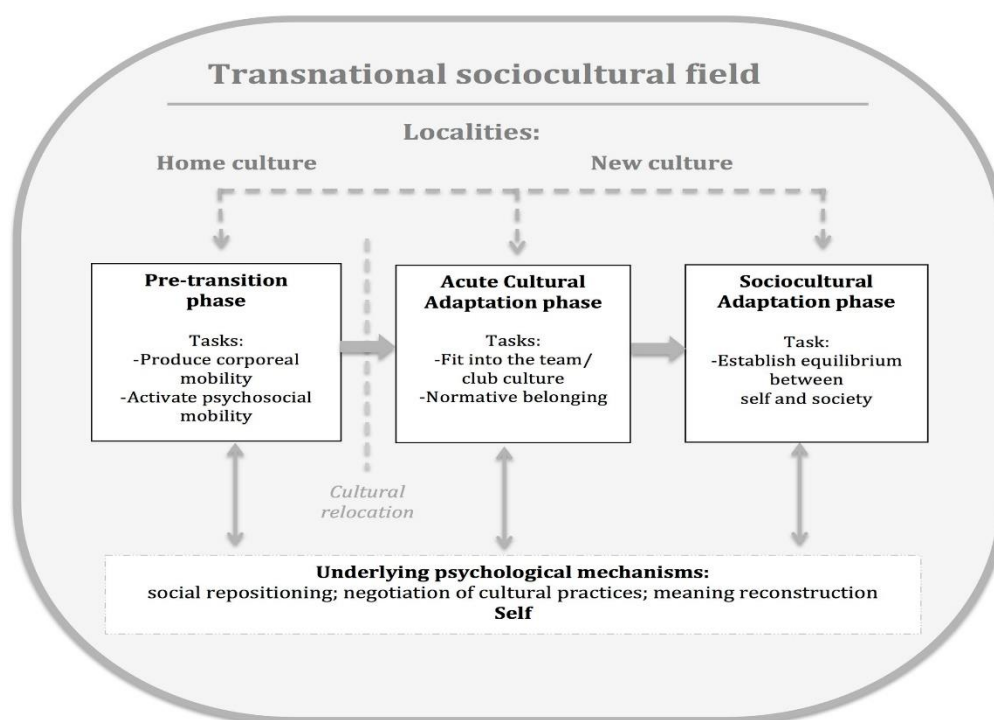


Figure 1.4: Cultural Transition Model (Ryba et al., 2016)

Ryba and colleagues (2016) model shows that the cultural transition process is made up of three phases. The pre-transition phase is crucial in physically and mentally

preparing the players for the challenges they will face when going through a cultural transition. This may mean searching for opportunities and reconstructing already established career narratives. A lack of awareness of the cultural differences they would face was linked with difficulties in adapting. Thus, this phase may provide the athlete and his/her family with time to negotiate necessary adjustments towards work-family balance.

In the acute cultural adaptation phase, athletes are faced with the task of trying to understand and adapt to the cultural patterns of a new place. Ryba and colleagues (2016) found that those who struggled to adapt between the former and the new sociocultural context were likely to feel the loss of identity. In the case of the sociocultural adaptation phase, this is associated with a long term stay. Those who felt psychologically adjusted to the new culture were also more satisfied with non-sport related aspects of everyday life. Sport and non-sport contexts were interdependent and interlinked with the self in producing adaptability of their careers.

The implications of Ryba and colleagues (2016) work suggest the need for organisations to provide psychosocial support for transitioning athletes. Timing, as to when the transition happens and the time to prepare for it were seen as important. Sport psychologists also need to create awareness amongst team staff members of the challenges transnational athletes face and how they could support them through transition, especially, since migrants may not be so keen to embrace the culture even though they may be eager to adapt to it. Transnational belonging is seen as essential for identity and self-concept formation.

An increase in awareness of cultural diversity and inevitably more interest in culturally informed research and practice in sport psychology (Ryba, Stambulova, Si &

Schinke, 2013; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013) has arisen since “players have reported differences in training, climate, diet, tactical formations, culture of playing, grass, ball, everything” (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013; pg. 240). This has come about as a result of the increase in sporting mobility within a multicultural space of globalized sport which in turn has increased greatly variations in player career pathways (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Thus, this has created a new approach, the cultural praxis of athletes’ careers, which refers to a holistic perspective in career research and assistance, looks at combining such perspectives as the whole person, career and environment. Whilst the person and the career perspectives are embraced by the holistic lifespan approach (Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004) the holistic ecological perspective (Henriksen, 2010) is still quite new. The latter perspective tries to describe talent development environments and how successful they are in helping talented athletes make the transition to elite sport. This approach acknowledges that some sporting environments are more successful than others in developing athletes. It aims to create a manageable framework and method to develop prospective athletes (Henriksen & Christensen, 2013).

Merging the holistic lifespan and the ecological perspectives will help us understand better, athletes experiences in different cultures and will help facilitate individual-career assistance interventions and also ecological interventions which aim to optimize athletes’ career development environments (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013; 2014). The cultural praxis of athletes’ careers suggests the meticulous application of career research and assistance so as to stimulate reflexive situatedness of career projects in relevant socio-cultural and historical settings. Cultural/contextual situatedness should pervade all the phases in a project and should include the researchers’ awareness and reflexivity about how research questions come about from the context the participants live in. It should also include the provision of culturally specific meanings of important concepts; use of

culturally adapted theoretical frameworks or adoption of general models as a foundation for data collection, ideally too, with further transformation of the general model into an empirical model that is able to comprehend particular features of participants' careers (such as sport or country); the implementation of research tools/applied strategies which are easily understood by the participants; and the interpretation of results as rooted in a specific setting and which provide practical implications (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Thus, as suggested in a cultural praxis of athletes' careers framework, participatory action research is very useful in integrating theory, research and career assistance programmes. Therefore career research with transnational athletes should be aided by networks of culturally competent consultants to assist with issues of adaptation and support and to provide timely interventions when necessary (Ryba et al., 2014).

1.5 Career Transition Challenges

During career transitions, players may move from the perceived nurturing and protective youth environment to a less supportive first team culture that has been described as not tolerating failure and placing high expectations and demands on the players (Reilly, Williams, & Richardson, 2003; Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood, 2013). Players are expected to cope with harder training, pressures of coping with sports and studies, life being taken over by the sport, taking the right career decisions, problems with coaches, lack of specialist knowledge, training alone, and family issues (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010) which can all cause performance difficulties (Nesti, 2011). It has also been reported that players have to adapt to a new physical and social environment whilst also trying to remain in touch with their family and friends back home (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014). The players need to negotiate how much they will immerse themselves in the local culture, whilst sustaining their psychological wellbeing, what is known as "acute cultural adaptation"

(Ryba, Haaparen, Mosek & Ng, 2012). Sport psychologists may be able to help here by facilitating communication between coaches and players from different cultures to help them be more open-minded and adapt to the local setting (Ryba et. al. 2013). However, it has been reported that practitioners' lack of cultural reflexivity may hinder the applicability of psychological support to players from different cultures, and in the process, compromise the clients' cultural safety (Ryba et. al. 2013; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). It is thus important for service providers such as technical and support staff to develop a better understanding of cultural transitions within career development and to pay more attention to players for whom culturally competent support is a necessity (Ryba, 2011; Ryba et. al. 2013) by living the culture with the group, to gain insight into the group's values and assumptions (Henrikson, 2010).

For the players in Bourke's (2002) study, the notion of a full time career in football and the fate of their football idols was a strong influence. The move to England was seen as an exciting adventure and one not to be missed. There were 83% of Irish players who mentioned the opportunity to make money as an important reason to move to England especially since the quality of football in England is the best in the world. However, whilst some migrants may move from one culture to another quite easily, for example, if the host and donor nations share similar cultural and lifestyle factors (Bourke 2002), others may experience a number of challenges including culture shock, with feelings of fear, helplessness, irritability and disorientation (Bourke, 2003; De Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Munton & West, 1995; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Many immigrants seem keen to adjust to the new culture, however the stress they experience in the process may affect their career development (Bhagat & London,

1999). Players have reported difficulties during the first months in the new country (Richardson et al. 2012), whilst trying to see what values and customs to adapt to from the host country's culture, also known as acculturation (Bourke, 2002; Sam & Berry, 2006)

The players in Richardson and colleagues' (2012) study spoke about being homesick, difference in philosophies in which the game was played and coached, and they felt unprepared for this process. Furthermore, players had to understand and handle the English football culture with its high tempo, ruthlessness, machismo, and aggressiveness that they were ill equipped for. English football is known to be a masculine working class culture with strong language, male banter and other related behaviour (Parker, 1996a, 1996b). There is a lot of joking and snide remarks in football teams and, very often, they are a means by which players seek to influence other players who they see as not pulling their weight. The cultural aspect of professional football, in fact, encourages a win-at-all-cost mentality. There is often a highly competitive, physical and psychological environment where provocation, banter and behavioural issues can become unhealthy (Littlewood, 2005). At times, the banter is not serious but a source of team spirit. However, it may be a source of fear for players because it raises the threat of them being seen as weak in some way. If one does not conform to the values of the club this can also threaten their career prospects and their behavior may also have consequences within the club as isolation will follow (Roderick, 2006; Richardson et al. 2012). Therefore clubs have a duty to get to know the personal and cultural background of the player before they sign him up so as to avoid any problems as daily life in professional football may not be a positive experience. The players, too, must do their research on the club and area where they will be living and training so as to adapt better and suffer less from homesickness (Magee, 1998). However, this very rarely happens.

Homesickness is seen as the distress that individuals experience when they leave home or transition to a new environment. It is seen as one of the leading factors of dropout and poor well-being amongst athletes who have moved away from home to live in a sports related environment (Smith, Hanrahan, Anderson & Abbott, 2015). The athlete may experience physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional symptoms. Cognitive symptoms could include negative thoughts about the new environment as well as obsessional thoughts about home. The behavioural symptoms could include lethargy and little interest in the new environment. The athlete may also feel depressed, insecure, lonely and anxious (Thurber & Walton, 2007). Homesickness has been seen as closely related to acculturation stress (Van Tilburg & Vingerhoets, 1997) although this is usually associated more with international cultural transition (Tartakovsky, 2007). However, the more integrated individuals are into their host culture, the less likely they are to experience homesickness (Hack-Polay, 2012).

There is still a lack of clarity in the literature as to the definition of homesickness as well as theoretical frameworks on the subject. Thus, it is difficult to develop theory-based prevention and treatment programmes (Stroebe, Schut, & Nauta, 2015). However, Fisher (1989) summarized homesickness into four theoretical explanations, the first being the negative effects of attachment and loss when individuals leave family and friends behind. The second looks at the changes in the individual's lifestyle where routines will need to be changed. In the third, Fisher, explains how the lack of control an individual may feel may lead to helplessness, and homesickness may be seen as depression. The fourth theory looks at roles which may need to be adjusted and this may affect self-image and increases self-awareness and thus anxiety too. It is, however, unclear whether any health problems that are experienced are due to the challenges experienced during separation or to the challenges that inevitably athletes face when adjusting to a new environment.

Predictors of homesickness could include the present experience and how it fits in with an individual's situation context at that time (Schlossberg, 1981) and whether if the athlete had previous experiences away from home these were good or not as stated in Stambulova's (2003) model. The attitude towards the move, together with negative first impressions may influence too (Thurber & Walton, 2007). Homesickness is also more likely to be present when athletes are young and within the early stages of transition (Thurber & Sigman, 1998) as they are still learning to deal with many life issues (Richardson et al., 2004) and have a lack of knowledge or skills as well as a lack of preparation for transitions (Stambulova, 2003).

It would be helpful if we were able to identify athletes who are more likely to get homesick so that they can be prepared beforehand for the transition (Smith et al., 2015). An athlete may use approach-oriented strategies to manage the stressor, try to understand the situation better and adopt behavioural attempts to resolve the situation (Ward & Kennedy, 2001). To manage homesickness, individuals need to get involved in activities in their new environment (Thurber & Walton, 2007). An athlete may also use avoidant strategies such as cognitive attempts to deny the situation and behavioural attempts to avoid the situation (Ward & Kennedy, 2001).

In their study, Smith et al, (2015), found that neuroticism may be a significant predictor of homesickness. Van Heck, Vingerhoets, Voolstra, Gruijters, Thijs, & Van Tilburg (1997) suggested that those with neurotic tendencies, including tension, anxiety, worry, instability and irritability find it difficult to manage distress coming about from transitions since their coping abilities are impaired. Thus, Smith et al, (2015) suggest that organisations should have psychologists who are able to identify individuals with neurotic tendencies. Low self-esteem and high scores on mental escape were also found to predict homesickness, indicating that players who are not able to confront a new environment are

more likely to become homesick (Smith et al., 2015). Smith and colleagues' study also suggests that social support may not be an effective coping style for homesickness since athletes cannot rely on other athletes in the same team since these may be in direct competition with them. Social support would need to focus on others outside the sporting environment. It is recommended that athletes would benefit from access to psychological services aimed at identifying and treating homesickness before and during transitions.

Sports migrants can also face challenges when trying to maintain relationships with family and friends and may experience loneliness (Maguire & Stead, 1996). Preparation to move also means coming to terms with leaving relatives and friends and for some, joint decision making with wives and girlfriends who would join them (Stead & Maguire, 2000). The effect of the move on the partner or the spouse, the 'trailing spouse' must also be noted (Martin, 1996). They tend to feel isolated, are bored, lonely and have no friends, spend a lot of time indoors, take care of the children and are responsible for doing the chores (Luo & Cooper, 1990). Partners also experience some of the consequences of being a public figure but without being paid to be one. The partner is known as the 'wife of' rather than having her own identity (Finch, 1983). Stead and Maguire's (2000) study describes the situation of the partner of one of the players:

She may have had a promising career back home before they left but because he gets this good opportunity, she moves with him, and all of a sudden, she hasn't got anything. Her job is to look after him, to be interested in his football career. Everything is focused on his career (Pg. 47).

Thus, there are specific questions about how partners deal with the move. Gender issues crop up; partners need to look after children or take on jobs or courses. Whilst the player can engage in his football work, his partner may have far less opportunities to help them cope with the new situation. A Norwegian player believed that it had been harder

for his partner and thus she made regular trips home “It was better for her, makes her mind right ... it obviously makes it easier for me to think she is OK travelling home and happier” (Stead & Maguire, 2000, p. 48).

Players who have migrated to another country to play football may feel somewhat insecure with the instability of their employment (Roderick, 2006). They may face de-selection, a lack of playing time, tough training, poor relationships with club staff, issues with their contract, inability to play in their preferred position, and other incoming players possibly replacing them (Nesti, 2013). Footballers cannot resign from their job, work their notice and get re-employed by a different employer, unlike other jobs (Roderick, 2006) and such challenges may cause psychological stress, which may result in players’ losing focus and motivation (Nesti, 2013).

During transitions and the challenges faced, athletes may however gain from positive benefits such as developing mental toughness, existential courage and personality (Nesti, 2007). Existential psychology accepts that negative situations, emotions and anxiety can be beneficial, in particular if these feelings come hand in hand with a task that has been taken up by the individual himself (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). Therefore, the way players perceive the transition, their perception of their own individual characteristics and that of the environment, may all influence the way in which players cope and adapt (Nesti, 2011; Schlossberg 1981; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995).

Magee (1995) in his work with Northern Ireland (NI) football players also speaks about those players who returned home as they did not succeed to obtain a professional contract. They had to adjust to being back home, being unemployed, searching for a job, a club and accepting that they could not play football full time. Those players who return back to their country were faced with problems of adjusting, seeking employment, finding a club and realizing that professional football might be unattainable. It is a tough career

to work in but those who are willing to work hard will find that being a professional footballer is a satisfying experience and can provide financial rewards (Bourke, 2002).

1.6 Career Transitions Support Strategies

There is a need to see how players cope through 'major transitions' (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). When athletes are not able to deal with the challenges of transitions, they may experience a crisis and, thus, require support (Stambulova, 2003). This can include psychological interventions which focus on changing coping strategies which could affect positively the long term effects of transitions (Stambulova, 2009). If athletes do not receive help or the interventions conducted are not successful, there may be negative outcomes such as a deterioration of sport performance, dropout from sport, injury or over-training, psychosomatic illnesses or substance abuse (Morris et al., 2015). Thus, it is important to have people around who can give emotional, informational or tangible support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Sport psychologists or other qualified personnel, such as Education and Welfare staff, are needed to help young players handle these challenging periods (Richardson et al., 2012), as the transitioning players (typically) have very few people with whom they can speak about their problems (Roderick, 2006). Social support and the interaction between key stakeholders (coaches, peers, parents), in fact, has been found to play a significant role in helping players cope during the (within) career transition process (Côté, 1999; Richardson et al. 2004; Richardson et al. 2012). Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood (2014) suggest the need for an integrated approach to talent development that focuses on creating a strong link between all stakeholders (i.e. player, staff, parents).

1.6.1 Parent Support

Parents may have a significant influence in this regard. Their role is crucial if these provide encouragement and support (Bloom, 1985) as this support acts as a buffer to alleviate performance stress (Van Yperen, 1995). However, parents may be under involved, moderately involved or over involved (Côté, 1999). Under involvement means parents who do not take an interest whilst moderate involvement refers to parents who look at the best interest of their children at the expense of their own personal interests (Hellstedt, 1987; Côté, 1999). When they are overly involved this increases the levels of stress and anxiety of the athlete. This, too, can be an issue to clubs, in particular during the youth development process. Parents must give support with no pressure (Gould, Diefenbach & Moffett, 2002), however, at times, they themselves are unable to handle the emotional demands that they themselves face (Harwood & Knight, 2009).

While the young academy player is going through a challenging period, parents too experience a similarly demanding journey (Harwood, Drew & Knight, 2010). They must support their sons through the pressures of competitive sport coming about from the excessive demands associated with the professional environment (Bakker, Whiting & Can der Brug, 1993). However, there is little understanding of the stressors parents themselves experience as they support their child through the stages of sport development (Harwood & Knight, 2009; Harwood et. al. 2010). Parents of gifted footballers invest greatly psychologically, emotionally and socially throughout the early to later specialising phase (Côté, 1999). Thus, it is important for researchers, practitioners and sport organisations to understand the challenges parents themselves face in order to assist them to enhance their role as a key agent who can support the child-athlete (Harwood et al., 2010). Research is necessary in providing researchers, practitioners and sport staff with a better understanding of sport-parent behaviour, the challenges the sport parent faces, and

possible educational needs for the best support of their child-athlete (Harwood & Knight, 2009). Clubs also need to seek ways of educating, communicating and integrating parents of promising players throughout the developmental pathway as this would help coaches and reduce mixed messages and disruption that can be caused by parents (Côté, 1999).

When thinking of moving to another country, family support is crucial (Magee, 1998) as young players stated that this was important in their career progression and without the family's support the migratory transition would not have been possible (Pummell, Harwood & Lavalley, 2008). Though most often, family members will not move with the player they can give advice and support (Magee, 1998) and can help them with the demands of their new environment (Richardson et al., 2012). However, it has been observed that players missed their family dearly throughout their migration, despite having social support from significant others. While during acculturation family contact is limited to long distance communication, the option of going home every two months was seen as being weak, uncommitted or unable to cope with pressure (Richardson et al., 2012).

1.6.2 Coach Support

Although parents may have a significant influence this is sometimes difficult given the geographical distance between parents and players. This emphasises the importance of having individuals within the club structure that can act in some form of supportive capacity for players. Van Rossum (2001) reports that the coach becomes more significant in the athlete's life around 15-19 years of age and the role of family diminishes to some extent. The coach athlete relationship is crucial (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), so building a good relationship is necessary for the athlete to be motivated and satisfied and for his performance to improve (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

However, though players may look to their coaches, these are frequently seen as a source of stress (Holt & Hogg, 2002) and players may not consider it appropriate to

share personal and emotionally based issues with them (Nesti, 2010). Players mentioned players' fear to show weakness as a main reason for not sharing personal issues with the coach. Players also felt that coaches lacked the skills to give support and had a lack of understanding and/or empathy for the player's situation (Morris, 2000). Athletes need someone around them to provide emotional support, to listen to them and make them feel wanted. Players must, however, accept that this person can help (Pummell et al., 2008).

1.6.3 Sport Psychology Support

The life of a footballer has a lot of uncertainty and there have been few people whom players could speak to. Players continually try to orientate themselves in their social networks in the hope of dealing better with the problems that arise but the macho culture makes players hide their feelings (Roderick, 2006). During these moments players may need the help of a sport psychologist (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Ravizza, 1990; Rotella, 1990).

A trans-migrant athlete when travelling abroad should, ideally, have access to a local service provider in the host country. If that service provider can then consult with the athletes' home sport psychologist their help together may be better than from just one of them (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). This could be either to enhance performance or to provide emotional support and care (Anderson, 2009; Nesti, 2011; Singer, 1996). Lavalley, (2005), found that an emphatic counselling relationship helped participants set goals and use other strategies to cope with transitions. Thus, athletes in transition seem to benefit greatly when they have support from others who understand what they are going through. Sport psychologists can also encourage players to examine their attitudes, beliefs and values, to accept and understand the anxiety they are facing about their identity, and provide appropriate support to encourage personal responsibility (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Holt and Hogg's (2002) study has implications for sport psychologists who need to work closely with players when migrating to see that they are able to deal well with the

increased attention on them and the life changing decisions. Players need to be mentally tough, that is, they need to have a high level of self-belief and an ability to cope with the pressures of elite football (Thelwell, Weston & Greenlees, 2005). Thus, players need to be taught coping strategies related to their team culture and the stressors in that environment (Holt & Hogg, 2002). In their development programme young players should be given psychological and sociological support including counselling, life skills and related areas which may help them understand better what to expect in transitions (Richardson et al., 2005; Littlewood, 2005). When players are released from the club there are severe self - doubts over playing ability and self - confidence issues and player support is very much needed at this point (Richardson et al., 2004).

The introduction and use of sport psychologists in professional football has gained momentum (Beswick, 2001) and there is a real need to explore the role and evolution of sport psychology support in such set-ups (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010). However, in Littlewood's (2010) fieldwork, we find that the academy players did not engage much in psychologically based support. This could have been caused due to a lack of understanding of the subject or else the way the sport psychologist communicated the information (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Gilbourne and Richardson (2005; 2006) believe that a successful practitioner is one who is able to care and not just engage in mental skills training. Research on sport psychology and/or applied practice has, in fact, moved on from a more mental skills development base towards a broader approach – more focus is placed on the person and lifestyle issues (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993). A number of experienced practitioners such as Ravizza (2002) incorporate mental skills training within a more humanistic, existential and other person centred ways of working. Nesti (2010), too, suggests a holistic approach focusing on player identity (Erikson, 1997).

Sport psychologists should focus their attention on caring for the player with whom they are working and should note that individuals may not open up if they see the psychologist is too close to the manager (Nesti, 2011). In fact, the effectiveness of the support from the sport psychologist depends on the relationship between the psychologist and athletes (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2005; Petitpas, Giges & Danish, 1999), the ability to build up a rapport with concrete suggestions in a positive environment, (Gould, Murphy, Tammen & May, 1991) and the personality of the psychologist (Partington & Orlick, 1991; Andersen, Van Raalte & Brewer, 2004; Nesti, 2010). Personal qualities such as courage (Corlett, 1996), integrity, authenticity and a sense of humour are vital (Nesti, 2011). A sport psychologist should be personable, friendly, easy going and genuine. He/she should be able to communicate well, encourage, be a good service provider, have knowledge and experience in the area and the sport, be a good listener, have self-understanding, be able to build a rapport, have good perception of individual differences, be truly interested and someone the athletes feel comfortable sharing their concerns with (Orlick & Partington, 1997; Andersen, 2000; Petitpas, 2000; 1999; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Gould et al., 2002). Bond (2002) believes he/she needs to be flexible, adaptable, and opportunistic, be ready for the unexpected and should also be aware of the cultural dynamics within professional football (Littlewood, 2005; Nesti, 2010).

For a sport psychologist to be able to work in football they must understand the specificity of the football world and it is not easy to find psychologists with this knowledge (Relvas, 2010; Weinberg & Williams, 2001; Bond, 2002; Perna, Neyer, Murphy, Ogilvie & Murphy, 1995). Mike Forde Chelsea FC Director refers to mental skills training as being a very small part of the job and that a psychologist needs to deal with the broader issues and the management of the environment (Nesti, 2010). In fact, there are some barriers which hinder the acceptance of a sport psychologist – the football

world is not very open to new ideas, there is a general lack of knowledge and even a negative idea of sport psychology, the fact that some sport psychologists lack sport specificity, and the intrusion of financial and confidentiality issues (Nesti, 2010). Thus, an important factor that may help a consultant be effective is his/her ability to take general information on sport psychology and popular techniques and apply them to the specific needs of the athletes and the demands of the sport (Taylor, 1995). As a result consultants need to have a full understanding of the athletes they work with, an in-depth knowledge of the sport (Ravizza, 1988) and should also be aware of the roles the players have in the game so as to enable effective intervention development and delivery (Thelwell, Greenlees & Weston, 2010).

1.7 Career Assistance Programmes

Sport psychologists and other qualified personnel may also help in preparing young players better for transition through programmes designed specifically to help athletes cope with the challenges that come about. Apart from a lack of preparation for transition, factors such as a lack of knowledge or skills, interpersonal conflicts, lack of appropriate training conditions, as well as financial and social support and difficulties in combining sport and other commitments can have adverse effects on transition (Stambulova, 2003). Athletes will be able to cope with specific demands depending on the balance between the transition challenges they are facing and the resources and support they have available (Morris et al., 2015). Stambulova's (2003) youth-to-senior transition model places importance on psychological and other interventions to help athletes develop, have access and use the skills and resources they need for transition. Such preparation for transition may increase athletes' knowledge and skills and, thus, help them adapt better (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Stambulova et al., 2009).

Thus, talent development in football implies that young players are provided with a suitable learning environment to achieve their potential (Williams & Reilly, 2000) and this may include career assistance programmes. Such programmes include career planning/guidance, educational guidance, lifestyle management, life skills training, media training, retirement guidance and support. Often, psychological career assistance services are combined with performance enhancement programmes, financial management and other support. Sport psychologists, almost everywhere, adopt a preventive/educational perspective, a whole career approach, an ecological perspective, an empowerment perspective and a whole person approach. Career assistance is more culturally informed and contextualised than career research because practitioners are ‘closer’ than researchers to athletes’ everyday lives and to their lived culture (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013).

Martindale, Collins & Daubney, (2005) believe that organisations need to have youth development programmes with long term goals to enhance young athletes’ skills and competencies. One may also use role models and other support mechanisms such as support for technical and emotional issues in the development of young athletes. Moore, Collins and Burwitz, (1998) found that although support for elite athletes was found to be helpful, it was almost non-existent for still developing athletes, and this may hinder their progression. Martindale and colleagues (2005) believe that organisations need to focus on highlighting early development rather than early success by focusing on the characteristics required to become successful athletes such as fundamental mental skills, life skills and physical skills as well. Athletes, too, need to receive individual goal setting and review to help promote talent success.

A number of organisations, in various countries, have invested in career assistance programmes to help their athletes achieve success since there is a need to help athletes handle the challenges associated with having to leave home to improve in sport. When

young athletes move they need guidance counsellors to help them adapt to a new school, if this is the case, and a new way of life. The Centro Nacional de Desarrollo de Talentos Deportivos y Alto Rendimiento in Mexico helped prepare young athletes in secondary and high school through different workshops and individual and group counselling based on their needs. Students are given lectures in nutrition, careers, hygiene, monetary matters and national pride (Fink, 2013).

The English Institute of Sport, aimed to enhance British athletes' personal development and sport performance through the Athlete Career and Education Programme, which was launched in 1999. This programme consists of individual athlete assessment, life skills, career opportunity awareness programme and transition planning. However, few athletes, only one third, accessed the programme. Most of those who did felt it had a positive impact. This programme was rebranded in 2004 as the Performance Lifestyle Programme. This focuses on athletic lifespan development, in particular; integration planning of athletes' lifestyle, educational guidance, career planning, transitional support and training and development programmes. Similar programmes were conducted in Scotland, Wales and Ireland (Park, Lavalley & Tod, 2013).

In the United States there have been several programmes put in place to aid athletes in their careers. Programmes that assist athletes in preparing for a future event are called enhancement strategies. These emphasize self-exploration and help athletes identify skills, clarify values and assess their needs. These services also help athletes acquire new coping skills and other life-work planning strategies. Self-awareness is an important benefit (Petitpas, Van Raalte & Brewer, 2013).

In their study on the "Analysis of Organizational Structure and Transition Outcomes in the Youth-to-Senior Professional Soccer Transition", Morris and colleagues (2015), placed importance on the education of parents. One of the organisations in their

study educated parents on how they may help their sons become better athletes. A number of parents' nights were also held in which coaches and support staff informed parents on challenges their son might face. Parents were also educated on ways they could provide emotional assistance in football situations. They reported that they wanted to support their son but because they did not receive advice or support from the club, they could not do this well. Academies must be able to communicate with, and work alongside, parents to create an optimal environment for development (Harwood et al., 2010). Educating parents may help athletes adapt to transitions. Athletes, in Morris and colleagues (2015) study felt that knowing that their parents and coaches were informed about the changes they would experience helped them feel better about the process and able to talk more.

The findings from Mills and colleagues' (2014) study offer practical suggestions for those working within elite youth football settings (e.g., coaches, sport psychologists). A predominant implication of this study is that thorough consideration of expert perceptions of best-practice may help academies to improve their environment and lay the groundwork for a strong organizational culture. Larsen and colleagues (2014) go on to suggest six principles needed to inform an intervention, these being: the practitioner should conduct an intervention within the athletes' environment rather than the practitioner office, practitioners should also involve coaches and other staff; one should look at the strengths and weaknesses of the environment; the practitioner should try to optimize the entire environment around the athlete or team; the cultural setting needs to be taken into account; the intervention should create a strong organisational culture; athletes need to be seen as whole human beings and practitioners need to develop a holistic package of psychosocial skills useful to athletes in their life as well as sport (Larsen, Henriksen, Alfermann & Christensen, 2014).

Alferman and Stambulova (2007), go on to say, that whilst there are a number of studies on the importance of helping athletes in transition, there is a lack of research on the effectiveness of that assistance and which might suggest criteria for individualized interventions or for organised psychological services. According to them, there needs to be more methodically rigorous evaluations of programme effectiveness through longitudinal research, multi-method approaches and multiple indicators of programme outcome.

Not many studies have been developed using career transition theoretical models. Socio-cultural issues are also important to take into account. Only a few studies have looked at athletes' perceptions of programme involvement and the effectiveness of these programmes. Such studies may help improve current programmes. Park and colleagues (2013) as well as Morris and colleagues (2015) too, suggest future research directions through longitudinal studies to gain better understanding of the changes and experiences of athletes, the provision of specific types of support and to measure transitional outcomes. This will help show whether Stambulova's (2003) model is robust and which resources are most important in facilitating effective transitions. According to Morris and colleagues (2015) study, the club with the proactive programme aligned to Stambulova's model had better transition outcomes and spent less on player assistance compared to the club with no programme. This study implies a proactive approach to supporting transitions; targeting demands, barriers and resources associated with transitions may yield positive consequences in terms of their development and the club's success. This provides the justification for the practitioner-researcher approach adopted in the current thesis.

Academies must keep on looking for ways to improve player development. Creating the right environmental conditions for success in elite youth football signifies a greatly tempting prospect for those currently working in such settings (Harwood et al., 2010). The cultural praxis of athletes' careers encourages participatory action research

which facilitates collaboration between researchers, practitioners and athlete-participants (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard & Selänne, 2015; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Many authors in Stambulova & Ryba's (2013) book "Athletes' Careers across Cultures" also emphasize the importance of good evaluation of the effectiveness of career support services.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the various challenges that young players may face when going through a migratory transition to play professional football overseas. Players' perceptions of their transitions are, however, instilled by their (host) cultures (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009), which may not sufficiently prepare them for the experiences of a new environment and (donor) culture. Whilst the current literature provides rich and in depth accounts of the transitional difficulties footballers faced when moving to professional leagues, very little of this literature comes from small nation states like Malta, where the players live in a much tighter knit community than most of Europe. Here, everyone knows each other and family and friends take precedence over everything else. The individual's existence is also framed around a Mediterranean culture that is characterized by an easygoing way of life (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). In this regard, the current work examines the challenges faced by football players from a small island nation state that experienced a migratory transition, and further explores the cultural difficulties between host and donor nations. In addition, the research also explores how players managed the associated challenges during the migration process.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodological

Framework

2.0 Introduction to the Methodological Framework

The following section seeks to provide an insight into the methodological framework upon which the thesis is positioned. Action Research, how it first started and its merits are first delved into followed by how action research can be conducted, the positionality of the researcher as well as how bias is addressed. The research question and context as well as the thesis aims and working methods are described towards the end of the chapter.

2.1 Action Research

Action research is “a way of trying out changes and seeing what happens” (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994, pg. 108). It is a practical form of research found in particular social settings and one which helps bring about some kind of positive change for those whose lives and work are affected by that research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). It is inquiry done by, or with insiders in an organisation, and includes a reflective process deliberately undertaken to improve the situation in an organisation. This tends to appeal greatly to researchers who are motivated by a philosophy of social change (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In fact, action research has been adopted across many different professions as a means of enhancing professional development through reflection and change brought about through research (Koshy, 2005).

Action research suggests that the nature of knowing is ingrained in the experience of doing. Knowing is seen to be embedded within the cycles of action and reflection. It comes about from an extended epistemology which includes many ways of knowing, including having experiential knowledge, practical knowledge and presentational knowledge (Heron, 1981), and not just from theoretical propositions (Ladkin, 2004).

2.2 History of Action Research

Action research evolved from the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940's. Lewin was not the first to use or advocate action research. However, he was the first to come up with a theory of action research that could be used in the social sciences. He believed that knowledge could be created from problem solving in real life situations (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Lewin (1946) first studied production lines in factories and also discrimination against minority groups, and later went on to study group dynamics with his theories being widely applied (Boog, 2003). He brought popularity to the idea of studying things through trying to change them and seeing the effect of this. He changed the role of the researcher from distanced outsider to involved participant (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

Lewin's cycle of planning, action and fact gathering led to Elliott's (1980) action research spiral which was then used in the United States by consultants who set up controlled experiments. Eventually, Europe and the third world developed action research in particular in its participatory forms (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London and the Work Research Institute in Oslo extended Lewin's work by taking the concept of team building as being essential in improving organizational behaviour and structure (Boog, 2003).

Over the years there has been strong debate between the need for experimental rigour and the flexibility needed in everyday settings. The 'neo-positivists' dreamt of a clean social science where researchers are equal, unbiased and reliable. Eisner (1984) however, urged the social science world to accept an increase in research paradigms and take advantage of the new way of looking at things. Although by the 1970's action research had been revived, it was still not accepted as 'real research' on the grounds that it

is not real science. In fact, there are still few action research projects to be found. However, in certain areas such as practitioner research (see Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Friedman & Pine, 2009), there has been some activity. In this area it is accepted that the research method cannot be separated from conceptual analysis for they are intertwined. Other variations of action research such as cooperative inquiry (Reason & Rowan, 1981) and action science (Argyris & Schön, 1989), have contributed to a better understanding of the relationship between theory building and change processes within organizations and local communities (McIntyre, 2008).

2.3 Merits of Action Research

Research done either by, or in collaboration with, practitioners and/or community members may be known as action research, participatory action research, practitioner research, collaborative action research and many more terms (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Action research shows some similarities with qualitative research, however, it is different in that research participants are either leading the research, or are participants in the methodology and design of the study (Herr & Anderson, 2005). It is as scientific and rigorous as applied research, though it does interpret scientific method more loosely when focusing on precise knowledge which has been applied in a particular setting (Cohen & Manion, 1980). Spjelkavik (1999) states:

“The difference between the applied research model and the action research model is that participation with the actors in the field is an important part of action research.... Action research is a method that can be fruitfully combined with other methods (questionnaires, interviews, observations, whatever), and in this respect it does not require specific epistemological commitments. (p.126)”

Reinharz, (1992), identified five types of action research: Action Research, in which action and evaluation proceed separately but simultaneously. It consists of research projects that attempt directly to change people's behaviour. Data is gathered either in traditional or new ways which is fed back into the community to try and develop new forms of action. The second type is participatory or collaborative research in which the people studied make the decisions about the study format and data analysis. The aim is to create social and individual change by changing the role relations of people involved in the project. Participants help to make decisions, they are co researchers. The third type is prevalence and needs assessment. Here, the research aims to determine the number of people with a particular experience or need. An emphasis is placed on mobilizing people to set up resources and organisations to respond to the needs as they are being identified, measured and redefined. The fourth type being evaluation research which evaluates how effective different types of action are in meeting needs or solving problems. It can be used to evaluate individual and organisational behaviour as well as evaluation research itself. The fifth type being demystification. Central here is the belief that the act of obtaining knowledge creates the potential for change.

Action research is most often used since it puts action central to the research (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Practitioner-researchers combine action, reflection with theory and practice to try and improve local situations and enhance professional practice. It is designed to improve the researched subjects' abilities to solve problems, to develop skills, increase autonomy, and to have more impact on the operational and decision-making processes of organizations from the framework in which they act (Boog, 2003). Thus, the focus is not on making a theoretical contribution to the field of knowledge, more typical of traditional academic research (Somerville, 2014).

Practitioner-researchers gain knowledge that can be applied to their own behaviour during events and that helps them inquire better with others about common goals. In action research, the research question arises out of practitioner problems, the aim of the research being to understand the problem. The researcher, whether he is the practitioner or not, comes up with general principles about the identified problems. Hypotheses are then generated about what action may lead to desired improvements (Herr & Anderson, 2005). It is crucial that the area identified for improvement is an area where they can make change and one in which they feel motivated to do so (Taylor, 2006). Action can then be conducted and data on how effective it was, collected. This data can then be used to revise the hypothesis (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The research question and methodology and evaluative criteria may all change to some extent, depending on the collective understanding. Besides, some aspects of the local situation may have changed if there have been improvements from the first phase of the cycle (Somerville, 2014).

Action researchers have extra responsibility to see that the action taken has to be in the best interests of the people involved and they must safeguard the practice aspects of their professional work while keeping a rigorous and reflective research stance. Action research may involve the practitioner researcher developing new sets of relations with clients and colleagues and thus it is imperative that ethical guidelines are strictly adhered to for total respect of the participants (Kemmis, 1982).

Action research means intervening in a world where everything is happening at once and it is impossible to be sure what arises from what; there is no ethical way of measuring the ‘intervening variables’ because they are people with emotions, needs and other personal and psychological traits (Herr & Anderson, 2005). It is by actively engaging in critical dialogue and collective reflection that the participants of action research recognize

that they have a stake in the overall project. Thus, participatory action research becomes a living dialectical process, changing the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act (McTaggart, 1997).

As a result, action research projects provide a very valid contribution to a field's knowledge base for they resolve lapses brought about by practitioners who are too engrossed in their everyday work and who do not have enough time. Such projects engage the local perspective in thinking about the knowledge generated which, in turn, can be fed back either into the local setting or transferred to other settings (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

2.4 Conducting Action Research

Action Research becomes essential when an existing state of affairs is seen as problematic (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In the case of this thesis, the need to prepare young players for migratory transitions has been recognised as an issue that needs to be addressed (Morris et al., 2015). So, once the issue is identified, attempts are made to change it and this is monitored throughout. Such research is appropriate when precise knowledge is essential for a particular problem in a specific situation (Cohen & Manion, 1980).

Action research (see Fig. 2.1) involves utilising a systematic cyclical method of planning, taking action, observing, evaluating (including self-evaluation) and critical reflection prior to planning the next cycle (Elliott, 1980; Kemmis, 1982). There is a concern with both action (improvement of practice, social change etc.) and research (creating valid knowledge about practice). One must be informed by the other so as to affect change. Each cycle should increase the researcher's knowledge of the original question and, hopefully, lead to a solution or change in knowledge. Some stages of the action research cycle may overlap and the researcher must reflect throughout these cycles (Taylor, 2006).

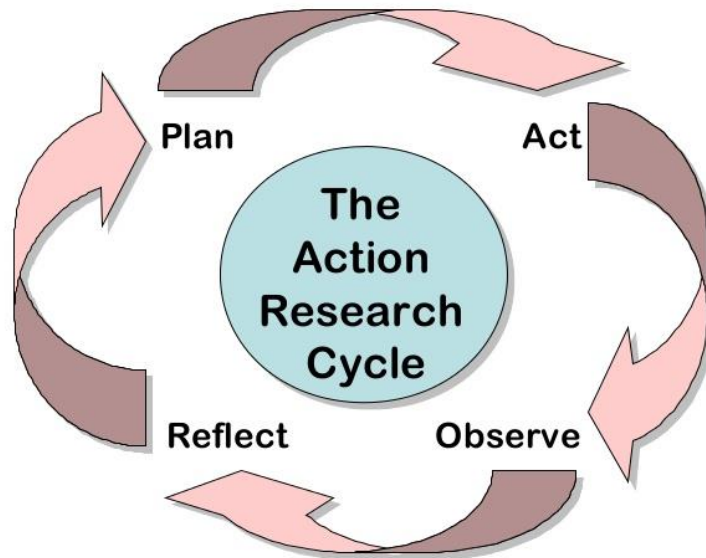


Figure 2.1: The Action Research Cycle

It has been reported that engaging with the action research cycles of inquiry is often very demanding, in particular when reflection on the self, leading to change is involved as the emotional reaction a Practitioner-Researcher may experience may provide important data about deeper issues that lie below the surface of rational engagement (Ladkin, 2004). Action research is a way to increase understanding of how changing one's actions or practices can benefit other practitioners. It is designed to address specific issues identified by locals, and the results are directly applied to the problems at hand (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Participants in action research projects continuously reflect on their learning from the actions undertaken and proceed to initiate new ones. Outcomes are often difficult to predict and the challenges may be great (Ladkin, 2004). Achievements depend, to a large extent, on the researcher's commitment, creativity and imagination (Herr & Anderson, 2005). There are underlying principles that are specific to the field of Practitioner Action

Research (PAR) that inform most of PAR projects: (a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue, (b) a desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to understand better the issue under investigation, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of coalitions between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process (McIntyre, 2008).

Data needs to be collected to monitor the action (practice). The aim in the present research was to inform all stakeholders at the Malta Football Association (MFA) and the National Sports School (NSS) including technical and support staff as well as parents and players too with the intervention programmes and offer opportunities to evaluate the efficacy of these programmes in general, using a combination of the following approaches: collection of documents relating to the situation such as newspaper articles and policies; keeping a detailed diary to record ideas and what happened when; observation notes of meetings and actions; questionnaire surveys to gain impressions of others; interviews or focus groups for detailed information; shadowing – participants may be followed by an observer; tape or video recording for monitoring of the data collected; photos – for subsequent participant discussion; triangulation – using a range of the above to check the information gathered, interpretations and action decisions (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Sapsford & Abbott (1992) believe that you can never be completely sure exactly what action produced what results. The action researcher must also be careful not to take too many of his or her own assumptions for granted and thus lose the essential evaluative cutting edge of this approach (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Thus, the researcher's positionality is crucial in this aspect.

2.5 Positionality

There has been a tendency for action researchers to be insiders to their professional settings and in that respect, making them both researchers and practitioners. Individuals often want to study their own contexts because they want the research to make a difference in their workplace. However, the term action research leaves the position of the researcher, whether of insider or outsider, open. Action research is done by, or with, insiders to an organisation or community and not to or on them. It is a systematically undertaken reflective process where some form of evidence is presented to support assertions made. This type of research is ideally done with others who have a stake in the issue. Where the practitioner is studying his or her own practice, ongoing feedback should be sought from other stakeholders (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Action research dissertations are often conducted by organisational insiders who look at it as a way of deepening their own reflections on practice towards problem solving and professional development. In this case, the researcher and practitioner may be the same person, such as is the case with this thesis (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Similar to other practitioner-researchers (Anderson & Jones, 2000), I want my research to make a contribution to my clients and place of work, and to empower myself professionally and personally to bring about (some form of) organisational change. One's positionality, however, may shift during the study and does not fall into neat categories.

2.6 The Practitioner-Researcher as an Insider

Practitioner researchers often want to study whether the outcomes of a programme they conducted in their setting was effective. Such studies often use more traditional qualitative and quantitative methods of data gathering. A common mistake in such research is to see oneself, both personally and professionally from the outside rather than from the

inside. The insider is seen as being more committed to the success of the actions under study. It is difficult and possibly misleading to separate the study of one's self and practice from the study of actions initiated in a setting. This type of self-reflective action research is always written in the first person (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Insider researchers often work with other insiders in the hope that the research has a greater impact on the setting and it is also considered to be more democratic since there is collaboration between the insiders involved (Herr & Anderson, 2005). For instance, in the current thesis, I am an insider working with other insiders including the MFA and the NSS stakeholders, staff members, students, football players and parents. Moreover, positionality does not only occur in terms of inside/outside, but also in terms of one's position in the organisation's hierarchy and position of power as compared to other stakeholders. However, researchers occupy various positions that overlap and that may bring conflicting loyalties within the research locale and processes. Researchers may be included as insiders, whilst in some areas we see ourselves as outsiders. It is our obligation, as researchers, to question our multiple positions in connection to the research being conducted (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In my case, I felt like an outsider as well, since I am a female among male players and members of staff, and besides, I am the only sport psychologist in the MFA and NSS.

As an insider one must also be alert not to take some aspects of the setting for granted. Anderson and Jones (2000), found that when researchers positioned themselves as insiders doing action research, they were able to move their individual, organisational and social transformation through actions taken in the setting, to the forefront. The process of action research requires one to be organised, open minded and capable of being critical. This, at times, may be exhausting, but it is essential to make sure that what is concluded is reasonable and permissible (Taylor, 2006). Researchers need to be in a 'good

place' themselves, advance with sensitivity and care, and realize that critical reflection is not a yardstick that somehow they must measure against (Morley, 2007).

2.7 Practitioner-Researcher Bias

It is necessary to address how one's bias in a study is handled. Researchers acknowledge that they enter the research with a perspective drawn from their own experiences (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

All research is biased in some way, it is about recognising your bias, being as upfront about it as possible and recognizing how it will colour your interpretations. It is about understanding the choices you make, rather than to making them (Ladkin, 2004; pg. 26).

One way to deal with bias is to acknowledge one's presence in the study and build in self-reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Reflective practice is all about learning about oneself, how one thinks, and by reflecting on experience. Reflective and deep learning comes about from looking beyond what is obvious, challenging the norm and trying to connect previous knowledge, skills and understanding with current ones. It is useful to keep a diary of observations, thoughts, conversations, feelings etc. to help reconstruct what has happened (Taylor, 2006).

Researchers conduct research with a perspective drawn from their own experiences and they then need to build a critical reflexivity into the research. Bias and subjectivity are natural and acceptable in action research, as long as they are not ignored and are examined critically (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Validation meetings with others who are able to be critical about ongoing findings and to challenge the researcher's thinking are important (Lomax, Woodward & Parker, 1996). Practitioners may also begin to ex-

perience contradictions between their values and actions; and thus there is a need to resolve the contradictions, that in turn, drives the research (Evan's, 1995). Researchers need also to be sensitive to issues of power and thus the need for collaboration. They must be open to a variety of interpretations, able to take into account the emotional, social, spiritual, political dimensions of those with whom they work with (Ladkin, 2004).

Critical subjectivity is very important with action research. Reason, (1988), describes it as

a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary subjective experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and swept along by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process (pg. 12).

This is difficult to do; thus, it is important to discuss with others any inherent unarticulated assumptions (Reason & Marshall, 1987). In this action research project, such issues were discussed with the PhD supervisors.

2.8 Validity and Generalizability of Action Research

The focus of an action research project is often local in nature, the researcher wanting to study a phenomenon in its natural setting, which makes it unlikely that research results could be generalized to other settings (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Its aim is to effect change locally. Action researchers are interested in outcomes that go beyond knowledge generation and not only on whether knowledge generated from the research conducted is valid and trustworthy (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Reason and Bradbury (2001) propose measures for evaluating the quality and trustworthiness of action research studies: how much the research displays emergence of new and stable consequences; how much it deals with realistic issues of practice; how

much the inquiry shows good qualities of practice such as collaboration; how much the research deals with noteworthy questions; how much it takes into account different ways of knowing and whether the study is useful.

Herr and Anderson (2005) also believe that most traditions of action research agree on the following goals; (a) generation of new knowledge, (b) achievement of action oriented outcomes, (c) education of researcher and participants, (d) results relevant to the local setting and, (e) appropriate methodology. Based on these goals they have identified indicators of quality for action research (See table below).

Table 2.1: Quality Indicators for Action Research (Herr & Anderson, 2005)

Outcome Validity	The study may be seen as valid depending on the extent to which actions occur which help solve the issues that led to this study. Action researchers must be competent in research and also influence participants towards successful action outcomes.
Process validity	This looks at how problems are framed and solved in such a way that allows ongoing learning through a process of reflection.
Democratic validity	Research needs to be done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem being investigated.
Catalytic validity	The researchers, practitioners and participants must be ready to reorient their view of reality as well as the way they look at their role. All those involved in the research should deepen their understanding of the subject being studied and should be willing to act to change it. This is why it is important to keep a research journal where one can monitor one's own change processes and changes in the setting.
Dialogic validity	In research there should be peer review. The same can be said for action research. One may need to work with a friend familiar with the setting.

Findings are seen as transferable from one setting to another rather than generalizable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Action research should ideally come together with one's own growth areas, values and beliefs according to Reason and Marshall (2001), who state that all good research is "for me, for us, and for them" (pg. 112-113). It is 'for them' to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable outcomes which stimulate an interest from those who are concerned with understanding a similar field. It is 'for us', to the

extent that it is relevant and timely and works for those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is ‘for me’ to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher’s position (Reason & Marshall, 1987, cited in Reason & Marshall, 2001).

Researchers who engage in action research can expect their work to contribute to their sense of being in the world, to their praxis and to the larger discussion regarding the subject being investigated as well as the inquiry process (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

2.9 Framing the Research Question

The literature in Chapter One discussed the benefits experienced by footballers when migrating to play professional football overseas, however, it also evidenced the many challenges they face during this journey. More specifically, it is clear that the standard of the Maltese national football team would benefit greatly if more Maltese players were to gain experience playing professional football overseas. However, as the literature has shown, it is imperative that players are prepared beforehand for such migratory based transitions. Thus, this study attempts to critically examine the challenges faced by Maltese players who have already made the migratory transition and will look at developing ways of preparing young Maltese players more effectively to overcome such challenges and benefit from migratory transitions. It is important to note that prior to this action research project, no preparation and/or educational type activity focusing on migration was provided for players making the transition.

In order to best address the research question and to enable the research to directly benefit the participants, action research was seen as the most appropriate research method. This collaborative approach to research is designed to create change and to provide rich data from which new and improved methods of working practice are promoted to improve

effectiveness. This action research study has been conducted in collaboration with the MFA and the NSS, the key sporting bodies responsible for developing football talent on the island.

2.10 The Research Context

Two organisations are at the centre of this action research project. One is the Malta Football Association (MFA), the other is the Malta National Sports School (NSS). Both organisations work hand in hand in the development of football with a number of the older student-athletes at the NSS forming part of the MFA academy national team. The practitioner-researcher is the sport psychologist in both of these organisations.

2.10.1 The Malta Football Association (MFA)

The MFA, founded in 1900, is the body responsible for the Maltese national football teams and for the development of football on the island. Currently, the MFA holds national team training for players from the age of 14-15 upwards. The Malta national team had its debut in 1957 against Austria, losing 3-2. Two years later, the MFA joined the world governing body of football - FIFA (1959), whilst a year later it became a member of the European Football Union - UEFA (1960). Malta could now participate regularly in international football competitions at national and at club level. Maltese clubs also started to participate in the UEFA Cup in 1968 and later on also in the UEFA Intertoto Cup competition.

Malta's best result related to the World Cup, was the 'away' win in Estonia in 1993. Also in 1993 there was the 1-0 win against Armenia. Malta's most prestigious result in the European Nations Cup came in 1971 when Malta defeated Greece 2-0. Malta also recorded wins over Hungary and Iceland and draws against Portugal, the former

Czechoslovakia, Croatia and Bulgaria in World Cup or Euro Championship group matches.

The principal aim of the MFA is to foster the game of football through the organisation of competitions, coaching, refereeing and also instilling a love for the game amongst youngsters. The MFA is currently formed of fifty-two (52) clubs and ten (10) Member Associations, which in turn organise football competitions for the clubs and teams affiliated with them or other activities related to their status. The MFA also organises courses for referees, coaches and administrators on a regular basis. Malta also participates regularly in the preliminary rounds of the FIFA World Cup, the European Football Championship, the European U/21 Championship as well as the European U/19 and U/17 Championships.

The MFA has been entrusted by UEFA, during the past years, to organise several meetings of the UEFA Executive Committee and other seminars for European top coaches and referees. Malta also hosted the U17 finals in May 2014 in which England were the eventual winners. The Maltese U17 team (born 1998-1999; participants in this research), for the first time ever, participated in these finals since they were automatic qualifiers.

The Technical Centre also runs a National Football Academy where young players, selected from the various Football Nurseries spread all around the island, attend training regularly at Ta' Qali. The mission statement of the MFA is:

"To organise, promote and protect the game of football in Malta and Gozo with respect to the laws of the game and without discrimination on grounds of race, colour or creed."

(Mission Statement MFA, 2014)

(All the above information on the MFA has been taken from the MFA website:

www.mfa.com.mt)

Table 3.1: Malta Football Association Organisational Chart



2.10.2 Malta National Sports School (NSS)

The NSS is the only dedicated National Centre of Excellence for Sport in Malta. It first started operating in September 2012. It is a co-educational secondary school for student-athletes over 11 years of age who are talented in sport and have a high potential for development in their chosen field. The school assists these young athletes to pursue, from an early age, a specialised sports training programme together with their academic studies. Students receive coaching within the school day, which is timetabled around their academic subjects. The ultimate aim of the sports school is to guide its students along a dual career path, leading them to a successful career in sports and academic achievement.

Entry to the NSS is by selection. Interested student-athletes must be nominated by their National Sports Organisation as being among the most promising at national level. All prospective candidates must sit for the ‘End of Primary National Benchmark Examinations’, in the case of Year six students, or the NSS ‘Entry Core Subjects Exams’ in the case of Form two students. There is a very limited number of places available at this entry point. The mission statement of the NSS is:

To be the leader in developing and training high performance students to potentially become professional athletes of international standing whilst safeguarding their interests in completing their secondary education to pursue a second career alongside their development in their chosen field of sport.

(Mission Statement NSS, 2014)

(All the above information has been taken from the NSS website: <http://nss.skola.edu.mt/>).

The National Sports School works in conjunction with the national sport federations. Therefore, the young athletes are coached by the top coaches and former top athletes within

the sporting federation itself as it is believed that they will eventually form part of the MFA academy and national teams. The football students are coached by:

- a) one of the most successful Premier League coaches in Malta (also an experienced Physical Education teacher)
- b) a former top National Team player; also Head Coach of a Premier League nursery (qualified Physical Education teacher)
- c) the most capped Maltese National Team player; also coach of a 2nd division team
- d) the female senior National Team coaches
- e) a female player from a top team (also a qualified physical education teacher)
- f) two National Team goalkeeper coaches (of the senior male and female teams)
- g) the U15 national team coach and ex national team player himself
- h) the physical trainer of the National Team (comes in to conduct tests)
- i) the sport psychologist of the National U19/ U17/Academy Teams (the researcher).

2.11 Aims of the Thesis

The purpose of the present thesis is to understand the challenges that (young) Maltese players face when they migrate from Malta to play professional football overseas, and secondly, to identify mechanisms of how emerging talented players can be prepared more effectively to cope with the demanding environments within professional football clubs. This collaborative action research project will offer an in depth insight into the working practices of the MFA and NSS, and develop collaborative action change strategies to enhance the organisations effectiveness in preparing young players for migratory transitions. The following aims are positioned against the respective phases of the action research cycle.

Aim1: Reconnaissance Phase:

- a) To critically explore the challenges faced by Maltese players when they migrate to play overseas.
- b) In collaboration with parents and coaches, to reflect on how young players can be better prepared for migratory transitions.

Aim 2: Action Planning:

In collaboration with the management at the MFA and NSS, to critically reflect on the results from the reconnaissance phase with a view to creating action change strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the organisations' programmes of preparation.

Aim 3: Implementation and Monitoring Phase:

To collaborate strategically with the management of the MFA and NSS, to implement, monitor and evaluate a number of key action change strategies.

2.11.1 Thesis: Working Method

The above aims are to be attained through the following method:

For objective 1: Reconnaissance Phase:

- I. By conducting interviews with Maltese players who have already experienced the migratory transition to play professional football overseas to understand better the challenges they faced.
- II. By exploring the perceptions and experiences of parents of young National Team players, parents of young players who have already experienced a migratory transition, head coaches of top nurseries, MFA and NSS coaches on the challenges experienced by Maltese players.

For objective 2: Action Planning:

- III. By disseminating findings from the reconnaissance phase to the MFA and NSS management to generate meaningful ways forward in order to enhance the effectiveness of the organisation's programme of preparation for migratory transitions of young players.

For objective 3: Implementation and Monitoring Phase:

- IV. By assisting MFA and NSS management in moving forward in order to improve working practice and enhance the effectiveness of the organisation.

2.11.2 Thesis Structure

Chapter One looks into the development of sports labour migration in Europe, including Malta, where this research is based. It also looks at the theoretical underpinnings of transitions faced by athletes and the challenges footballers face when they migrate to play professional football overseas.

Chapter Two presents the methodological framework adopted and the research context for the thesis.

Chapter Three presents the first part of the reconnaissance phase which looks into the transitional challenges faced by Maltese footballers who migrated to play professional football overseas.

Chapter Four deals with the outcomes of a dissemination event (i.e., focus groups) for parents of the then U17 (born 1998) Maltese national football team, parents of players who have already migrated to play overseas, head coaches of top nurseries in Malta and coaches of the

NSS and the MFA. Feedback from the reconnaissance phase, presented to generate meaningful ways forward (or actions) to enhance the effectiveness of the organisations, is analysed.

In Chapter Five the actions gathered from the focus groups are distributed with senior management at the MFA and the NSS at an action meeting to discuss and confirm plausible ways forward.

Chapter Six, the implementation and monitoring phase, incorporates a range of formal and informal data collection techniques, as the author facilitates the strategies discussed at the MFA and NSS in order to improve the preparation of young players for migration and thus, in turn, enhance the working practice and effectiveness of the organisations and the key people involved in this project including the practitioner-researcher herself.

Chapter Seven underlines the main findings from all phases of research and includes an identification of emerging issues. A consideration of the implications of the findings are considered. The author's reflective journey on 'Becoming an action researcher' is also described here.

CHAPTER THREE

STUDY 1: Reconnaissance Phase

3.0 Study 1 Aims and Objectives

Aim 1a: To explore the challenges faced by Maltese players when they migrate to play overseas.

Objective 1a: To conduct interviews with Maltese players who have already experienced a migratory transition to play professional football overseas in order to understand better the challenges faced.

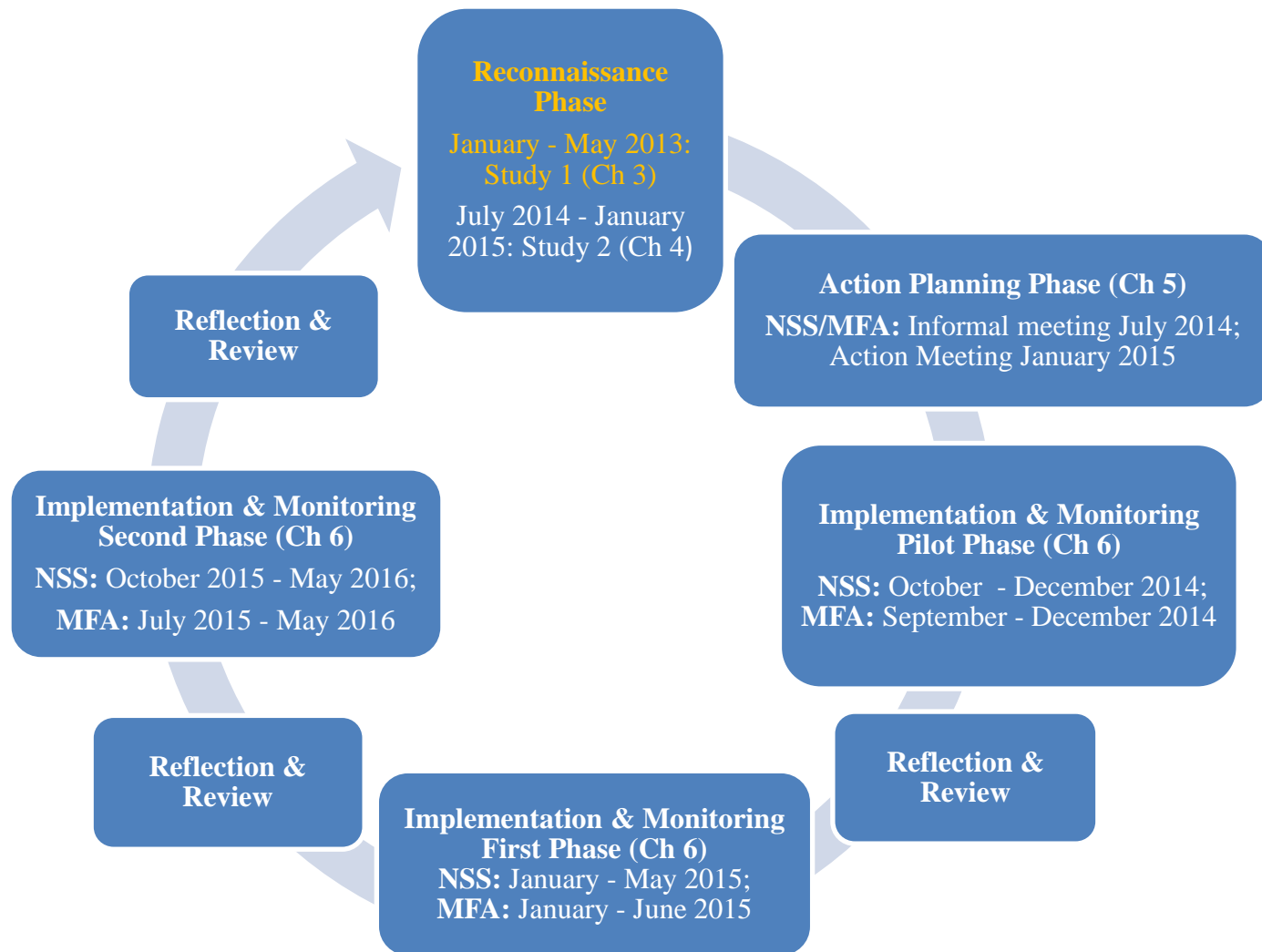


Figure 3.1: The Action Research Cycle Study 1

3.1. Study 1: The Reconnaissance Phase: Aims and Methodology

The following aim will be considered within Chapter Three:

To explore the challenges faced by Maltese players when migrating to play professional football in a different European and/or International context.

The chapter will initially discuss the location of the research, that is, Malta, as well as the biographical positioning of the researcher, followed by the methodology and results and discussion.

3.2. Location of the Research

The actual context within which the thesis evolves has been discussed and highlighted in Chapter One and Two. Malta is a small island in the Mediterranean, to be found at the southernmost tip of Europe. It forms part of the European Union and the Commonwealth. However, it is of some importance to outline the history, geography and culture of Malta to help set the scene for the thesis.

3.2.1 The Maltese Islands

The Maltese Archipelago comprises a group of small islands in the centre of the Mediterranean. Malta is 96 km (60 miles) away from Sicily and 290 km (180 miles) from North Africa. The Archipelago consists of three main inhabited islands - Malta, Gozo and Comino. The total area is 315.6 km squared (122 sq. miles). The larger island - Malta has an area of 245.7 km squared with the longest distance in Malta from the south-east to the north-west being 27.3 km, and the widest distance being 14.5 km in an eastern-westerly direction. The prevailing climate is typically central Mediterranean, being temperate with no extremes of heat or cold. January and February are usually the coldest months, while July and August are the hottest. The mean temperature is 19 degrees Celsius (The Maltese Islands Geography, 2015).

In the past, Malta has been under foreign rule for most of its existence; the Phoenicians (800-480BC), Carthaginians (480-218BC), Romans (218BC-AD395), Byzantines (AD395-AD870), Arabs (870-1090), Normans and Angiovin (1090-1283), Aragonese and Castillians (1283-1530), the Knights of St. John (1530-1798), the French (1798-1800), and the British (1802-1964). Given its history “it is not surprising that the Maltese appear to be constantly looking over their shoulders at what ‘foreigners’ are up to” (Pg. 6; Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). Malta has been besieged twice. In 1565 the Maltese, together with the Knights of St. John, managed to deter the Turks from taking the island and come out victorious. The second Great Siege happened in 1940-1942, during the Second World War, when the islands were cut off from the lines of supply by the German-Italian axis. These were hard times for the islands were heavily bombarded. However, the British and Maltese stood side by side in reciprocal assistance. It has been argued that such narratives have brought on a submissive mentality in the Maltese and created the notion that “the foreigner is always right” (Pg. 7; Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). Malta was governed by the British who, in turn, gave a degree of self-rule back to the Maltese. In 1964 Malta became independent, but the British forces actually left Malta in 1979. When the Nationalists came to power in 1987 they brought a European-oriented foreign policy. The country was once again divided on whether Malta should enter the EU or not, but the nation voted in favour in the 2003 referendum (Briguglio, 2016).

3.2.2 Sport in Malta

Malta does not have much of a sporting heritage and culture. Though football is popular, the results obtained on the international scene are poor. The locals are seen as doomed to failure due to the smallness and insularity of the country, lack of organisation, commitment and resources, as well as because of corruption (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). It is

also the case that Maltese schools have a short working day and a long summer break, the reason being that it is too hot to work in summer. As a result, with this mentality and with little time on the curriculum for sport, it is difficult to achieve a good skill level in the vital childhood years. This cultural apathy is accentuated by the government, with sport most often seen as a subject for students to vent all their energy on and to keep them occupied so that they are not causing trouble (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008).

3.3 Biographical Positioning

In the context of this study I should make my position clear by offering some biographical information relevant to the research process and subsequent interactions with the participants.

My interest in conducting an Action Research thesis stemmed from my experience of approximately 13 years of applied work in sport psychology in Malta. Here too, it is imperative to go into the implications of living on a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean. As a child I was always very much into sports to the extent that later on in life I sought to follow a career in this area. However, in Malta, in the late 1990's, the only sports course one could pursue happened to be a Bachelor's degree in Physical Education. Not being particularly interested in teaching, I was lost as to which course to take up and eventually decided on a Degree in Psychology. It was in my second year that I was introduced to sport psychology and realised that this was what I wanted to be doing. Things, however, became rather difficult in that there was no Masters course in Sport Psychology that I could pursue in Malta, thus, obliging me to go abroad for a year to pursue my studies. This would come at a considerable financial cost due to the fact that, at that time, Malta was not yet in the EU and no scholarships were available. This choice of career was a great risk since there were no sport psychologists in Malta, and, with a lack of sporting culture, it was difficult to

find a job. However, thanks to my parents' support, including financial help, I embarked on my dream. It was in 1998, aged just 21, that I moved to England to follow a Master's programme in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the Manchester Metropolitan University.

This was a life changing year for me, both in terms of setting me on my career, as well as in terms of growing up. Though I was brought up to be independent, I still struggled with homesickness, having to make new friends, getting used to having to cook, shop, pay bills and attend to other chores while dealing with the intensity of a Master's programme. Moreover, I really struggled with the lack of sunshine. But all in all, I loved my year in England and learning at an institution and in a sporting culture which was far superior to what I was used to in Malta.

On my return back to Malta, it was very hard to set up a career in an area no one knew anything about. However, slowly, I built up a name for myself, thanks to the work I was doing with the Maltese Olympic Committee (MOC) and several sport federations. After 13 years working in Olympic sport and having been fortunate enough to experience two Olympic Games, two Commonwealth Games, one Mediterranean Games and several Games of Small States (for countries with a population of less than one million), I felt that I was stagnating in my career and felt the need for a new challenge, due too, to the fact that in Malta there is very little turnover of athletes. It was at this time that the MFA approached me to start doing some work with a new group of academy players that they wished to prepare, in the best way possible, in order to try and improve the level of the national team in the future. Thus, I slowly moved away from Olympic sport and into football. Over the past five years, my work at the MFA grew from just working with the U15's to working with the U17's and U19 teams too, as well as with some of our senior players on an individual level. I was also involved in the UEFA U17 finals in Malta in May 2014, where our U17s, for the

first time ever, were eligible to participate being automatic qualifiers since Malta was hosting the tournament.

It was during the first few months at the MFA that I felt the need to learn more about working in football, thanks to the different and more intense demands I was experiencing when working with footballers. Thus, I decided to pursue a PhD, originally aimed at enhancing mental toughness in football players. This eventually became more specific: to prepare Maltese players for transitions, in particular migratory based transitions, due to the fact that the MFA were seeing players who got the opportunity to pursue a career in professional football overseas, returning to Malta early due to the perception that they could not cope. In that regard, it seemed to be far more effective to pursue an Action Research study where a programme of awareness and preparation could take place, and where I would get the opportunity to be a researcher-practitioner and thus enhance my own practice simultaneously.

It was in the third year of my PhD studies that the government noted the importance of my work with young athletes and offered me the position of full-time sport psychologist at the National Sports School, where I had more access to our upcoming players. This helped to enhance the programme of preparation, I, together with MFA and NSS stakeholders were conducting. It was at the end of 2015 that the first group of NSS footballers, aged 14, were selected to form part of the MFA academy team.

3.4 Research Framework

Action Research has been discussed in detail in Chapter Two with the aim in this thesis being to explore, monitor and assist in the preparation of young Maltese football players for transitional challenges, in particular, the migration to play professional football overseas. Action research utilises a spiral of reflective cycles that include a reconnaissance phase,

an action planning phase, and an implementation and monitoring phase (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

3.4.1 Method

A qualitative approach which draws upon a phenomenological approach was utilised to examine the experiences of Maltese footballers as they made the transition into elite football overseas. This approach gathers in depth information and perceptions through qualitative methods, such as interviews, and represents the perspective of the research participant (Lester, 1999). Phenomenology concerns the individual perception of a meaning of an event and lends itself to a deep understanding of that event. Understanding of subjective experience can be gained together with insight into personal motivations and actions, while ignoring assumptions and conservative knowledge (Lester, 1999). The phenomenological approach “describes the meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences about a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p.57). It has been suggested that such an approach is becoming more and more popular in the sport sector, when the aim is to gain insight into athletes’ entry experiences into elite sport (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). It offers players the opportunity to share their knowledge, and for the researcher to try and achieve a deep understanding of the players’ transition experiences.

3.4.2 Qualitative Data Collection

The reconnaissance phase adopts a qualitative approach with the method used in Study One being the semi-structured interview. The research method in this study builds upon previous research and helps to fill the need for more in depth analysis of players’ lives and experiences during migratory based transitions. Qualitative research, using a naturalistic approach, is the best method to gain a better understanding of a particular setting (Hoepfl, 1997); since qualitative data is rich, provides depth and detail, and helps us understand better

the reality of the field (Scanlan, Ravizza & Stein, 1989a). Qualitative research is research whose findings are not brought about by statistical methods or other means of quantification (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is a systematic empirical strategy for answering questions about people in a particular social context. An advantage of such research is that the researcher is able to develop an in-depth understanding and obtain detailed information about the participant's experiences in his or her environment (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002).

Conducting interviews is seen as the best way to understand humans and their behaviour (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Interviews include the individual face to face with the researcher. In sport psychology research, a combined protocol of semi structured interviews and content analysis is seen as the most adequate method (Côté, Salmela, Baria & Russell, 1993), since it also facilitates an in depth understanding of the participants (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001). Inquirers are sensitive to the participants, there is collaboration between the researcher and participant and the dignity of the latter is respected (Creswell, 2007).

3.4.3 Participants

Phenomenological research aims to describe the fundamental structure of an experience and not the statistical characteristics of the participants in the group being studied. Thus, participants were not chosen randomly, so as to achieve statistical generalization, but purposefully selected due to their experience with transitions into professional football overseas (Dale, 1996; Patton, 2002).

The sample for the reconnaissance phase (Study One) consisted of 12 players of Maltese nationality who were playing overseas, or who had previously played overseas with a foreign club. Very few Maltese players have had the opportunity and the privilege to play abroad. Thus, the researcher tried to interview players and ex-players of all ages in order to

have a representative sample. Of the six Maltese players who at the time of data collection were plying their trade abroad, five agreed to proceed with the interview. Of the 12 players (or ex-players) who at some stage in their career played abroad, and who the researcher managed to obtain contacts for, seven proceeded with the interview. The football environment is a typically closed environment and one that is skeptical of the presence and/or role of outsiders (Parker, 1995). That being so, and to try to gain access to these players, it was of vital importance to guarantee confidentiality with regard to data collection, recording and presentation of the study.

Some players may have opted out of the research due to work commitments and lack of time, others may have not seen the importance of the research, some may have feared my involvement as the Sport Psychologist at the MFA whilst others, knowing the size of the island, and the fact that few players have migrated to play overseas, despite the assured confidentiality of the study, could recognize that they might still be identified in the research.

Contacts with the players were brought about by several methods. Three of those interviewed were at that time making use of sport psychology support being provided by the researcher; other contacts with national team players were brought about through the help of players themselves, coaches and the MFA. The first initial contact with the players was made by email to provide them with information on the research itself. The email briefly explained the aims of the research and what was expected of them in order to participate. This was followed up by a phone call. A place and time were set at the convenience of the participant. At times, several phone calls had to be made to settle such an appointment and, sometimes, this failed to materialise. All participants who were interviewed, using semi-structured formal interviews, (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Côté et al. 1993, Biddle et al., 2001) were male. The youngest was 11 years old whilst the eldest was 38 years old at the time of interviewing.

3.4.4 Constructing the Interview Schedule

Phenomenological principles were drawn upon to develop an interview schedule that was open-ended and designed to create a conversation or discourse on the experience of interest (Creswell, 2007). Guidelines set out by Gould (1990) and procedural works developed by Scanlan and colleagues (1989a) were used. Previous research on the migratory experiences of sporting athletes (e.g. De Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Richardson et. al.) and within-career transition literature (e.g. Bourke, 2002; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) were specifically utilised to inform the themes and associated questions. The interview schedule was designed to explore the players' history in the sport, the challenges they faced in their transition to playing in a foreign league, as well as the transition from the youth to the professional environment, their thoughts and beliefs about the requirements to be successful abroad and their opinions on what can be done to aid our younger players seeking to play abroad in the future. The nature of open-ended interviews allows the participants to express their feelings freely (Scanlan, Stein & Ravizza, 1989b).

It was important to create an interview guide based not only on a thorough review of the relevant literature (Patton, 2002) (see Relvas et al., 2010), but one that also incorporated important elements of knowledge from the researcher's and supervisory team's experience in this area to enhance the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis. The interview schedule was also enriched through informal talks with players, ex-players and coaches. A pilot test was conducted (Janesick, 1994) with a student athlete who from a young age, had previously played abroad. Through peer triangulation (Janesick, 1994; Biddle et al., 2001) and pilot work, the first guide was adapted and refined until the researcher and supervisory team felt that the final version met the scope of this research (See table 3.2 pg. 86).

Phase one of the interview aimed to establish some rapport with the individual participant and clarify any issues about the research (Scanlan et al., 1989a). Each participant

had been previously given information about the research and its aims and their part in it. However, it was important to stress this information so as to avoid any misunderstandings and, also, as an introduction to the interview. The participant was reminded about the nature and confidentiality of the interview and research process and was asked to read and sign the participant consent form (in Appendix A2). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical approval for this study was granted through the Liverpool John Moores University ethics committee.

In order for the participant to become more comfortable (Roulston, deMarrais and Lewis, 2003), phase two of the interview began with some familiar questions regarding the player's history in the sport and the aims he had. Phase three then dealt with the migratory transition the player had experienced, the decision to go and play abroad, preparation for this transition, expectations, difficulties, progression and the role of the MFA. Each player was encouraged to describe critical moments in this transition and the environment he had found himself in. This phase also explored the participant's beliefs on the demands and requirements for a positive transition. The player's characteristics, main barriers and support mechanisms were explored. The final phase of the interview gave the participant the opportunity to highlight any other important issues that had not been previously discussed in the interview itself. This phase helped the participant to respond to, clarify and/or extend any aspects of the interview schedule. In conclusion, the author showed appreciation and stressed the value and importance of the participant's contribution to the research.

Table 3.2: Interview Schedule
Introduction: Importance of the interview <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal Introductions (name, job, research aims) - Interview details (Length of interview, audio taping, confidentiality, structure)
Background Information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can you describe your sporting background? (length of time in sport & playing for national team, clubs, position, critical moments)(Nesti, 2012; Richardson et al. 2012)) - What aims do/did you have? (roles & responsibilities, expectation change over time) (De Vasconcellos Ribeiro & Dimeo, 2009)
Migratory Transition <p>Can you talk about the decision to go and play abroad?</p> <p>How and why did you decide to go and play abroad? (before migration - qualities that made the club decide to take you on, age, if decision was difficult, support from others in taking decision, agent influence, did you go abroad alone or with parents/partner, reaction of others, identity, money issues etc. (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000; Nesti, 2011; Petitpas et al., 1996; Weedon, 2011; Richardson et al. 2012).</p> <p>In Malta, did anyone help you prepare for the transition (MFA? Club? Coaches? Significant others? Could you have had a better preparation? Was this preparation needed? Was the experience what you expected? What are the characteristics needed by Maltese players to adapt?) (Bourke, 2002, Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000; Littlewood et al., 2011)</p> <p>How did you find the transition from playing amateur football here to professional football there? (during migration - club and coaching philosophy, adaptation to foreign country, culture difference, acculturation, tough training (professional football world) and differences in training from home, living arrangements, barriers, language issues, coping, home sickness, critical moments, injuries, appearances, performance quality, team mates, support (Bourke, 2002; Maguire & Pear-ton, 2000; Richardson et al.2004; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Nesti, 2012; Weedon, 2011; Richardson et al. 2012))</p> <p>(Post-migration – (If relevant) -Why did you stop playing abroad? Would you have liked to continue?, reaction of others & its effects on you)) (De Vasconcellos Ribeiro & Dimeo, 2009)</p> <p>In what ways do you think that you have developed as a player whilst playing abroad? (progression, future plans for improvement, favoured country to play in) (Richardson et al., 2004; Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Nesti, 2012)</p> <p>Do you think the MFA can help in preparing players better for this transition? (Current thoughts on the set-up at the MFA, expectations, youth set-up, purpose of the Academy? (if relevant, changes over past years)) (Maguire & Pear-ton, 2000a)</p>
Conclusion <p>Review what was discussed. Any additions on the part of the participant.</p>

3.4.5 Interview Procedure

Twelve individual face to face semi structured interviews were conducted by the researcher (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Côté et al., 1993, Biddle et al., 2001) with players of Maltese nationality who had previously played football abroad or who were currently doing so. These interviews were conducted over a period of five months, between January 2013 and May 2013. All the interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone. No players objected to this. Each interview lasted between 35 and 90 minutes. The more informal and semi-

structured interview approach afforded the researcher and the participant the opportunity to be flexible and allow clarification and probing in relevant areas and other issues that cropped up (Scanlan et al., 1989; Kvale, 1996; Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). Through the pilot work, the author found that it was important not to be too rigid in the interview process as this might be a hindrance to the amount of information that could be captured (Biddle et al., 2001; Dale, 1996; Krane & Baird, 2005). Flexibility is often important as, in many cases, the answers given will dictate the next question (Magee, 1998). The interviewer became more and more familiar with the questions and this is important for a smoother interview (Jones, 1991). As the number of interviews progressed it was not necessary to consult the question schedule so much.

In fact, the ‘testimony’ approach was used more and more. Here, subjects are treated less as ‘respondents’ and more as ‘informants’ of their own life (Alasuutari, 1995). With several of the players the conversational approach as used by Magee (1998), was used as opposed to direct and rigid questioning. This helped the participants relax and they responded well to this, with the focus directed at their own experiences. The fact that the researcher and some of the participants already knew each other helped the interview to proceed more freely. Indeed, the researcher purposefully chose to conduct early interviews with the participants she knew well so as to grow more comfortable with the interview schedule. The researcher’s background and experience in the field provided her with a high degree of familiarity and prevented any fear of entering the group. There was mutual familiarization and the participants could be at ease as they could trust the motives of the interview (Dandelion, 1995). This built a rapport between the interviewer (Jones, 1991) and interviewee, and allowed the subjects to be honest and open during the interview. It also allowed the researcher good access to the data. Mention of her work with the MFA helped to build the rapport.

The researcher, who, herself had previously experienced a migratory transition from Malta to the United Kingdom to pursue her studies overseas, felt that the experience helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the research process as she was able to remember similar experiences she had passed through in her transition. One also had to be aware of certain constraints such as knowing too much, saying too much, premature saturation, role identity and negotiation of the results (Dandelion, 1995). The researcher was aware of the possibility of these factors emerging and tried her best to keep them from influencing the research.

Most of the interviews took place at the researcher's place of work, since this was convenient to the participants and provided the privacy needed. Four interviews were held in the lobby of the hotel where the national team players were residing prior to their World Cup 2013 qualifying match against Italy. These were conducted here due to the fact that three of the players were playing in a foreign league at that time and it was thus difficult to find a day when they were in Malta. Permission from the coach and team manager was sought before setting up appointments with these players. Privacy was not at its best here, time was limited and players were rather excited about the upcoming game, however, it was felt that the interviews proceeded well despite the distractions.

In the case where two of the players were underage, their parents were informed beforehand about the research and the importance their sons' contribution could make to the study. The parents were duly asked to sign the consent form before the research was explained to the young players and the interview conducted.

3.4.6 Data Analysis and Representation

It is important to provide a detailed examination of procedural methods to enhance the credibility of the interview process (Biddle et al., 2001). This concern should also be seen during the data analysis process (e.g. Hanton & Jones, 1999). Procedural guidelines of a

number of authors conducting interview studies were considered (Scanlan et al., 1989b; Côté et al., 1993). The analysis procedure adopted is described below.

All interviews were attended to and transcribed verbatim by the researcher as soon as was possible to aid interpretation and time management (Burgess, 1995). This yielded an average of 15 pages of single spaced text per interview. Some of the interviews were partly or wholly, in the Maltese language and these interviews were transcribed and translated simultaneously into the English language though certain terms could not be translated literally. The transcribed interviews were then read several times by the researcher and also by the supervisor to ensure familiarity was established with the transcriptions and the participants' personalities. This was essential to avoid any assumptions and to provide as exact a representation as possible of what had happened during the interview (Roulston et al., 2003).

Transcriptions were then analysed using the principles of content analysis (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Côté et al., 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a procedure where the researcher may organise raw data into meaningful themes and allow these to emerge from the participant's own words (Hanton & Jones, 1999). Such a method of data analysis was chosen since as suggested by Côté et al. (1993), the dominant qualitative template within sport psychology is the combined protocol of semi-structured interview and content analysis (Scanlan et al., 1989a, b). Both deductive and inductive procedures were used, as advised by various researchers (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Patton, 2002). The analysis started deductively, based on the pre-determined quotes used in the interview guide and related literature; it involves using a pre-determined set of themes/categories to organize the quotes from within the transcripts themselves (Scanlan et al., 1989b). This continued inductively with emerging quotes from the interview (Scanlan et al., 1989a). Krane, Anderson & Strean (1997) and Meyer and Wenger (1998) have a similar perspective with the former stating that "it is unrealistic to expect any researcher to begin a study without the requisite knowledge to understand the

phenomena under consideration... (pg. 216)". Krane et al. (1997) go on to say that it cannot be the case that Scanlan et al. (1989b) had no prior knowledge that certain themes could emerge from the data. This view should not place suspicion upon the inductive nature of the research conducted by Scanlan et al. (1989b) or others but should rather create awareness on the need for researchers to acknowledge biases and address them. "A more open-ended, athlete-driven interview process may bring on a wider range of responses and encourage those conducting the analysis to consider the responses from a less focused agenda" Biddle et al. (2001; pg 796) stated. The analytic process requires good awareness of the data, focus and openness to the undercurrents present. The most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis is the identification of salient themes, recurring ideas and belief patterns that link the participants and the setting (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). One may also use software packages, however, most researchers who use unstructured interviews shun all quantification methods. They believe that they need to immerse themselves in the data collected to identify the emerging themes (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995).

The next part involved the coding of large amounts of data into blocks that represented a common theme (Côté et al., 1993). Quotes that clearly identified subjective experiences were identified. These quotes were then clustered into common threads and first order themes were identified. These, then, became emergent themes (Biddle et al., 2001). This process was done by comparing and contrasting each quote with all other quotes and emergent themes to group quotes with similar meanings and separate quotes with contrasting meanings (Biddle et al., 2001). The first order themes were compared and contrasted, thus identifying the second and third order themes. This continued until it was no longer possible to create a higher level theme (Biddle et al., 2001).

Thus, a number of quotes from the transcripts were clustered by the researcher into seven general dimensions as can be seen in Table 3.3. As suggested by Scanlan et al. (1989b),

sub-themes are formed by allowing a building process to emerge, where higher-order themes provide overarching cluster descriptors. Table 3.3 also shows the higher order themes that emerged from the data. A tagging system was used to clustering, in which the participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms (i.e. alternative names) to retain their confidentiality (Krane et al., 1997). Relevant, contextual, verbatim quotes and consequent themes/headings were 'tagged' and aligned to the various players. At times, themes did not seem to fit in neatly due to the level of descriptiveness of the participant and were carried on to higher level themes in the same way (Scanlan et al., 1989b). The clustering process was first carried out by the researcher and then discussed with the supervisor in order to provide trustworthiness and credibility (Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999; Biddle et al., 2001). Representation of data adopted a thematic narrative approach in order to capture the unique lived experiences of each player, clarify particular moments in the player's story and aid the reader to become fully immersed in each player's journey (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Richardson et al., 2012).

3.5 Results and Discussion

This section aims to outline the general dimensions and dominant themes that emerged from the interviews and is represented by using selected, verbatim quotes to highlight the players' perceptions relating to the research questions. The general dimensions and dominant themes delineate the challenges that the players experienced during their migratory transition, exacerbated too, by the nation's perceived mentality and cultural existence. The dominant themes identified and discussed here, refer to themes that have emerged in previous studies by other authors and new themes which have emerged from this study which focus on migratory challenges and factors such as cultural issues that may have influenced players ability to adapt to the new environment. The need for support during this challenging period in their lives is also discussed. The general dimensions and higher order

themes that emerged from this study are displayed in Table 3.3 on the next page. The dominant general dimensions being discussed in this section are underlined in the table whilst italics have been used in the table and in the text to depict the dominant identified themes that emerged.

Most players had played football from a young age and moved up gradually to the first team of their club, made a name for themselves, were scouted by foreign clubs and signed a professional contract similar to that reported by Richardson and colleagues (2012). Six players experienced multiple (from two to seven) migratory transitions, while for four players, the transition occurred when they were still at academy level. In fact, their transition also involved attending new schools and facing new school syllabi; two of them had to handle a new working language as well. The countries the players in this study migrated to were Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy and Serbia.

Table 3.3. General Dimensions and Higher Order Themes Study 1

<u>Transitional Challenges</u>	<u>Maltese Culture</u>	<u>Characteristics needed to succeed</u>	Critical moments	<u>Acculturation Factors</u>	National Team	<u>Clubs/MFA support</u>
<i>Homesickness</i>	<i>Maltese mentality</i>	Psychological characteristics	Difficult moments	<i>Cultural and psychological change</i>	Player's feelings	Coaching
<i>Lifestyle Skills</i>	<i>Being from Malta</i>	Physical/ Technical Characteristics	Good performances	<i>Way of life</i>	Conflict international & club matches	<i>MFA/Club Support</i>
<i>Changing Room Culture</i>	<i>Mummy's boys</i>	Being an average footballer	Opportunities	<i>Personality or Culture?</i>	Clashes with national team personnel	<i>Sport Psychology Support</i>
<i>Environmental and cultural factors</i>	<i>Home is where the heart lies</i>	<i>Parental Support</i>	Playing in Europe		Raising national team standards	Facilities / Sports medicine support
<i>Club issues</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	Be prepared				Professionalism
<i>Footballer's life</i>		Money				Sending players abroad
<i>Additional difficulties</i>		Grab opportunities				

3.5.1 Socio-cultural and Psychological Challenges

It has been suggested that an athlete's path to sporting success includes a number of transitions that hold the potential for crisis or growth (Mortensen, Henriksen, & Stelter, 2013). For Jean (aged 14), migration to England was even more complex since he was still so young. He describes the transition as being very "painful," due to the many changes that took place in his life at a time when he was still growing up:

a very hard step for me...different friends... atmosphere...the hardest year of my life...moving country, house, school, my parents separated, dad moved out, had my first love...from going down to the "piazza" (village square) with my friends, training with my Maltese club, relaxed ...the change was sudden...it all happened in one year... a bunch of things which you would probably experience in, what, seven years?

However, his new club, was very supportive and has constantly been there for him, unlike what a number of other players in this study reported. Jean goes on to say that the migratory process helped him to grow up mentally and learn to handle things better as he went through the various transitional challenges. This is in line with Schlossberg's (1981) model in that Jean, despite the many challenges, had a positive perception of the transition: he moved abroad at a young age with his parents and felt that he was in a very supportive club. This helped him to adapt. However, most of the players in this study left their family and the associated support behind, findings that resonate with Nesti and Littlewood's (2011) study where players reported the prominent difficulties as being the absence of family ties and close friends, as well as difficulty coping with and adjusting to living away from home.

This study shows some similarity to Bourke's (2002) work, where only 14% of the players in her study settled within the first month. In the current study, eight out of twelve players suggested they were *homesick, in particular during their first migration*. What is

different in this study, however, is that, while according to a player in Richardson and colleagues' (2012) study, Ireland is just a 'short hop' from England, for the Maltese, moving from Malta may be tougher due to the many cultural changes Maltese players have to face. There were large distances to be travelled, having to live alone for the first time in their life, learning and adapting to a different language, food and habits. One player even felt homesick when he saw the sun as this used to remind him of back home and what his friends would be up to. For some players, it took them a year or so to settle down whilst others never settled down at all. This feeling of homesickness is further highlighted in the following quote:

The first three months I couldn't settle down. I used to feel very homesick, but after six months I started settling down a bit. I started making friends and I started getting used to the language, but, also, I was spending a lot of time on my own. Sometimes we used to have two days off, I wouldn't go out, and I was so homesick. (David)

Four players admitted to feeling even more homesick when returning to the club after having gone home for national team matches or holidays. In fact, Martin tells us that when he first migrated he did not come to Malta for six whole months as he believed that "when you go, come back, go, you are risking that you don't go back". However, Jean believes that to make it as a professional footballer, this is the game he has to play -

it's that good homesick....it doesn't make me feel bad...it makes me feel good because it shows me that, yes, I miss Malta, it's my home, my true friends are there but my dream and my future lies here...so that's what keeps me heading forward.

The sacrifice is deemed as worthwhile if it helps him reach his goal. Any change in a new environment can be seen either as a challenge, barrier or crisis (Richardson et al., 2012) and permanent migration and adaptation to a new work place and society can be crucial for a player's career (Agergarrd & Ryba, 2014). However, from all the players interviewed, only Jean interpreted homesickness as a challenge that could be overcome.

One must also take note of *the effect of the move on the partner or other family members* of the player (Martin, 1996). The dominant issues reported included a player having to return back to Malta, even though he had another year left on his contract, as his wife was on her own and became severely anxious when the neighbours were subject to a burglary. For Tony not only was there a language issue but, due to the financial crisis, his mother could not find a job. One player's parents, who accompanied him on his transition, separated a few months after the family moved abroad because of problems they were experiencing.

Players experienced *a variety of difficulties at the club*. George spoke about how during two different transitions the club he was at went *bankrupt and his contract was terminated*, making him insecure with the instability of his employment as he then needed to find another club (Roderick, 2006). The clubs David and Steve were at had *financial difficulties*, or were involved in corruption scandals, whilst for John, Peter and Tom there was a *change in management* that impacted on their existence. Due to managers' short lifespan in clubs and the money available, managers are (generally) not working on long term youth development plans, but simply investing in "more finished" or readymade players from other clubs (Gammelsaeter & Jakobsen, 2008; Maguire & Pearton, 2000a; Richardson et al., 2005).

(The club) was taken over by an Arab company, with a lot of money which definitely didn't work in my favour or in favour for a lot of players. All of a sudden they could go out and buy a 60 million pound player instead of focusing on a young player (John).

Most players wanted to move abroad both to enhance their career and for financial reasons (Bourke, 2002). However, according to Matthew, the *life of footballers* was "always a very cutthroat environment. If you weren't good enough you wouldn't be here".

Given that the top clubs tend to bring in new players instead of training their younger ones (Maguire & Bale, 1994; Richardson et al., 2005; Richardson et al., 2012), the migratory

players believed that they were asked to work much harder to justify their existence and make progress within their respective clubs. John admitted to never expecting to return home after just three years and Peter recalls his thoughts in that first training session, the excitement of being there, but also the doubts on whether he would make it or not:

‘I have two and a half years here. How are they going to pass (by)? My dream has become a reality, but how will I live alone, without friends?’ I still remember my first training session; you never got tired in that air, I was very excited, could I handle it?

A number of players also found the *changing room environment* difficult to deal with. However, this may differ according to the country and culture they are in. One player who went to Cyprus stated that he never had so much fun in a changing room; however, as Parker (1995) and Richardson and colleagues (2012) stated, the culture in football clubs tends to be one inundated with banter, strong language and provocation. Two players experienced racism whilst James just did not get on with his team mates, he felt that on a cultural level they were different and they even sought a different kind of fun. Players may become isolated because of their behaviour (Roderick, 2006; Richardson et al. 2012) and George recalls others talking behind his back and, not passing him the ball because he was a foreigner. While in Malta he was seen as one of the best players around, when abroad, in contrast, he was just one of the rest, fighting to keep his place and in constant competition with other players. This highlights the need for migrating players to demonstrate psychological strengths to deal with the variety of challenges in the environment. Matthew sums up the changing room culture as follows:

In England, the mentality is very much deal with most of it yourself. Football is a culture where it's the strongest who will survive. Even the changing room is very

much taking the mickey and having a lot of banter. You all try to be the best that you can beif you're not particularly in the right frame of mind you'd be an easy target.

Adaptation may be seen as part of the process wherein player migrants develop their transnational belonging, involving membership of groups in the contexts they find themselves in (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014). In Agergaard and Ryba's (2014) study, migrant players continued involving themselves in activities back in their home country through use of social media, however too, by involving themselves in cultural practices in their new country of residence. For Maltese players in this current study, having a *social life* in the new country was hard, due to the tough training regime and playing during the weekends and on holidays, and players felt they missed out. Five players mentioned that for the Maltese who are used to going out regularly to socialise, this makes it difficult. Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) stated that, "if you're bored there is always somewhere to go in Malta". Chris, having gone abroad at a young age, felt he missed out on the Maltese social life and wanted to see what it was all about. He regretted the decision to return home since he missed out on making it as a professional player.

I went there at a young age and I didn't know what being a teenager in Malta was about and I wanted to try it... but now I regret not staying there because I believe it would have been life changing if I had stayed there.

This shows us the importance of looking into the processes of adaptation to a new sociocultural setting, as vital for the players' establishment in their transnational athletic career (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014).

In a new country it wasn't just the *language* (Richardson et al., 2013) one had to learn, but players in this study also had to adjust to other *environmental and cultural factors* which affected them (de Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Magee & Sugden, 2002) including

travelling, food, weather (Magee & Sugden, 2002), *culture and lifestyle* as well as the *host nation's personality characteristics* (Bourke, 2003; Weedon, 2011). Chris, John, Jean and Tony recounted the demands made on them to adjust to new *schooling*, a new *syllabus, making new school friends* (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004) while simultaneously coping with the social and psychological challenges of *growing up* (Weedon, 2011). Moreover, they had to adjust to a *new club*, with a different training style (de Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009). In Richardson and colleagues' (2012) study, players also spoke about the differences in *philosophy* in how the game is played and they felt unprepared for this.

The experience of adapting to a new environment shows the intricacies of migration and the psychological challenges players may need to go through in order to succeed in their football career. Many migrants seem keen to adjust to the new culture; however, the stress they experience in the process may affect their career development (Bhagat & London, 1999). *Acculturation* looks at the changes individuals experience as a consequence of connecting with people from other cultures (Richardson et. al., 2012). Migrants may need to see how much they want to assimilate to their new culture. Players who migrated to play in Cyprus (not their first transition) seem to have settled down most easily and were happiest in this country. This may be because Cyprus is similar in climate and culture to Malta. Tom believed that when Maltese players play abroad their vision changes completely. However Matthew believes that a person is always growing, "I don't think it was because of the cultures of where I've been, I think it's the person that you are". You find your own self in whatever you are doing; you change over time thanks to the experiences you have to deal with. According to Relvas and colleagues (2010), each professional club has a unique sub-culture specific to it. David, who played in Germany, felt thankful for the discipline the Germans instilled in him. In this country he needed to be more organized and punctual as

otherwise he would have lost his place. Martin feels that from Italy he learnt what real football is all about, the pace of the game, technique and tactics. He also adapted to the Italian way of living, the way he dresses, the way he acts. His identity changed in Italy; he describes himself as being proud to be Maltese but in the same sentence he says he is not Maltese as he grew up differently. Increased globalisation has brought with it, amongst other things, a wider exchange of ideas, information and value systems which has helped to change the current sporting scene. Athletes, coaches and support staff from different cultural backgrounds are in close contact and their life stories are very likely to bring together different historical memories, clarifications, and sociocultural positioning (Ryba et. al., 2013).

One of the major issues Maltese players experienced, that does not seem to have been experienced by players in other studies to such an extent, was adapting to certain *lifestyle skills*. In Malta, life is still very traditional: the mother or wife (typically) does all, or most, of the chores at home and few young people live alone (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). Players spoke about not knowing how to cope with living alone; they were not used to undertaking household chores or cooking for themselves. George found this particularly challenging and, as a consequence of his inability to understand the technicalities of cooking, gave himself food poisoning, which, unfortunately, meant him losing his place on the team.

I wasn't comfortable, lots of gas in the stomach. I said, well, I have to do something, I started experimenting. The first couple of times it was shit... spaghetti. I took out one, all the rest came out. Then time after time you know, I spent about two weeks just eating pasta, it was the only thing I knew how to cook. Then, I said, let's try to do something else. I started feeling well again, I was eating the things I needed and basically I was learning. I had to learn, there was no other choice. If I had a wife, a mummy, it would have been much easier, but, thank God, most probably I didn't have them because, probably, I wouldn't have got to where I am, it was very hard.

George goes on to say that he did not know how to use the washing machine and was taking his clothes to the laundry. Matthew and Chris also found it very hard to learn to do chores on their own and the question arises whether, on getting to know that they were migrating, these players knew what they were really going into. Richardson et al., (2004), Nesti, (2010) and Nesti & Littlewood, (2011) have stated that a large number of players are not ready for the post-academy transition and find it difficult to cope after the more caring environments they were previously in. Although many players do not prepare themselves in any way (Bourke, 2002), Steve did try to prepare himself as best as he could and went to live with his friends beforehand to get used, as much as possible, to what lay ahead. He believes this made it a bit easier for him to adapt.

3.5.2 Pre and Post Transition Support

A major factor in this study, unlike other studies, is what players described as the country's *mentality* and how it might hinder a player's migratory transition. Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) found that moving from Malta proved problematic, as players in Malta are used to an easy life where they find everything ready for them and where the football is amateur in nature. Eight players mentioned that we have too many *mummies' boys'* in Malta and seven of them admitted to being one. Maltese mothers are seen as dedicated, but, ultimately, submissive and tied to the home (Borg, 1986). They will do all the chores themselves and are at times overprotective. Whilst a number of players accepted that they needed to be better prepared for the transition, they believed that they were under-prepared as a consequence of being a "Maltese Boy". Specifically, they felt that the way in which their parents, mainly their mothers, did everything for them needed to be changed. However, Chris believed that this is challenging.

My mother used to call me every day... 'Do you want to come back?' It used to make me angry sometimes ...sometimes I did want to come back...I used to tell myself, I want to go back...but...the parents they just have to...if you want your children to make it...you can't just...keep them back from something they are really good at.

To understand transitions better, it has been suggested that we need to consider players in their cultural contexts (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). The *Maltese lifestyle* may be a reason for the difficulties Maltese players experience in transition. Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) stated that Malta is one big community where everyone knows each other and people make themselves comfortable wherever they go. A former national team coach Sigmund Held, said that Maltese players had a “vacation mentality”. Three players confirmed that the Maltese were generally laid back, even lazy, whilst four others believed that the Maltese had too much of an easy life, with Matthew suggesting that to make it you need to have a lot of intrinsic motivation:

Malta is a very comfortable nation to live in.....most things are looked after....its relatively cheap to live here, you can get by on whatever....and you have to have a lot of will and drive to do it especially if you're leaving the country.

George is in agreement, whilst David referred to the Maltese as having talent, but “everyone is sitting pretty in the sun”. Horst Heese recognized that his problem, as Technical Director at the Malta Football Association (MFA), was compounded by “living in a holiday country with a population who were forever living a holiday” (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008; p.89).

For John, the *Maltese mentality*, the laid back attitude, was his downfall; he did not take things seriously and lost his place at the club.

Being Maltese, when I got the chance to go to a big club I saw it as that I had already achieved something big, when, really, I never actually thought that, I am so close to making it. That was just the first step and that is where the hard work starts. Being

Maltese, that's what happened. I went there, was happy to be there, I thought I had already achieved a lot, and, really and truly, I was nowhere close to making it.

In Stead & Maguire's (2000) study we find that the Nordic/Scandinavian players placed importance on their professionalism, as an approach as well as a state of mind. For them, working hard is important and they adapt easily. However, George believes that, maybe, Maltese players are not hungry enough for success:

When you see some young players abroad, sometimes, the hunger in their eyes, determination, body language... this is very important ...here, if they do something not right they say 'u ejja' (it doesn't matter) ...you cannot become good like this....the first person you need to say f... off to is yourself ...once you do that, you realise what you're doing....you start improving...players need to have the hunger...and unfortunately that comes from families ...we need to cut off all this pleasure here if you want to be a professional player ...the results show for themselves then...

Players need to be willing to make sacrifices and to work hard (Littlewood, 2005) and Jean, who migrated to the same club as John, felt that he adapted well because he does not have the attitude and mentality of a Maltese person, as he was brought up by his dad, who had lived in England, and by his ex- army English grandfather who instilled in him the value of a hard work ethic.

Being from Malta may pose a problem, and, as a nation, the Maltese may lack confidence when comparing themselves to other countries. This may also be experienced by other small nations or regions, in particular countries who feel inferior to others due to their geographical and population size and who feel that they can never reach the standard of bigger nations. In fact, in other sports, Malta participates together with Andorra, Monaco, Montenegro, Iceland, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein and San Marino, all small nations with less than one million inhabitants, in what are known as the Games of Small States. The

Olympic Committees of these nations believe that it is with these countries that they can compete on the same level.

However, in football, currently (2015), Iceland and Luxembourg, who have approximately the same population size as Malta, have 93 and 48 players respectively playing abroad. Cyprus, with a population of nearly 900,000, has 26 players abroad whilst Malta has just five players currently playing abroad. It was even more difficult for Maltese players to go and play abroad prior Malta joining the EU

To go and play abroad, in Malta at that time, it was very difficult because they saw us as foreigners...they prefer someone from Africa and they get him free and pay him little...and the Maltese? What did this nation ever do? (Peter)

According to Greenfield & Keller (2004), culture is mostly inside us and influences how we think and act. People internalise meanings from their cultural contexts and, thus, it is impossible to separate their development and behaviour from these contexts. Moreover, cultural context is fairly rigid and cannot be readily changed by the individual (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). However, who we are may be influenced by the cultural circumstances and situations to which we are exposed and socialised through. David tells us that, being Maltese, there is a sense that you need to prove yourself more than other players. He refers to Brazilian players, suggesting that there are general stereotypes; people automatically believe that the Brazilians are good at football since Brazil has a series of successes in World football. He says, in a hurtful tone, “but the Maltese....people do not even know where Malta is”. For John, clubs would look at him and say, ‘Who from Malta has ever made it?’, while Jamie had to do all the contact works with clubs “because being from Malta no one comes to pick you up”.

Players move from a protective environment to a less supportive first team culture which does not tolerate failure and puts high demands on the players (Reilly et. al., 2003).

When things are not going that great and high stress is experienced, career development may be affected (Bhagat & London, 1999) and the Maltese find it so easy to give up and return *home*.

You come to a point when you say, ‘I want to go home’. The only place that I can call home and that attracts me is Malta. When I played abroad I was always looking at the calendar of the national team so I can come and spend a week. It’s a magnet.

(George)

He goes on to say that he would stay in Malta if the football were of the same standard of other countries. Tom had the opportunity to go and play with another two clubs, but, he felt, that once he had not settled down after seven months, it would be difficult. For Matthew and Jaimie, there are too many distractions in Malta, which may hinder the player’s migration and career progression.

I think Maltese children find it a bit of a struggle to leave. I was young, I was starting to have a social life here in Malta and I found it a bit harder than I should have

(Jamie).

It has been suggested that there needs to be a culturally specific approach in applied work to help players adjust to transitions (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009) and, thus, it is important for clubs to get to know the personal and cultural background of the player before they sign him up (Magee & Sugden, 2002). Chris wanted to come back; he missed Malta, stating that he had the “Maltese gene” in him. However Jaimie was determined to get away at the time of his second transition “because I was done in Malta... socially, football wise, everything”. He needed a change from the sheltered island life.

Players need people around them who can give *support* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Just like players in the Richardson et al. (2012) study, the Maltese players stated that the

support of their families was crucial. However, certain football decisions had to be taken on their own since parents had little knowledge and there was no one to talk to.

We don't have many players who played abroad, I ended up in situations in which I did not know what to do and I didn't know who to phone to give me their opinion (Steve).

This shows the great need for expertise to be provided by the Football Association, clubs or other stakeholders. Social support, especially from coaches and managers (Pummell et. al., 2008; Bruner et. al., 2008), plays one of the most pivotal roles in the transition process (Stambulova et. al., 2012). However, similar to the findings by Holt and Hogg (2002) and Bourke (2002), this study holds that the manager role in these settings is not a supportive one and, thus, other personnel may be needed to give that support.

Sport psychologists have been seen to be ideal to help players through transitions and to settle down in the new country (Ravizza, 1990; Rotella, 1990; Richardson et al., 2012). Migrating players should be able to access a culturally competent service provider in the 'host' country. The service provider should also have the possibility to communicate with the clients' career consultant back home in order to be able to provide a better service (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Some players in this study mentioned that if you really needed a psychologist the club might provide you with one. However, there was not a psychologist present on a daily basis and only George spoke regularly to a sport psychologist, whilst James sought his sport psychologist back at home when needed. Steve speaks about the trauma he passed through when two of his friends committed suicide; however the macho culture makes players hide their feelings (Roderick, 2006). He did not seek help since "when you are seeing the psychologist, you have a problem."

Pain and Harwood (2004) and Nesti & Littlewood (2010) also found that players did not engage much in psychologically based support. Very often players are not aware of the challenges that lie ahead (Mortensen et al., 2013), and John says:

I went through each day never trying to improve myself but (like) in Malta, everyone thought I was playing with this club. For three years I felt like it was a long holiday whereas the other players, I wouldn't say they worked harder, but mentally they were much more prepared, they knew what was to come whereas I was always happy, looking forward to coming down for a holiday here.

Players from smaller countries and/or a sheltered upbringing may find themselves experiencing similar challenges to the above and, thus, greater knowledge, as well as available support, may aid players to have a greater understanding of what may lie ahead. What might also be useful would be for potentially migrating players to speak to other players who have already made the move abroad. In Stead and Maguire's (2000) study we find that players were keen to offer advice and emphasized having the right mental approach as a key factor. One Danish player advises potential migrants to "look in the mirror, see if they are ready or not, and make sure they are not lying to themselves, because if they do, they will not have success and will therefore always think about going home again" (Pg. 11). Players in this study, however, felt that in Malta, no one helps you. Moreover, clubs here make it problematic for players to the extent that David recalls the difficulty he experienced when he wanted to migrate when still under a local contract and affirms that "to get out of a Maltese contract you need the best lawyer in the world." He believes that now the MFA is helping players move abroad; however, in agreement with Martin, young players need more guidance.

The MFA needs to be determined that if it wants young players to play abroad it needs to help them in all aspects. The MFA needs to be strong, if it's going to help a player it needs to work with the club and parents to not get in the way (Martin).

3.6 Conclusion

In this study, the researcher examined the experiences that players go through as they migrate from a small country to play professional football in a foreign country much larger in population size and professionalism. It can be clearly seen how the effect of the culture, in particular the laid back attitude and the traditional sheltered upbringing, had a tremendous effect on the players during the migration process within the host country.

Players moved from a sheltered family upbringing, where most players were still living with their family and where typically mothers did everything for them, to living alone or with other players. They had to do chores they had never done before, make new friends in a competitive environment, most had to learn a new language and adjust to more intense training and a faster paced game. Furthermore, social and psychological support was not always available and, although players turned to their families wherever possible, these still lived in Malta, and, at times, communication was not possible.

Some of the players, despite all the difficulties they had, found that the experiences they encountered helped them develop as a player and as a person too. On reflecting about their difficult moments they could see the changes they underwent that were beneficial to them. This was similar to the findings found by Nesti (2010) and Richardson et al. (2012), in that players were able to recognise difficult challenges, which at times helped them grow.

This study has identified several areas of importance in understanding the character and challenges facing players coming from a small nation and a sheltered upbringing. The data highlights issues that players may face, and identifies why they believe that these issues have either manifested themselves or been heightened as a consequence of their upbringing. This study shows clearly that parents need to be educated in terms of how to prepare their children for a more successful transition to foreign soil. Parents, although very supportive, may at times be seen as an obstacle to the player's development and career (Harwood &

Knight, 2009). Personnel working with players from a sheltered upbringing have a hard job trying to change the culture and instilling a more competitive mentality and professionalism in the players. The relaxed lifestyle which might characterize small nations may be hard to tackle once the players are still playing in their own country. Coaching staff must be aware of this and push the players to their limit so as to enhance the way players look at their future.

As previously noted, this study forms part of the reconnaissance phase of a larger action research project to examine ways of preparing young players better for migration. The next chapter will focus on the views of parents of young footballers on this study as well those of head coaches of top nurseries and the Football Association, and aims to develop a series of action research strategies. Significant stakeholders, including sport psychologists and other practitioners, may need to recognize issues brought up here when working with young players from small countries being prepared for migration, who are characterized by a very traditional upbringing. Players need to be taught coping strategies related to their team culture and the stressors in that environment (Holt & Hogg, 2002). As Nesti (2010) suggested, the support work provided should not just be focused on mental skills training but there should be more focus on the person and lifestyle issues (Danish et al., 1993).

Similar to what was reported in Ryba et al's (2016) work, most of the transitioning athletes did not have psychosocial support available to them in their club or association and this has been seen as necessary. Such support must be made available pre, during and post transition. This may be even more necessary in small island nations where individuals grow up in a more sheltered environment which may make it more difficult for them to adapt in larger nations. Sport psychologists must help players become more aware of the challenges they will face and possible coping mechanisms. Practitioners must also be willing to collaborate with staff members in the new club the player moves to so as to provide as smooth a transition as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

STUDY 2: Reconnaissance Phase

4.0 Study 2 Aims and Objectives

Aim 1b: To reflect, in collaboration with parents and coaches, on how young players can be better prepared for migratory transitions.

Objective 1b: To explore the perceptions of parents of current young national team players, parents of players that have already experienced a migratory transition, head coaches of top nurseries, and MFA and NSS coaches, on the challenges experienced by Maltese players in relation to football based migratory transitions.

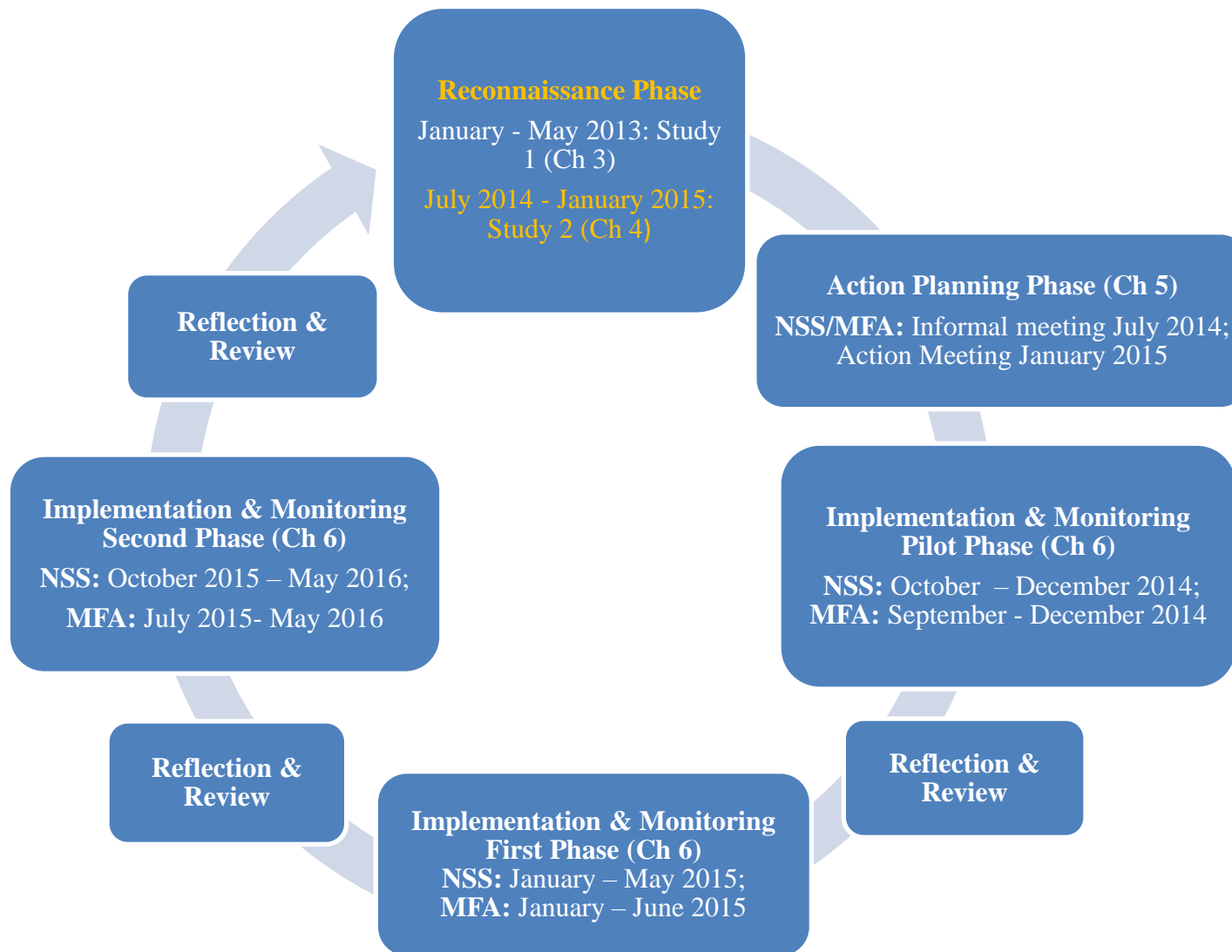


Figure 4.1: The Action Research Cycle Study 2

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter Three, the challenges faced by young Maltese players who migrated to play professional football overseas were discussed and evaluated as part of the reconnaissance phase of the action research project. The next phase of the action research project is to explore the perceptions of a range of key stakeholders (i.e., parents of current young national team players, parents of young players who have already experienced a migratory transition, head coaches of top nurseries, and MFA and NSS coaches) on the results obtained from the reconnaissance phase that explored the challenges experienced by Maltese players and the support that can be provided in preparation for future migratory transitions.

4.2 Methodology: Focus Groups

This part of the action research project made use of focus groups as the method of data collection. Focus groups have been described as organised group discussions on a single theme or set of themes, hence the term ‘focus’ (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Robson, 2002). They came about thanks to market research, since many consumer decisions were made in a social, group setting (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995). They are now a popular method of data collection in various fields of applied social research and have been successfully used within sport and exercise. For example, Harwood, Drew and Knight (2010) used focus groups made up of parents of young footballers in their study of parental stressors in three professional youth football club academies.

A focus group is a well-targeted and designed meeting (Breakwell et al., 1995) and has been defined as “an exercise in group dynamics and the conduct of the group, as well as the interpretation of results obtained must be understood within the context of group interaction” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990 p. 7). Therefore, during focus groups, there is

group interaction to generate data (Bloor et al., 2001) and the conversational aspect of focus groups is seen as fundamental to this technique of data collection (Fern, 2001). Although the researcher asks initial questions to stimulate responses, the aim is for participants to discuss their thoughts together on the topic at hand, and to get closer to participants' understanding of and perspectives on certain issues (Breakwell et al., 1995). In that sense, focus groups aim to bring about two forms of evidence, which are interrelated; the way the people in the group interact and the content which is discussed. The former looks into the thoughts and attitudes of the individual and also how people interact with each other (Bloor et al., 2001).

Sparkes & Smith (2014) in their critique of focus groups come up with a number of strengths and weaknesses of this method of data collection. In their list of strengths they speak about focus groups bringing about more impulsive and passionate views than individual interviews. Focus groups allow for a lively dialogue amongst participants and examine the social interactions not only between participants but also the interactions of the moderator. Power is diffused among the participants and the moderator and participants have control over the content and direction of the focus group discussions. Focus groups can also create the opportunity where participants validate their experiences and challenge themselves and others to look at different things as well as allowing unspoken rules and expectations to be exposed. Individual as well as group empowerment and change may be enhanced. The weaknesses of focus groups include the fact that, some participants may not want to share sensitive issues in a group and also one individual may dominate the discussion and, therefore, others are not heard. Thus, transcribing may be tough due to people possibly speaking at the same time. Here, the moderator needs to skilfully negotiate to draw out the views of reticent participants. Ethical issues may also arise as it may be difficult to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Setting up a focus group meeting, to get a group of people on the same day

and at the same time, may be difficult and time-consuming. There may be no-shows and so one should remind participants a day or so before.

Group interviews and individual interviews could have been conducted. However, in group interviews, all participants are asked the same question and there is no interaction (Bloor et al. 2001). In individual interviews, although there is in depth probing, confidential information may emerge which otherwise would not in a group (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999), however, if the interviewee is nervous about the interview this might affect the quality of the data gathered. Moreover, since there were a great number of people who the researcher wanted involved, focus groups were seen as the most effective method of data collection in this study.

The open-ended group discussion is guided by the researcher, and usually lasts between an hour or two, possibly more. There are usually eight to twelve participants, though smaller groups have been used too. What is of interest is whether groups should be homogenous or heterogeneous. Homogenous groups have a similar background and experience, which help communication, promote sharing of ideas, help participants feel safe when expressing concerns, and may show similarity in their views. Heterogeneous groups differ in their background or position, and this can stimulate the discussion, as well as inspire other participants in the group to think differently, but may risk power imbalances, can lead to disrespect of the opinions of others and can lead to a dominant participant damaging the group work (Brown, 1999). In this study, the focus groups were homogeneous within their particular focus group, in that several groups consisted of parents of the U17 national team (born 1998). However, there were other homogeneous groups, namely, of parents of players who have already made the migration, of head coaches of various nurseries, and of MFA and NSS stakeholders.

4.2.1 The Moderator

The person running a focus group is usually referred to as the moderator or facilitator. His or her job is to regulate proceedings, keep within certain ethical bounds, and facilitate matters by helping the group session run effectively. One needs to keep a balance between an active and a passive role. The latter involves making encouraging gestures to show interest but not direct the discussion as such, while the former involves the moderator listening attentively to the participants' comments and using these to build the discussion (Hennink, 2014). The moderator needs to create an interest in, and a discussion of, a topic of his/her interest without leading the group to reinforce any pre-existing expectations or confirm a prior hypothesis (Sim, 1998). The moderator in this study, however, at times, needed to take on more of an active role so as to keep the discussion from going out of point. Being a moderator in a focus group held for research purposes may be difficult for some professionals. This is not a support group and those in the helping professions, such as psychologists, need to be aware of this so as to keep to the task at hand; that of gathering the relevant data for the study being conducted (Brown, 1999). Video-taping may be used; however, this may be seen as obtrusive, and for this reason, it was decided not to film the focus groups, since the participants were not comfortable with it when asked. Audio-taping is recommended, although this may at times affect the working of the group. It is also good to take notes as sometimes the recording does not turn out well due to outside noises or participants speaking over each other or in a low voice (Brown, 1999).

4.2.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis of focus groups follows the general principles for qualitative data analysis (Robson, 2002). However, one must keep note of the group dynamics in focus groups. One has to be careful not to interpret absence of dissenting voices as showing

consensus and thus it is important to remain alert to the group dynamics and communication patterns when conducting the focus groups and probe individual members if the need is felt. Before collecting the data, one needs to think about data analysis, as there are several implications for the analysis of large amounts of qualitative interview data. One may not need to transcribe everything, but may pick out relevant passages and one must also note down the summary notes taken during the focus group (Robson, 2002). Transcriptions of the focus groups were analysed using the principles of content analysis (Scanlan et al., 1989a; Côté et al., 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the same data analysis procedure used when conducting interviews and as described in Chapter Three.

4.2.3 Pilot Study

It is necessary to conduct a pilot study so as to obtain comments on how the interview questions came across to the participants. Thus, one can revise the question structure; decide whether more questions need to be included while others removed. A pilot study also helps the moderator learn about his or her effectiveness and whether one needs to modify the amount of involvement in the focus group (Breen, 2006). The pilot study was conducted on Thursday 10th July 2014 at 10.00 am and lasted for a total of 77 minutes. The pilot study was conducted with five staff members of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) (four males and one female). Three were parents; one was a coach (and President of one of the smaller football clubs in Malta), whilst the other was involved in national team coaching and also played football for a short while in a foreign country. The study was conducted in one of the classrooms at the college. Chairs were set up in a circular fashion and participants were handed out a copy of the slides. Two Dictaphones were used, one on one side of the circle and the other on the other side. Participants were informed of the structure of the focus group and that this was a pilot. Ethical issues were also discussed.

From this pilot study a number of factors came out which needed to be taken into consideration for the actual focus groups of the study. These included, the importance of telling participants at the beginning of the focus group to give everyone a chance to discuss and not to talk over each other, especially too, due to the recording; and to keep to the point as at times the discussion became so heated that participants were discussing other issues not directly related to the subject. In fact, the question of, to what extent to report on group dynamics and individual thoughts arose. Also too, the explanation of the slides seemed important to the researcher but the participants were too keen to talk; possibly they were to be let to look at the slides and prompted with an example. However, the question of how far could the researcher probe, as well as the need to focus on ‘what can we do?’ came up. The questions in the slides needed to be more pronounced. One participant also probed whether there was too much material. After discussing with the supervisory team, it was decided that only one or two quotes were to be used to help the participants understand better what was being discussed.

4.2.4 Participants and Logistics

Focus Groups were conducted from July to October 2014 with one last focus group with NSS and MFA coaching staff, taking place in January 2015. These lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were held in the Board Room at the Malta Football Association Technical Centre. The last focus group was held at the Malta National Sports School. Focus groups were audio recorded with the use of two Dictaphones, one on each side of the table for more clarity when transcribing. The necessary participant information sheets and consent forms were presented to the focus group participants for completion prior to the focus group commencing. Table 4.1 on the next page depicts the participants of the focus groups.

Table 4.1: Study 2: Focus Group Participants

Focus Groups	Participants	Males	Females	Invited to participate
Focus Group 1 (FG1)	Parents of MFA U17 national team (at the time of conducting focus group) (born 1998)	2	3	10
Focus Group 2 (FG2)	Parents of MFA U17 national team	2	4	10
Focus Group 3 (FG3)	Parents of MFA U17 national team	3	0	10
Focus Group 4 (FG4)	Parents of MFA U17 national team	3	2	10
Focus Group 5 (FG5)	Head coaches of top nurseries	6	0	8
Focus Group 6 (FG6)	Parents of young players who have already experienced migration	2	2	8
Focus Group 7 (FG7)	MFA/NSS coaches	3	1	6

Parents of all the MFA U17 team (born 1998) were invited to participate in Focus Groups one to four. Parents of five players were allocated in each of these four focus groups making it possible for a maximum of 10 parents to attend each focus group. Out of the twenty-two players that made up the team, parents of two of the U17 players were invited to attend with focus group six since their son had already experienced a migratory transition abroad. Parents of three players could not attend. In FG (5) five there were six head coaches. Eight had been invited, but one was unable to make it or send anyone instead whilst the other nursery never acknowledged the invitation to participate in the focus group. In FG (7) seven, three of the coaches are full time coaches at the NSS, with two of them having high ranking coaching jobs with top football clubs in Malta. The other coach, practices at both the MFA as well as the NSS. Names have been changed to protect the identity of the focus group participants.

4.2.5 Construction of the Focus Group Schedule

The dominant themes that emerged from Study One were translated into an organised and understandable format. Here it is important to emphasize that while dominant themes from Study One informed the focus group, all the findings of Study One were covered in order to provide more trustworthiness during the process. Nothing of importance was ‘lost’ from Study One to Study Two as can be seen in the detail provided in the results and discussion section of this chapter. A power point presentation, with hand-outs, was developed and five specific slides were formulated to guide and facilitate discussion (see Table 4.2 below and copy of slides in appendix). These slides highlighted a number of issues brought up by Maltese players who had made the migration to play professional football overseas. The focus groups were conducted in a way as to present the results of Study One to focus group participants and to seek their thoughts on the results of this study, as well as to suggest ways to prepare younger players better for migration.

Table 4.2: Content and flow of the focus group (Full slides can be found in Appendix B)

Slide 1: Introduction Purpose of focus group; role of the researcher; aims; structure and guidelines of the focus group; consent forms and confidentiality
Slide 2: The migration of Maltese Football Players Exploration of Study 1; aims of this study; methodology
Slide 3: Challenges of Migration Homesickness; Lifestyle skills; Environmental/Cultural factors; Changing room culture
Slide 4: Maltese Culture Mentality; Mummy’s boys; Maltese lifestyle; Being from Malta (identity)
Slide 5: Support Parents; Sport Psychology Support; Club/MFA support
Conclusion and Summary To enable clarification of discussion and responses

4.3 Results and Discussion of the Focus Groups

The themes that emerged from these focus groups can be seen in the table for Focus Groups Study Two on the next page. The main themes that emerged were: *a) the need to*

Table 4.3: General Dimension and Higher Order Themes Focus Groups Study 2

Prepare players better for transitions - Developing mental and lifestyle skills	Provide Social Support	Organise Activities	MFA/Club investment	Parent awareness/education
Develop Mentality/ Attitude – (discipline/sacrifice, time management, responsibility & independence skills)	Parent	Live in/ Training camp/boot camp	Club structure and style of play	Lifestyle management
Transition awareness/education	Family	Army training	Coaching standards and professionalism	Allowing children freedom
Develop mental skills (self-confidence, communication & integration skills, goal-setting, dealing with anxiety)	School	Exchange	MFA to send players abroad together and monitor national team players abroad	Transitional challenges
National pride	Club	Work with other FA's	Improve level of league (higher standard of foreign players & U19's league)	Form G
Language	Peer	Youth awards	Mentality/ Mental skills training	
Visit foreign club beforehand	MFA	Talk by role model	Investment (resources)	
		Tournaments abroad		

prepare players better for transitions by developing mental and lifestyle skills, (b) the need to organise activities that may help prepare young players for migration, (c) the need to provide social support, (d) the need for investment from the football clubs/MFA, and (e) the importance of parental awareness and education on transitions. Pseudonyms' have been used to protect the participants' identity. Italics have been used to depict the identified strategies that emerged from the focus groups.

4.3.1 Preparing players for migration: developing lifestyle and mental skills

The focus groups were received well; there was good participation, and parents and coaches felt comfortable discussing the issues that were brought forward. One of the major factors brought to attention was the fact that our young players need *to develop lifestyle and mental skills* to help them through the transitions they will have to face, and in particular, to help them through migratory transitions to overseas clubs if they have that opportunity. It was seen (FG3) that

there is such a huge difference in *mentality (between foreign and Maltese footballers)*...foreigners are ready to make sacrifices...ours are not like that. You need to prepare players for this from when they are young ...in the football life you need to make big sacrifices so that if you get selected you are ready.... you already know how to make *sacrifices*.... (Carl's dad).

Carl's dad compares foreigners to soldiers in the army; they are ready to do everything, unlike Maltese players who will try to get out of doing more work. However, "if you want to continue improving you have to make an effort; he (my son) is not up for the challenge." He goes on to say that the MFA needs to work on the players' mentality as Maltese players will already be thinking of when they are coming back for a holiday before they have even gone abroad. Players need to have the courage not to come back. In fact, George's mum

(FG6) said that her son found it difficult to settle into the new club abroad and when he came back to Malta for the Christmas break, he didn't want to go back.

Players need to make a *sacrifice* to succeed, however “psychology seems to be the problem.... The mind is the main problem, that's what it all boils down to (Michael's mum, FG4).” Maltese players' thinking may at times be problematic and, as George's mum (FG6) stated, players must not be thinking that they will not succeed. When her son migrated he was afraid;

‘What if I break my leg?’ If you break it come back and study I told him; but then look how he thinks, ‘But then I will fall behind the boys in my year’ he says.

She goes on to say that her son wants to feel safe and that at 15, he was already playing in the first division. In Malta, he knows what he has; he knows he is going to play regularly and that he will do well in school like he has in previous years. Abroad, he is unsure of what he will find and whether he will succeed. Brian's dad (FG6), who was in the same focus group, is in agreement stating that 15 year old talented players (in Malta) know they can make it to the Premier League in Malta, they have it easy, but, there is no professionalism.

Players also need to be helped with *time management*, in order to cope with school and sport (Chris's dad, FG1). Moreover, another issue coach Stanley (FG7) came up with is the fact that the U17 league is played on a Tuesday and Wednesday, which means they can go out socialising as much as they want to in the weekend. When they move on to the senior team it is hard to then tell them they cannot go out to socialise due to matches.

For Maltese youth it is a standard that they need to go out in the weekend, and not just on one day...Friday, Saturday and Sundayand sometimes even on Wednesday!

Besides, parents put too much pressure on schooling to the extent that sport, as well as *life skills*, especially, how to get on with others, suffer (Angelo's dad, FG1). This can be seen

in the changing room with the players, at times, going out as losers before they have even started the match; self-confidence is low. Being a coach too, he believes that this comes from the group mentality in the dressing room; something the coaches need to work on. We need to believe in ourselves and, even if we are five nil down, as an individual you need to show what you can do. However, we need to help young players develop confidence from when they are young (Angelo's dad, FG1). Coach Stanley (FG7) is in agreement with this, saying that we are also too impressed by foreigners.

A Maltese club that gets a Spanish player they say, 'because this one is Spanish'. He might be a matador not a football player...but he is Spanish and this influences us.

Maltese children, also, do not have enough *competitive drive* inside them

since in Malta, in football, we always lose so, I imagine, inside them ...lots of children think they will lose ... they don't have the same fighting spirit as abroadeven the national team They play a good half, then they get a goal and they stop...down the drain.... (Bernard's mum, FG1).

Brian's dad (FG6) believes the problem is demotivation and players need to be capable of *motivating themselves*. This was also put forward by George's mum (FG6). Her son seemed to find the club he was at abroad as too good with him; it was not a challenge it seems, "maybe it was another walk in the park for him".

However, Coach Jeffrey questions whether they return because of early burnout. He believes there is a lot of pressure in nurseries and this may prevent young players from speaking out, as others concur, they will be afraid of repercussions' (Bernard's mum, FG1) and they suffer from low *self-esteem* too (Daniel's mum, FG4). Even their posture needs working on as, at times, one can really see that they are afraid and do not believe enough in themselves (Michael's mum, FG4). However, Thomas's dad (FG3) believes that his son and the other players at the MFA academy feel quite confident because they form part of the

national team academy. Nevertheless, he questions how his son will feel abroad when he is a no-one in particular. “Unless his mind-set is good, his confidence may be affected”.

The fact that Malta is a small country and no one abroad seems to know much about it may also affect confidence levels, coach Conrad (FG7) stated. However, he believes this will not be overcome with anything except by football itself; “we will have a player of whom they will say, ‘This one is Maltese, but he is good, there is nothing to be done about it.’”

Players also need to *learn more about the place they are going to* (Daniel’s mum, FG4), they need, at least, to search on the internet to find out more about it. One of the coaches believes that we need to introduce them beforehand to what they are going to find, possibly by taking them there for a training camp or something similar. Kyle’s dad (FG2), in fact, questioned whether the MFA is realistically informing the players what there is out there. However, what his wife is worried about is whether her son is *responsible and independent* enough to cook, clean and wash his clothes: “I never got him to do these tasks; this is like something that comes upon you suddenly...we need to make sure that when it does happen they are prepared.”

Carl’s dad (FG3) believes that when the aspirant players go to the MFA straight from school, the MFA should train them to do extracurricular tasks, like cooking and other chores. They need to face challenges which they do not enjoy doing as they might need to do similar tasks when abroad. Players need to be taught young how to overcome homesickness, and how to obtain life skills. However, it needs to come from the nurseries too.

Home is still home.... Parents still give in to their children.... Children, nowadays, have a mind of their own and they decide what they want to do but, if you give them at least the tools to make it, they’ve already got the raw material which is their talent. But it’s not only that ...there are also the other key factors which are just as important (Brian’s dad, FG6).

He goes on to say that it's useless having a good footballer if he then cannot handle homesickness, or keep house. Coach Peter believes that the problem of nurseries/academies in Malta is that we are not preparing them enough, *transition awareness/education* is lacking, but this is not the only thing- the Maltese way of life may be an issue. Malta is small, distances are small, and mum takes her child everywhere, so he doesn't need to think. Players suffer (Bernard's mum FG1) when the place they go to is very different from their previous club/country and this is then even more apparent when it comes to integrating on the pitch. Parents also felt that players should *go and see the club* before committing themselves to moving there. At the first thought of moving abroad to a professional club it all sounds exciting, however few realise exactly what they will find there. So, players need to be prepared in terms of language, geography, practices to expect when abroad,

because, otherwise they feel like a fish out of the water...maybe they know some of the language, what their day will consist of, so that it does not come as a jolt when they get there (Thomas's dad, FG 3).

A number of parents also believe their son should be familiar with one or two *foreign languages* so that they are prepared if they do migrate. It could be just greetings or catchphrases to start off with, to be able to communicate, even on the football ground itself (Michele's dad FG4). Dino's mum (FG2) went on to say:

I had to give my son private lessons in Italian so that if they ever call him up he would be able to function.... You also need to support them when handling personal self-esteem if they come back after not succeeding in trials abroad.

Another idea that came up in focus group four was the importance of *instilling a degree of national pride*. Michael's mum said

Even in training sessions...I am not saying they should sing the national anthem but there needs to be some kind of perceived group solidarity ...like 'Forza Malta!' (Come on Malta!) ...we are going out to train and we wish each other well...to show we have the 'balls'.

Her husband went on to say that he believes "the MFA needs to see how to put Malta higher on the map": when sending a player abroad the MFA needs to give that player some standing.

4.3.2 Preparing players for migration: Practical educational activities

In order to help young players be better prepared for migration, it was important to try and replicate similar situations so that the players can start to understand better what they might expect when migrating. Parents and coaches mentioned a number of activities that could be implemented, one being *live-ins* (i.e., *creating an opportunity for students to live together and understand what it means to live away from home and from their family, be responsible for themselves and their belongings and so on*); this was mentioned in four of the parent focus groups.

Maybe they could live together, learn to do some things. You should provide them with the food, but they need to do everything else on their own, like scouts. You check their moves but you let them fend for themselves. They would have to help each other because, maybe, some are better than others in some things....they learn through each other's experience (Bernard's mum, FG1).

Parents in focus group two were a bit more extreme in their views, stating sardonically, that we should cast the players on an island, leave them there for a week conceding them only food, pair them to monitor them well, and see what they could come up with since they will learn more from their own experiences. They would also have to clean, do the laundry and be forbidden to have any communication with the outside world. Michael's dad (FG4) stated

They might experience homesickness, as they will be cut off from their routine, but they will get used to living a bit more on their own...even though they will be in a group ...we have to be tough on them

Exchange visits were also seen as a possibility, with foreigners invited to train with Maltese players, thus displaying their more professional attitude. Sending Maltese players overseas would also help them understand the culture, mentality and nature of training abroad. The *MFA should also work with other FA's to exchange ideas, for some form of exchange*, “to help players acclimatise to the world of football outside Malta ... through EU funds there is a possibility ... (Thomas's dad)”.

Training camps and tournaments also need to be organised both in Malta and abroad. Head coach Tony (FG5) stated

The MFA need to totally change the mentality of going for tournaments abroad ... they need to go more frequently and at a certain level ...and not simply go on trials ...send them to take part in tournaments and players are chosen from there.

As Sicily is just round the corner (Coach Jeffrey, FG5); one could possibly even take up the U19's regularly (coach Hilary, FG5). Head coach Matthew (FG5) believes that having players go abroad regularly for tournaments will help the players develop the mentality needed to migrate successfully. However, two other coaches, Steve and Godwin, believe that one shouldn't just send players abroad but that head coaches and clubs need to invest in coaches, resources and facilities in the hope that our clubs become good enough that you then do not need to send players abroad. Other activities that should perhaps be organised include *visits to the army/boot camps* and for as head coach Matthew who is also a soldier, wryly stated, “a month in the army or six months recruitment will surely develop character.

Young players should also have *talks and discussions with player role models* who have experienced the migratory transition and who can realistically tell other players what it's all about. Thomas's dad (FG3) also focuses on the fact that football is about character, "I feel there is some need for recognition ...I see football not just for what it is ...for self-confidence, team work, character building." He goes on to say that there should be some sort of recognition for players' achievements such as *Youth FA awards* so as to motivate players. Despite all the effort the MFA are putting into their grassroots there needs to be more attention given to this and maybe other factors such as sportsmanship.

4.3.3 Providing (pre and post) social support

Young players looking to move to play professional football overseas may need support from various areas. Participants of the various focus groups spoke about *parent and family support, peer support and also support from the school, club and from the MFA*. Younger players are especially likely to rely on *parental support* since they still depend, to some extent, on their parents. However, this may not be so easy for parents who have no knowledge of what the professional football world is like, and Nigel's dad (FG2) says;

For me when your son says he wants to become a footballer its like saying he wants to become an astronaut... can a Maltese person really become a professional footballer? To me it's as likely as a Maltese person becoming a football player, so it's very tough...I told him I would not stop him, I would try and help him as best I could. I would be behind him all the time even though I do not follow football at all.

In FG6 for parents of players who had already made the migratory transition, it emerged that it may be necessary for parents to spend some time abroad with the young player to help him settle in and not feel homesick. Brian's mother stated "I used to spend one month in the

summer with him, to cook and help a bit. We used to be the four of us.” And the above statement seemed to have an impact on George’s mum’s mind.

We never did that for him.... We always sent him alone We just threw him in it.
At 15 he packed his bags and left We didn’t even go with him the first time he left.... We weren’t always there and that is what we did wrong ...it was our mistake.

She goes on to say that she and her partner told him

Stay here by yourself for the time being and we’ll move in September ...but he didn’t want to stay there alone Because we didn’t want to move our daughter out of school and relocate the family.

Coach Conrad (FG7) believes in fact that

The few players who were successful abroad either had their partner or their wife with them those whose wife did not support them had more difficulties.....
Because this (while pointing to the lifestyle skills slide), although it looks small, is one of the biggest problems ...everyone is used to finding things ready....

However coach Peter (FG7) believes that

once you prepare them well they should be fine, this is like in nature, the hen looks after its chicks but then it lets them go...that’s it ...so until they are old enough you do everything for them but once they leave, they’re gone

George’s and Brian’s parents (FG6) believe too, that players should have the *support of their own peers* in order to succeed. They should encourage each other to look at improving their career and not try to hold them back from leaving the island. As Thomas’s dad (FG3) stated:

They need to encourage each other, so that when they see one of them going abroad, instead of teasing him they should support him. And the player himself cannot compare his stay abroad to a prison while his peers are living it up in Paceville (referring to Malta's night spot). They need to encourage him for in a couple of weeks he would settle in.

This parent went on to say that these young players need role models, players they can look up to, a colleague who has already succeeded, and he asks whether “these players who play abroad ever talk to these younger hopefuls about the difficulties they faced. A Maltese can relate better to a Maltese”. This parent also hopes that there might be the opportunity for two players to enrol at a club overseas, initially. He believes that the risks for them to return back would be less. Head coaches (FG5) also believe this could help, with one saying

The MFA need to come to some sort of agreement with some serious clubs...of a certain level..... To send two or three at a time...so there will always be another Maltese ...same ideas.... same culture.... same time ...the problem of feeling homesick is going to decrease.

Another coach mentioned that he was taking three young players to Serbia, in a remote area,

If they get homesick they can turn to each other and we introduce them to the bitter pill gradually ... because if a player goes on his own he certainly will not acclimatise himself to that lifestyle immediately.

The support should, however, also be provided by *the club and the MFA*. Angelo's dad (FG1) spoke about his son's experience when on a trial where the other players were saying things behind his back and did not make him feel welcome. His son felt very cut off and alone, especially because there was no Wi-Fi and he could not communicate with anyone. It is

important for the players to be welcomed (Chris's dad, FG1), however, we know that the environment in football clubs can be hostile. Carl's dad (FG3) stated that if the players are not happy, it is difficult for them to perform, and he questioned whether there are sport psychologists present. Maltese clubs may also not know how to give the support needed to players leaving the island: "Maltese clubs do not have any idea... and they do not have the resources to help". Moreover, "Maltese clubs are not too keen to send their good players abroad (Nigel's dad FG2)". This may cause a lot of frustration for the player (Thomas's dad, FG3). Brian's mum (FG6) states;

now that he feels he is settled down with his girlfriend he wants to go but they are keeping him here ...it's not fair ... it's a pity that he is losing this opportunity ... it's sad...we're really sad ...

Parents stated that the MFA also needs to keep tabs on the players playing abroad and, in fact, coaches (FG7) were happy to report that this does take place

The MFA Technical Director contacts them every now and then What I can say is that the players who trained with me and went abroad find it right I receive messages nearly every day....they find it helps them.....as MFA, of players who form part of the national team, I believe that, not that MFA personnel visit them, but they remain in touch directly so that if there is a problem they can help the player (Coach Peter).

Liam's dad (FG4) however, believes, that the MFA should have someone who would go around from place to place checking out that the players are fine in the country where they happen to be. Coach Conrad (FG7) not only follows his national team players who play in Malta, but he also follows those who play abroad: "once every week or two I speak to

him, through Skype. I follow his matches...and when the national team coach asks about it I tell him ...it's my work."

With younger players, support must also come from the *school*. In Malta, education is seen to be very important, much more important than sport and Angelo's school, at times, did not allow him to go abroad (for tournaments) (Angelo's mum, FG1). Bernard's mum (FG1) also felt a lot of pressure from the school;

they wanted him to stop football ...because he has his O levels ...and I told them I do not agree with you ...there is still this mentality ... even though the school is very sport oriented.... individual teachers are a problem.

According to coach Godwin, (FG5) who is also a teacher in a secondary school, players should first do their A levels and then migrate, so that they will always have another area to fall back on if they do not succeed as footballers. However, Coach Matthew questioned this saying that it would be too late for a player. Coach Godwin believes that

when a player is capable and because our culture is what it is ...mummy's boys, daddy's boys etc. the students who would have got their A levels are more mature.

George's parents (FG6) faced a situation where the country their son was in did not provide him with adequate schooling and he came back to Malta to sit for his O levels. Their son feels that, "I might not make it in football, so I might as well stay here and use my brains and do sixth form". 'I feel like shaking him up' his mother said". He felt that over there he was not training enough and had too much time on his hands because the educational system was totally different. He was not ready to throw away 11 years of studying and George's mother went on to say that

you don't blame him for thinking like thatand he got very good grades even though he missed the first four months of the scholastic year So what do you pick ...you have two pluseshe told me in school I know I can make it ...there it's like

Daniel's mum (FG4), however, probed the possibility of having schooling online, directly from Maltese schools, so that they could retain the same level of learning as previously.

4.3.4 Strategic development within clubs and the MFA

Parents and coaches believed that *more needed to be done by the clubs and the MFA in preparing the players better for migration*. However, the general feeling was that the clubs do not know much on what needs to be done. As Nigel's dad (FG2) states:

It's difficult for clubs to do something because Maltese clubs do not have any idea of what to do...and they do not have the resources to help Besides, if one is a good player will the club see how to send him abroad?

Whilst Kyle's dad (FG2) goes on to say:

It's more the situation that of not supporting them; clubs aren't doing anything about this...they do not have the knowledge. It all depends on money and powerwe are lucky our children are at the MFA ...you can see the difference between club training and training here....

He adds on that from this present group of players we are seeing results and you can also see the good level in league matches. However, Nigel's dad (FG2) is worried that if after the U17 finals held in May 2014 the MFA do not keep these players and keep working with them, then it will all be in vain; "If the MFA has made this investment in them it cannot let them go and leave them in the hands of the club." Sean's mum (FG2) is of the opinion that the mistake that happened in the top teams was that the clubs thought they would be better

off training the players themselves however as she affirms “I had to insist on my child to go to *training with the club*, he didn’t enjoy it, not like here at the MFA”.

The coaches too question the ability and *professionalism* of the clubs. Coach Matthew states that, when he first started with the club he is now at he found a brick wall. He still feels that if you cannot work with the administration then you have a problem.

To be in the premier league you need to be professional, plus have the course (qualifications) ... we did the Director for Youth Coaching course... everyone in it put in their input....how to implement it is the problem.....the administrators do not think on the same wavelength. I think there are a lot of clubs, that every time you try to say something about the nurseries, the big clubs make it clear that they care only about how they are going to win now to go up to the Premier league, Champions League, Europa league.....

He goes on to say that he believes there are too many clubs and that there is a need for a well- structured set up. “The clubs need to be more organised and have a *philosophy, a style of play*,” says coach Jeffrey (FG5), whilst for coach Hilary, clubs need to work with other satellite clubs. However, he questions which club will accept this. Coach Peter (FG7) feels very strongly about this; for him, if we do not *change the structure of the clubs* then we can forget all about it.

If the structure of Maltese nurseries does not change, part is nursery and part is financed as an academy where the kids come and understand fully what it means to train football, and not just because their parents dumped them there, we have no chance. If the structure does not change in that way, we have no chance. In Malta we are at the stage where we need to have ten academies made up of the top footballers.

He believes this is the way forward, just like England did. Academies demand requisites and if the club does not satisfy them it cannot qualify for an academy. He goes on to say:

Today we have 54 clubs... 54 clubs??? (in an aggressive tone). We can get some clubs to have an academy for we cannot say that clubs can do it on their own, because they cannot. For sure not. In Cyprus, the government was involved in it. The government needs to say that we will finance the clubSo, why, in Malta, haven't we yet accepted that we can have top clubs and then other clubs....

It also upsets him that a player has a full time contract with the club but has still to go out to work in the mornings....

You can't do it. I am sorry... If we are not going to draw the line....even if we get to do these academies....whoever aspires to be in the academy needs to earn his place...there will be 8-10 clubs only and if you want to be one of them, there is the structure...it's like for whoever aspires to attend the sport school, NSS. So, the MFA needs to use the knife (a Maltese expression for taking drastic measures) or else we will remain the amateurs we are...pub teams..... There is nothing else to be done.....and this is the one thing I want from them, to decide (here, this coach, who is a very calm and soft spoken person by nature becomes aggressive and frustrated)...either we remain pub teams or else we have a structure..... But then again, with the structure, someone will get hurt...there is nothing to be done.

He believes that there are too many clubs and the people administering them are not professional, and thus clubs are experiencing many difficulties. So, for him, this is where we have to start from: changing the structure of the clubs and then help the parents to work with their children at home. He goes on to say that "As long as we remain with this nonsense, parameters etc., this is the way we will remain...isn't that the way we are going to remain?"

It is in the hands of the MFA to decide the prerequisites for such academies (Coach Peter, FG7). He gets greatly upset when he goes to a small village club and sees one talented child, from a group of 35, who, however, cannot improve because of the level present at that club. These prerequisites are important because if a club does not have enough coaches who have an A license, they cannot run an academy and they cannot have a license. Coach Stanley (FG7) is in agreement with having around 8-10 academies with similar characteristics to the National Sports School where the children attend school and also do football training. This is the ideal, still, coach Conrad (FG7) believes that “with all due respect...certain administrators do not have the skill...I think they make life difficult”.

The *level of coaching* needs to improve too (Coach Steve, FG5; parents from all focus groups) and we need to pay attention to the *qualifications* of certain coaches as some seem to find it easy to go abroad and get any license they want. Coach Steve also believes that there aren't enough coaches to make the training sessions as intense as they should be. George's guardian (FG6) went on to say that when George first went abroad on a trial, the players would be divided according to skill level and body size and coaches worked with them on their weak points. Maltese coaches need to do more of this. Coaches also have a lot to learn in terms of *communication*; “they need to communicate in a more assertive...positive manner....with discipline there needs to be encouragement (Michael's mum, FG4)”. Her husband goes on to say that Maltese coaches need to be full-timers and adopt even more discipline.

They are afraid to impose their discipline because of the parents around them or I don't know what There is no discipline.... And discipline does not mean how much you shout.

However, discipline may be difficult to achieve in Maltese clubs:

A lot of it is the culture of our training grounds...there is the social life and the training....so the parents are always there ...maybe they have a bottle of beer whilst they are at it (Liam's dad, FG4)

and, possibly, this portrays a more relaxed atmosphere than certain coaches and parents would like.

Participants in the focus groups believe that, apart from the level of coaching and clubs, the *level of the leagues also needs to be improved*, with coach Steve (FG5) saying "it's the worst league in the world", with even the *level of foreigners* being really poor. He asks whether we are not able to produce a player better than these foreigners in 10 years' time, his aim being not to need foreign players at all. He goes on to say that children do not have a good example to look up to because the foreigners who come to Malta do not have the mentality of professional players since "they becomes Maltese too readily...you see players drinking beer in pre-season...that's how they become."

Coaches (FG5) recounted their experiences with the teams at the UEFA U17 finals, with one coach who was with the Swiss team saying that, in Switzerland, they do not allow their young players to go abroad because their level of second division is already good enough for a 17 year old to play in and improve. They also get very good contracts which stops them from looking elsewhere. Another coach who was with the Portuguese team also found that in Portugal players remain at home when young because the level is very good. The Maltese coaches, however, shared strong feelings on the *U19 squads* in Malta. As coach Jeffrey (FG5) put it, "we cannot remain having a head coach only till U17 and then throw away the kids ...there is no continuity after U17." He would like to conduct research on the U17's league and trace what happens to the players after ten years. He believes that 90% of them will be out of football. Coach Matthew (FG5) agrees that no one seems to be looking

out for them and that it is not good for them that they move from the U17's directly to the seniors.

However, it is not just the level of play which is not up to standard. Coaches believe that it is not acceptable that in the Premier league matches the game is stopped because the ball is deflating or because it is dirty, the pitch is not in a satisfactory state, the turf is not wet enough or it needs to be cut shorter. To improve performance from the players as well as spectator attendance there is the need to ameliorate the whole situation.

It's utterly frustrating for me, in April, to see the condition of the turf and all the balls getting stuck in it....so, how can the tempo of our game go up...we cannot

(Coach Peter, FG7)

The *mentality of Maltese clubs, administrators, coaches and players needs to change* if Maltese football is to improve. According to Liam's dad (FG4), it's not only the foreign players who become Maltese in tendency, but even a foreign coach, who spends two years or so in Malta, becomes Maltese. Here, in Malta, we do not take note of detail (Coach Steve, FG5); "In Malta the player goes down to train if he feels like it", and there is not enough competition. "The children in nurseries here already think they have made it, that they are the best on the island (Coach Peter, FG7)." Coach Hilary (FG5) goes on to say that, when coaching U17's, what used to irk him was that when the team lost it seemed as if nothing had happened, whilst George's father (FG6) believes that

there is no sense of rivalry....children do not have it... they are taught to go down to play, to do their best and that it doesn't matter if we lose ...of course it matters.... If we lose we are going to look stupid...but teach them how to be tough ...how to have the will to win.... It's not OK to loose ...but that's the culture....

A number of clubs put a lot of emphasis on the technical skills but very little on *mental preparation* (Thomas's dad, FG3). Our *mentality* "is the biggest thing we need to change, we Maltese," stated coach Matthew (FG5) and, being from Malta, "(I think) psychologically, we are small and fear not coping."

Coach Steve (FG5) sees fear in Maltese children's eyes when they play against another young player who is foreign, even if that player hardly knows how to move; "I see that as being inbuilt in us." Maltese children need to mix more with other children from all over Europe and the world. It also hurts him when people say, "I want to get foreign coaches because the Maltese coaches are not good". He, together with coach Peter (FG7), believes that the administrators are inefficient and that is where we need to start from.

From the top downwards, otherwise the situation cannot change.....the worst thing we have is our mentality...when you go into a club you know you are going to find a mentality that needs changing. We cannot expect to work just with the kids and the general mentality will somehow change ...it has to start from the top and then it will stream down (Coach Peter, FG7).

Coach Peter (FG7) believes that "here we are still afraid of 'using the knife' (taking drastic measures)...but that's what we need to do to move forward...life is all like that, with all due respect....". However, there are still too many people who are influenced by politics (close friendships or personal contacts) he states. Coach Stanley (FG7) agrees with this believing that, if everyone is professional at the top, then, without knowing it, the mentality will improve further down. Coach Peter (FG7) went on to say that *the MFA, besides working with the parents', needs to shake the children up to get them to do certain tasks* because Maltese children are too pampered. At home, parents are not preparing them enough, they have everything laid out on a plate. He sees "two things which are central...the situation of

our lifestyle and the structure of football itself in Malta.” However, if the structure is really to change it all boils down to money, “as amateurs we are never going to get anywhere...sorry...but that’s the reality, we cannot keep going around the problem (Coach Matthew, FG5).”

Furthermore, a coach cannot keep doing everything himself... be the coach, goalkeeper coach, psychologist, team manager and so on (Coach Jeffrey, FG5). Nurseries need to *invest* in the right staff, have resources and facilities, and take players to play abroad as often as possible in the weekends (Coach Godwin, FG5). The feeling is felt that if the clubs are good enough, then you don’t even need to send players abroad at all. However, if we are going to send players abroad the MFA needs to come to some *agreement with some serious foreign clubs to be able to send two or three players together at a time,*

so that there will always be another Maltese with me...same ideas.... same culture, time ...the problem of feeling homesick is going to decrease (Coach Godwin FG5).

When a player is going abroad it is imperative that all the relative personnel, who may help the player prepare for trials and for migrating, be informed;

When my son went abroad the nursery informed the club, but you need to inform the MFA too...I do not know whether there is a standard procedure or not...but I believe this needs to be done (Thomas’s dad, FG3).

The MFA needs to *keep monitoring national team players playing abroad* so that if there is a problem they can help the player, possibly even go up to visit the player, one coach concluded.

4.3.5 Parental awareness and education

Parents in Malta have a big part to play in helping their children pass through transitions; however, findings in Study One have indicated that the local culture and the lack of know-how are great obstacles on this island. Focus group participants believe that first we need to *make parents aware of certain lifestyle factors* before we can then act upon them. Chris's dad (FG1) believes that "when our children need something we should not give it to them immediately," whilst Bernard's mum (FG1) stated that if a son does take the initiative to do something at home, but does it badly, the parent should *accept that children will do things their way*. Parents shouldn't tell off their children and fix it themselves; "you have to teach the child and not do it for him because, otherwise, they will never learn."

John's mum (FG1) affirmed that her son, aged 16, leaves his dirty kit in his training bag despite her telling him to remove it over and over again. Her husband tells her to leave it there and the next day he would find the dirty one, but she feels she cannot do that. Bernard's mum (FG1) retorts to this by saying they are lazy because they always find everything ready for them. Even to go to training, just one bus ride away, they do not get up and go because they are used to getting a lift from parents: "he wouldn't go on his own and I would have to take him, and as I would have work that would mean money lost, all because of him (Chris's dad, FG1)." At his son's school they have been told not to prepare their things for them... however, mums find it harder, he said. In the second focus group, four parents were in agreement that, in Malta, children are pampered too much, emphasizing what players in study one had stated. Sean's mum (FG2) goes on to say that this is why they are then homesick

I think we Maltese are totally different from foreigners in the way we raise our children ...I think that is why they get homesick....mine isn't a mummy's boy (researcher not in agreement!) but, still, he depends on me, he tells me, 'ma get me

that' and you see me going to get it for himwe Maltese are like that, this is the way we raise our children ...so, I think they find it hard then

This mother, trying to shift the responsibility, believes that if the MFA keep on insisting on the players' personal integrity they will progress, since the word of someone outside the house carries more weight (Kyle's dad, FG2). However, Richard's mum (FG2) believes it should start from home. Still, she finds it hard not to do things for her son:

I do not work, so, sometimes, this works against meas I do everything.... I feel it is my duty since I am at home....so they find everything ready...I find it difficult to tell my husband to wash the floor when he has been working all week for me.

In fact, it was seen in these focus groups that stay-at-home mums find it even harder than those mums who work outside the home to leave their son or husband to do household chores. Kyle's dad believes his wife does too much for her son, not realising that she is there at his own beck and call. However, Michael's mum (FG4) believes that, sometimes, it's not the players fault but the problem of women in general as they are fixated on everything being in the right place, on getting things out of the way, "so, sometimes, we have to face our problem and leave things as they are". Her husband went on to say that the parents' problem is that very often they want things done their way and, if their children do it differently, parents will change it round again. Parents need to *allow their children the freedom to take decisions*; "show them once and move on. At times we impose too much our ways on themI think that is typically Maltese." He goes on to say that his generation grew up differently and were kept more at home, and though his son takes initiative at home this sometimes creates anxiety. He believes that "this is why we need to work more on the parents rather than the children." We need to let the children take the wrong decision at times;

The important thing is that he takes a decision and that is why sometimes leadership on the pitch is difficult ...because they do not take decisions for fear they will make mistakes....we put so much pressure on them that they can't make mistakeswe need to back them up....with all respect to the coaches...he tries and he might not manage ...but at least he takes a decisionwe cannot all the time say 'what did you do?' because that stops them from taking decisions (Michael's dad, FG4).

If we want to create a culture change, then parents have a role to play in this and they need to raise their children to be independent to some extent (Thomas's dad, FG3). Coaches, too, believe parents pamper their children too much and that is one thing we need to work on. We need to inform parents about what their children may experience when they go through *transitions*. However, at times, unfortunately, parents do not take any real notice of what the coach says (Coach Steve, FG5) for parents are not knowledgeable until they are taught.... "We need to be informed," George's mum insists. Her partner believes the MFA needs to inform parents, when players are still young, that their son might make it abroad and, thus, it becomes necessary to help him prepare himself in certain ways.

Parents are with their children much more than the coach is....so, parents need to be educated because ultimately they are there to put him on the right track. The MFA need to educate parents, when their son is 15 what *Form G* is all about That Form G is the biggest hurdle of every football player in Malta and it is imperative that something is done about this (George's guardian).

Form G is a form used to register an amateur player, aged 14 years or more, to a club which binds the player to that nursery and its mother club until he turns 21. Those boys, totally amateur footballers, become exclusive club assets and property – up to and beyond the age of consent, to age 21. Form G literally transforms amateur, unprotected, underage boys (and

later young adults) into club property with a price tag fixed on their backs..... At 18, a footballer should become completely released from his club so he can freely decide on whether he's happy playing there or move to some other club. Nothing should inhibit or limit the freedom towards such a decision by the new adult (Spiteri, 2011).

4.4 Summary

As can be seen from the results of the focus groups, parents and coaches are in agreement with the issues discussed by players who have made the migration and the former have come up with their own ideas on these challenges and on other issues of concern. Such issues, as discussed above, may all hinder the progression of young Maltese footballers. The focus groups conducted have helped not only to create awareness with parents and coaches of the challenges experienced by young players when migrating, but have also helped to develop strategies (both strategic and operational) that the MFA and NSS can work on, in particular, to help prepare younger players better for transitional challenges and, especially challenges of migration. Moreover, the focus group results have served to educate parents on such challenges and may have an influence on practitioner development and training to help sport psychologists and coaches develop mental toughness development in players, as suggested by Eubank, Nesti and Littlewood (2017).

The main themes that emerged in the focus groups included *the need to prepare players better for transitions by developing mental and lifestyle skills*. Parents and coaches reported that young Maltese players were not ready to make sacrifices and needed assistance in becoming more responsible and instilling a hard work ethic. Players also suffered from low self-esteem, needed help with managing their time well and also needed advice on how to handle the transition to playing overseas. This could be developed by *organising activities that may help prepare young players for migration* such as a live in, exchanges and camps

where players would live away from their parents and would need to be responsible for themselves and their belongings. The sport psychologist, together with other staff should help players understand why they are being challenged and how such challenges will help them succeed in their future goals (Eubank et al., 2017). Discussions with role models who have already made the transition to playing professionally abroad would be helpful too. Young players also *need social support* from their family, peers, the school, club, the MFA and in particular sport psychology and transition support since the transition may be a tough one. Participants in the focus groups, in fact, discussed *the need for investment from the football clubs and the MFA*; in particular, the setting up of academies which would lead to more professionalism. Better coaching qualifications, a higher level of foreign players and a better mentality in clubs were also seen as necessary. *Parental awareness and education on transitions* was one of the areas emphasized in that parents do not have enough knowledge on how to help their children cope with transitions, in particular, migratory transitions. Sport psychology practitioners may be particularly useful here in not only providing information to parents but may also be able to support them when their child passes through transitions, in particular migratory transitions. Parents felt that they needed to learn how to let go of their children and allow them the freedom to do things on their own, and thus become more independent and responsible. However, sport psychology practitioners must not only focus on the individual but must take note of the environment the individual is in and help parents reinforce key messages outside of the programme being conducted (Eubank et al., 2017).

The next chapter presents the results of the focus groups to the key strategic decision makers of the MFA and NSS in a discussion regarding the agreement and process of implementation regarding strategies to enhance opportunities for young players to move successfully through transitions (pre, during and post migration).

CHAPTER FIVE

STUDY 3: Action Planning

5.0 Study 3 Aims and Objectives

Aim: To reflect, in collaboration with the strategic decision makers at the NSS and MFA, on the results from the reconnaissance phase, with a view to creating action research change strategies to prepare young players better for migratory transitions.

Objective: To disseminate findings from the reconnaissance phase to NSS and MFA management and create action research change strategies to prepare young players better for migratory transitions.

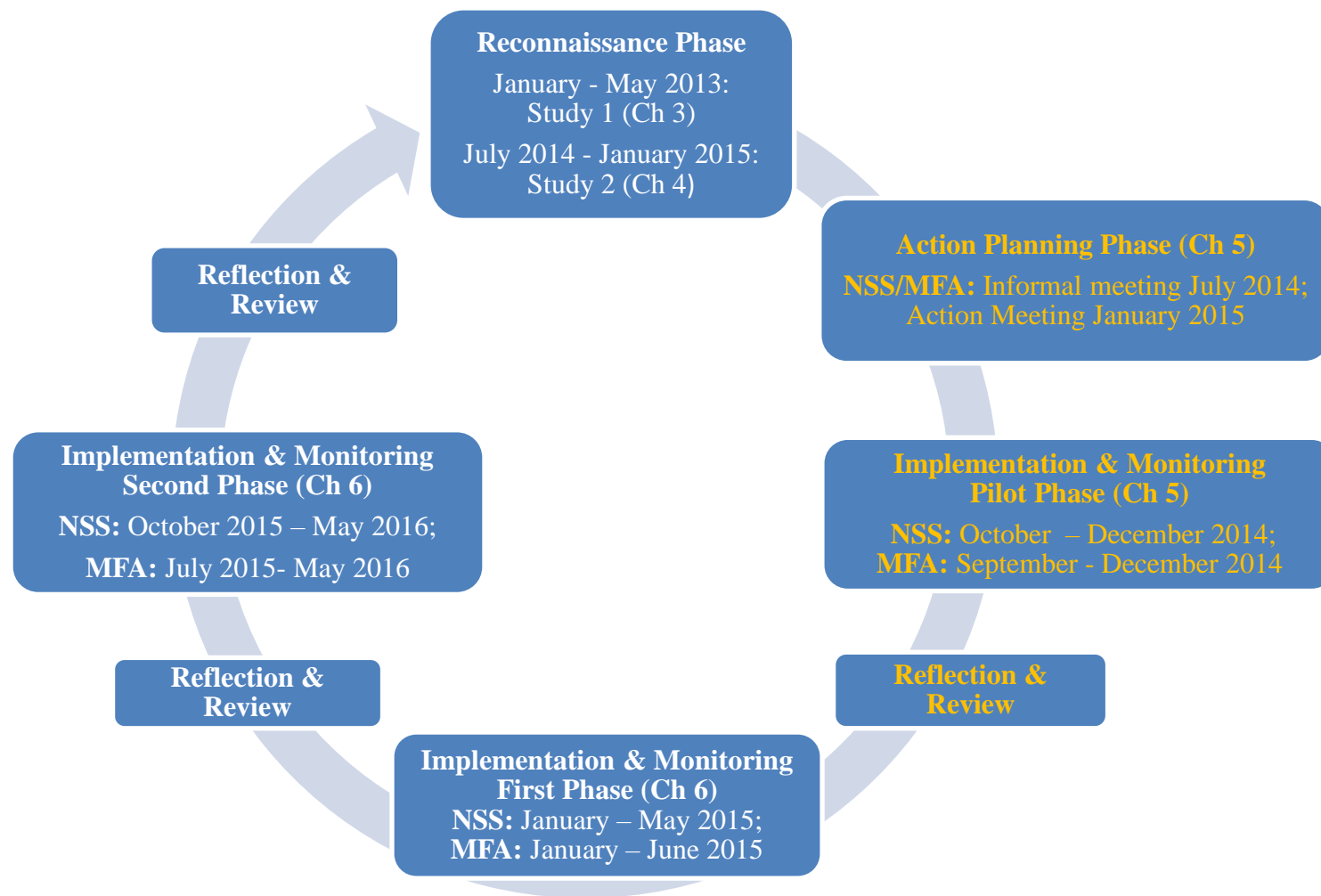


Figure 5.1: The Action Research Cycle Study 3

5.1 Action Planning – An Introduction

The aim of this phase of the action research cycle is to feedback the emerging themes from the reconnaissance phase with the Head of the NSS and parent body, as well as with the MFA Technical Director, with regards to what both organisations can implement to better prepare young Maltese players for successful migrations. The reconnaissance phase of the research (Chapter 3) focused on the challenges experienced by Maltese players when migrating to play professional football overseas. It also focused on what could be done to prepare young players for migration through focus groups with parents and coaches (Chapter 4).

The key areas highlighted included the need to provide young players with the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to succeed on the professional scene. Mental training skills, transition awareness, and psychological support needed to be emphasised, especially, through activities such as trips abroad to visit other football clubs, training camps, and live-ins. Another key area mentioned was the need for more education for parents on the challenges their children could face and how they, as parents, could help support them further. The issues of better coaching, academy systems, and more professional club set-ups were also high up on the agenda, especially for coaches.

So, it was appropriate to share the information gathered and to explore the findings with senior management at both the NSS and MFA, with a view to engaging in some form of positive change. The next section presents the findings from the discussions with the NSS Head and parent body, as well as the MFA Technical Director, on the information disseminated to them. It also looks into directions to generate action change strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the organisations. This section aims to engage the NSS and MFA management to target and agree explicit change strategies, within action meetings, to confirm plausible ways forward consistent with action research methodology.

5.2 Rationale, design and methodology

A focus group was used with the Head of NSS and parent body to present the findings of the reconnaissance phase to them and try to generate change strategies. The focus group held was similar in nature to a group discussion, with the researcher leading the group to come up with plausible change strategies. In the case of the MFA, the format used was an individual meeting, since only one participant, the Technical Director, was involved in this meeting.

The focus group with NSS stakeholders, and the interview with the MFA Technical Director, sought to encourage the management of these organisations to engage in reflection and dialogue whilst offering interpretations. The management was encouraged to consider potential mechanisms to move forward and enhance working practices pertaining to the emergent issues highlighted and discussed.

Whilst there was familiarity between the researcher and the NSS headmaster, as well as MFA technical director, there was no familiarization between the researcher and the parent body. The researcher was aware of ‘participant behaviour adjustment’, whereby the focus group participants adjust their behaviour in relation to the impression of others, their own personal needs and history (Carey & Smith, 1994). In some cases, this could be seen during the focus group and was addressed as best as possible.

5.3 Logistics

The focus group with the headmaster of the NSS and parent body was held at the Intercontinental Hotel, St. Julian's. The follow up meeting where the full parent body was present for information on the action plan, was held at the NSS itself. All meetings with the Technical Director of the MFA were held at the MFA headquarters during the less busy hours to avoid disturbances. Although the initial informal meetings were not recorded, the

actual action meetings with the headmaster and parent body, as well as with the Technical Director of the MFA, were recorded on a Dictaphone to allow for transcription and analysis.

5.4 Analysis

The data gathered in the action meetings was transcribed verbatim and read over several times to make clear the actions and subsequent agreements that were discussed. The action meetings presented below are in the form of a narrative that allows the participants' own voice to emerge. It also provides a detailed insight into the decision-making processes involved with respect to an agreement on a change strategy. To supplement the meetings, a series of reflective 'stop offs' (i.e., extracts from the field notes and the researcher's own reflections) are further embedded within this chapter.

5.5 Participants' Profiles

5.5.1 Head of National Sports School (NSS)

The acting head of the NSS is a qualified teacher and worked as a secondary school teacher for a number of years. He is also a well-known sports journalist in Malta, albeit not practising as a journalist anymore. The national sports school was a project he came up with. The government, at that time, in 2012, thought the idea was solid enough and the national sports school was born and has been in existence since September 2012. His role and responsibilities at the school involve the everyday running of the school, in particular, its academic and sport programmes; organising new projects to enhance learning and the advancement of the school, its students and staff; supervision and guidance of staff members; liaison with parents, associations, coaches and government officials; improvement of facilities and much more.

5.5.2 Parent Body

The parent body of the NSS is an elected, voluntary, body of parents who spend time and effort to improve aspects of the school and to help in the organisation of events that take place in and outside the school.

5.5.3 Technical Director Malta Football Association (MFA)

The MFA Technical Director was involved for nine years in the MFA technical sector and was the national coach for the U16, U18 and U21 national sides before he became the Technical Director at the MFA in 2011. He was also an assistant and caretaker coach for the senior team. In his role as the Technical Director at the MFA, he oversees the preparation of all the Malta national teams. His role is to work alongside the coaches, other technical and medical staff to provide Malta's top players with the best training programmes and services. His role also includes improving the relationship between the coaching staff at the technical centre and the MFA member clubs by improving the communication that exists with the clubs and their respective coaches.

5.6 Action Meeting NSS

This meeting was held in January 2015, a few days after I had moved to work full-time at the NSS. I had been working on a part-time basis at the school since its inception in 2012, so I was familiar with how it functioned and the key people involved. I felt that I could contribute to the school so much more and thus, in July 2014, I approached the headmaster and showed my interest in becoming more involved with the student-athletes at this school. We looked at the option of moving full time there and started working on getting transferred from MCAST, where I was managing the sports department, to the NSS. Part of this process included, coming up with a job description of what my role would involve, since the school had never had a full-time sport psychologist. It was thus at this point, in the summer of 2014,

that I, together with my supervisory team, decided that the action programme should be conducted not just with the MFA, but also with the NSS, since a good number of footballers at the NSS would eventually form part of the MFA national teams. Whilst waiting for my secondment from one workplace to the other, between the months of October and December 2014, I continued doing my part-time work at the school (though somewhat limited due to knee surgery) with the student-athletes, and this served as a pilot phase of the action research project prior to my commencement full-time at the school in January 2015.

In the action meeting held in January 2015, my role at the school was explained to the parent body. I then gave an introduction to myself, and what was to be discussed, and together with the group of three parents and the headmaster of the NSS, we went on to explore the results of the reconnaissance phase. Below, one can see excerpts of the discussion, presented in single spacing format, together with comments and reflective stop-offs. These stop-offs are there to illuminate my voice as a practitioner-researcher and the complexities involved in being an insider conducting practitioner-researcher based research.

Practitioner-Researcher – So, in the focus groups held, parents reported feeling the need for more information on how to help their children develop, on parental education, on allowing children more freedom ... on letting one's child experiment...and not doing everything for them...

Parent A – when they're young ...parents tell their children, 'come here because you will fall and get dirty...let them get dirty and enjoy themselves....'

Parent B – this ties in well with *transition awareness* ... *children need to be aware of what they are getting themselves into as they grow older...parents too...* because then it's not such a big shock ...once they already know ...they've seen a video, for example....

A theme that kept repeating itself in every interview or focus group conducted is the fact that the parents overprotect their children in Malta, they follow their every move, take all decisions for them and, in general, want to keep hold of them as much as is possible.

Reflective Stop-off

Having been brought up to be very independent, I am in a constant struggle with the above issue. Unlike most Maltese mums at that time, mine was a working mum who taught in a secondary school. She also, at times, needed to travel on work related matters. It was during these times that my brother and I would experiment, trying our hand at cooking, cleaning and washing the clothes. I still recall one of the first times we used the washing machine and my brother threw in a purple t-shirt with the whites... of course, my dad's socks, shirts and underwear turned lilac! However, we learnt from that situation and our parents never scolded us for taking the initiative with such things. My brother, to this day, is one of the few Maltese young men I know who does the chores at home, together with managing a full time job and raising two young daughters. Therefore, I must admit to feeling very frustrated when parents tell me they do everything for their children. They do not realise that they are limiting the child's growth rather than helping them. Based on my strong feelings, as expressed above, I needed to be very aware of any biases I might carry into the research I was conducted. It was vital to keep the data clean and valid. Researcher awareness of potential bias helps to increase the likelihood of implementing strategies with the intention to minimise bias and improve validity, reliability and generalizability (Ali & Yusof, 2011). With this awareness, I tried to keep myself in check when collecting data by being careful of the questions I posed, asking open-ended questions and by having a clearly defined target population (for example, giving the opportunity to all parents of the 1998 national team the opportunity to take part; the same with coaches). It was vital to be really careful when analysing results and not get too excited when a finding aligned with my own values and beliefs concerning the topic. I also took the opportunity to discuss biases with my tutors so that these biases could be challenged (Kirshner, Pozzoboni, & Jones, 2011).

Practitioner-Researcher - we need to commit to what we are going to do, what can be possible, what areas do we need to work on the most Now, some things are free of charge, for example, *developing mental skills*...

Head – *mental skills*, definitely we need to work on them...

Parent B – it's not exactly free of charge if you need to use a place to do it, produce communication material....

Parent C – I think we should focus on the things that we need to go and play beyond Malta ...

Head – that one over there (pointing to themes table), *visit foreign clubs beforehand...maybe get EU funding*; we would really like to travel abroad with the students. In fact, we have recently started contacts with the Dutch FA, it would be great if we are able *to go to Holland, maybe visit a particular school in Rotterdam and see how it operates*...

At the UEFA U17 finals, which were held in Malta in May 2014, one of the parents on the parent board had been helping out the Dutch team. This parent managed to set up a meeting with them for the headmaster and the head coach at the national sport school. This was meant as an information gathering meeting so that the headmaster and coach would get to know more about the set-up of sport schools in Holland, as well as how their football academies functioned. During this meeting, the NSS found full collaboration from the Dutch FA, who promised to help out if the NSS so wished. This meeting turned out to be vital in setting up one of the actions to take NSS footballers to play against a number of Dutch teams.

Parent B– we can easily use your (author’s) research to link with other research done abroad

Parent C – when you are basing an EU project on a PhD, European boards look at it as being more objective because, they say, that for this there is an ultimate goal...you haven’t created this just to get funding

Parent B – with entities abroad, it would be great to link this research with foreign research so that they say this is good for both of us...we need to follow this and work on it

Parent C - After every (EU funded) project you have to record what’s happened, what you obtained ...your budgets....this is not a question of allocating funds or getting them....you need to use them appropriately and then report back

Parent B – it will be 80% funded and 20% funded by us ...maybe we can speak to the Ministry of Education and Sports and get funds from them

Head – or get some sponsor; so you need to fish out the money from somewhere and then you get reimbursed

Parent C – maybe we need to create an association, financial institution, find a bank

Head – when we went to the Bank of Valletta they closed the door immediately unfortunately

Practitioner-Researcher – Does Good Causes Fund still exist?

Head – it does, we can tap into that as well...they don’t give a lot though...but there are some sponsors.... Also the American Embassy, we are making contacts with them....we need to build contacts and then they will start opening their doors to us...

As can be seen, funding seems to be a problem as the school does not have a budget to take young players abroad to experience training and playing in clubs overseas. Although, at

times, ideas are very forthcoming, it seems that budgetary issues are always a concern. In Malta, this is a common issue faced by all government institutions.

Reflective Stop off

Again, my frustrations are great in moments when I feel that something can really move ahead if only we had the funding for it. And it is the one reason why so many people lose their motivation, in Malta, because without funds there is a limit to what can be done and funds are rarely forthcoming. Again, when I attend conferences, visits abroad, foreign colleagues regularly speak about the funding available to them and how they were funded by their organisation to attend conferences or do projects, unlike myself who always need to fund such things out of my own pocket. I believe it is the number one reason why, in Malta, sport has found it difficult to develop, the government does not provide much funding compared to other countries, in particular small countries such as ours. Sport is still not a priority in Malta, it has never played much of a part in our culture, and we have as yet to make an impact in any area of sport. This continues to make us feel smaller than we already are; potentially influencing our perceived national identity.

Practitioner-Researcher – so, what can we commit ourselves to do?

Parent B – *write the draft (of an EU project)*

Practitioner-Researcher – before we write the draft we need to see what actions we are planning to do

Parent C – A couple of aims that then, in the objectives, are broken down further

Head – those three in the first column (pointing to themes tables) are very important: develop mentality and attitude ((*discipline/sacrifice, time management, responsibility & independence skills*); *Transition awareness/education*; *Develop mental skills (self-confidence, communication & integration skills, goal-setting, dealing with anxiety)*)

Practitioner-Researcher – these are things which I can work on

My work as the sport psychologist of the school and the MFA includes conducting team and individual sessions with the young athletes to help them develop the knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes for competitive sport, to develop their mental skills to enhance performance, to provide psychological support to athletes, and to help educate them about things that matter to them, including transition awareness and education. Therefore, it

made sense that, since I was going to move to the school full-time, a more formalised and organised programme of what I was already doing would continue to be conducted, coupled with activities which would enhance the learning of such skills.

Head – organise activities such as that *exchange* for example (pointing to table)

Parent C – we need to go out of here with an action plan

Practitioner-Researcher – so, if we set up an exchange...how would we conduct it? What do we want out of it? A match, training camp... live-in complete with training camp, match and so on?

Head – exactly, that all student-athletes are exposed to *some form of competition*...let's say there is *a training camp* and, at the same time that the students are getting on with their activities, the *coaches and teachers have an opportunity for professional development* So coaches can help students go through the transitions

Practitioner-Researcher – the students will be living with other athletes, even from the schools involved, or clubs; they will attend the same training programmes as them

Head – maybe it will be possible that for those five days they will attend school with them

Parent B – they will have the experience of living and waking up with the children in that family and some students the experience of sleeping in dormitories

Head – there are certain doubts about this...we tried it before and found resistance from parents, to have their children staying with families

Parent C – to be honest, I am one of those who have spent time with host families, so I have the experience ... with the disposition of today's children to deal with challenges alone, I do not think it is advisable to send them to stay with families

Parent B – maybe there will be the opportunity for five of them to live with families and twenty to stay in a dormitory... I have no problem if my daughter stayed in a family

Head – but you are open-minded ...not everyone is the same ...not everyone is open- minded and has that mentality

Practitioner- Researcher – if we have some of our students go abroad to join an academy, they might need to live in a house where someone is responsible for them ...so, they have to get used to it

Parent C – the first night they will cry ... the journey, leaving your friends to go into a family you don't know...

Practitioner-Researcher – but you need to make them aware that this could happen, that it may be difficult

Head – It's needed ...I can understand youwe'll try and see if we can have the two options

Parent C – maybe you'll do it with slightly older childrenThere are so many social cases ...you can't just risk ...

Parent B – yes, of course but having children with families is much cheaper than having them in a hostelthe parents can go abroad too... parents, staff, coaches students they can all go abroad.

Again, here one can see the fear/dread the Maltese have when it comes to allowing their children to stay with other adults they do not know. There is a lack of trust, maybe coming from the lack of travel, lack of information about other cultures, media reports as well as the sheltered upbringing of the Maltese.

Parent B – now, we need to limit the exercise to the coaches and children

Head – no parents ... because there will be conflict

Parent C – to reach this scope, the parent needs to be absent

Parent B – we can do *a course in parent education* if we are going to focus on parents too

Parent C – but ...our focus is on *exchanges, live- in's, professionalism* ...

Researcher – yes, so we are agreeing on *the exchange, parent education, training* ...

Parent C – *exchange, training camp and boot camp* ...as these are very similar

Researcher – yes they do go togetherthe *live- in* too

Head – shall we work on the subject of *transitional challenges*, as it is a bit important?

Researcher – yes...that goes into parent education and It's going to be the main theme ... it's going to be part of everything....

Parent C – so, that is the aim ...the objectives are 1, 2, 3.

Researcher - three, as in?

Parent C – in the case of *transitional challenges, training and boot camp, coaching and live in, children's freedom*.... this is the aim and these are the objectives (as he points them out on the computer screen) ...the aim is to *develop the mentality*...the objectives are: to undertake *a series of live-ins, even as part of exchanges with foreign countries, style of play, and lifestyle management*we can use the element of parents and the whole culture...these are the objectives...so from each aim we can target three objectives...so we have set out all the cards here... all we need to do is make use of them...it is thanks to your (author's) study that it makes it achievable ...so round of applause ... and this is already adding value to an aspect which you discovered to be intellectually and socially challenging for athletes in transition....so, if we look at the athletes and the culture of this particular age group, we might forecast, that in ten years' time, we will be able to produce a national sportsman ...

5.6.1 Summary and Agreed Action Change Strategies

The discussion with the Head of NSS and parent body, following on from the findings of the reconnaissance phase, suggested that the best way forward to prepare young players for migratory transitions, would be to organise trips abroad and/or exchanges with young student-athletes and staff from other countries where the students would get to live, train and compete together, while experiencing different cultures and ways of life. It was also thought that it would be effective to have parent and player education sessions to help young players develop the necessary skills and knowledge for migratory based transition, and to arm parents with the tools to support their children.

Apart from the EU funded project, which relied on actually succeeding to get the necessary funds, it was considered essential to conduct activities, which, at that point, were more in our control. It was decided that we would immediately work on trying to set up an exchange with clubs in Holland, since we already had a good contact there, with the Dutch FA, who offered to help. We would also conduct live in's and role model talks, since these were good preparation in terms of independent living and would help the young players adapt better for any future trips overseas. These would, ideally, take place in the students' mid-term holidays in February and November. At the same time, due to the deadline coming up, one of the parents and I were to spend some time working on the EU project draft in order for it to be ready to submit by the end of March 2015.

The headmaster and parent board were full of energy and fully supportive in trying to find the best opportunities for the students to experience new learning opportunities and I found a lot of enthusiasm at this meeting. Another parent board meeting for which all members of the parent board were present then followed this up and the above action change strategies were discussed. These were given full support by all parties concerned as it was

felt that the change strategies were crucial for young players' holistic development. A summary of the agreed actions in table format can be found at the beginning of Chapter 6.

5.7 Informal Meeting MFA prior Pilot Phase of Action Research Project July 2014

I had been working on a part-time basis at the MFA for more than two years prior to commencing this action research project. My job was to provide psychological support to our academy players on an individual as well as team basis. Once in a while, I would stop for an informal chat with the Technical Director in his office to let him know what I was doing. Thus, in one of my informal meetings with him, and with my action research project in mind, I reported on the findings I had found in my first study. We went on to discuss the need to educate players, parents and coaches further about the challenges Maltese players experience when they go abroad to play professional football. I requested his permission to conduct focus groups with MFA personnel, head coaches from top nurseries, parents of the academy, and parents of boys who had already migrated (conducted as from July 2014, as reported in the previous chapter). He informed me that I would have to invite all the parents of the 1998 group as otherwise, some might feel left out if not invited. Since parents have such an influence on their children and are so much a part of the player's life in Malta, this is probably true. He gave me his support, although he stated that it is hard or impossible to change the Maltese culture. He also referred to two players who had recently gone for trials abroad. Players were not prepared for these trials, he said. One player, when asked how he had got on, replied that during his week at a foreign club the coach did not speak to him once, and neither did the other players. He attended training and a match. He was not given a report, and, thus was confused. Another player who went to Italy on trial was lodged in a convent for a couple of nights where he had no one to talk to and no internet and felt lost. His mother also informed us that he had a number of opportunities abroad, but they were looking for an opportunity in Rome since he has an uncle living there and, thus, it would be

easier for him to handle. So, this is the mentality adopted, to go to a place where you have a relative, or a place where you feel more comfortable in, as it will be easier to adapt and, you are bound to suffer less from isolation and homesickness. Whilst this may make sense, especially with players of a young age, this may not, however, be the best chance for the player. To what extent should the player choose comfort over the best opportunity?

Therefore, it was decided, with the Technical Director of the MFA, as a pilot phase in preparation for the action research project, to try and develop the skills necessary for our players to adapt better, and to try and educate parents further about this through focus groups to be conducted over the summer, and talks and, possibly too, a parent education course.

5.7.1 MFA Action Meeting - January 2015

I had been trying to get a meeting for weeks with the Technical Director of the FA with no luck. This was due to personal issues which kept him away from the FA for quite a while. This left me very much at a standstill, not sure which way to go. Thus, for this reason too, the decision was taken that I should include the NSS in the action plan since as mentioned earlier, a good number of the school's young footballers would, eventually be called up to join the MFA academy, and, thus there would be a continuity.

Finally, months after that initial informal meeting, the Technical Director and I sat down to discuss what had been done over the previous months, how things had gone on and how we were to move forward from the main issues that had emerged from the focus groups conducted as part of the reconnaissance phase. Below, one can find excerpts from our meeting, together with comments and reflective stop offs.

Technical Director – So, what have you gathered from the sessions you conducted with the parents and coaches?

Practitioner-Researcher – There were coaches who said that, unless there are 10-12 *academies* and they run on a more professional level, then football cannot improve... parents

and coaches mentioned, too, that coaching standards need to improve. They also wish that players do not go abroad by themselves to a new club.... that two players should go together.

Technical Director – it would be better for all if it was possible but, anyway, we tried it once but it didn't work out

Researcher – if you are speaking to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) you can tell him that I spoke to these parents and coaches and these people said they want to set up these *academies*is there some way we can work on this in the near future?

Technical Director – yes, I already have the study ready on thisyes, it's all ready, so we can tackle the elite statuswe are going to do it ...but they made this big reform recently and they didn't deal with this ...

Researcher – so it needs to pass through the executive board no?

Technical Director – it's tough to take elite academy status ...it's not easy...it needs to be discussed by the council, otherwise it won't pass ... (*Technical Director brings document on elite academies*) ...look you have three types, academy A, B, C ...administration...technical matters...you have everything here... licenses.... You are classified according to the points you tot up Which you get from facilities... training area ... floodlighting, etc..... so, you need to have a certain set up before you can get elite status ...qualifications...youth director of coaching ...elite you get 20 points, non-elite 10 points etc. but you always get points... and then you get the license according to these and how to form the committee, president etc. If you sum up 80 points or more you get elite status....

Researcher – so, hopefully, it will be implemented, eventually I see that even *coaching standards* have improved because now more courses are taking place ...

Technical Director – yes, but we have a problem ... because here they come to learn ...but then they cannot implement it in their clubs; one, because of the level of the children they might have, two, because of the facilities, and also because of the administration and parents. You try and put into practice something that you learnt during the course and then you end up doing an eight vs eight which calls for a 60 x 45m pitch. The coach will stop you. You know this training should take an hour and a half and that you need an assistant, but the head coach comes along and tells you, 'so you are coaching on your own ...you have four balls not 15, I can only give you 30 x 30m area and after an hour you need to stop as the others will be coming in.

Practitioner-Researcher – yes you are right...but at least there are more courses and people are looking to do them

Technical Director - if you see a session of someone who did the course 10 years ago and then you see a session of someone who did the course in the last two or three years, they are completely differentthey are very different.... We are *teaching the latest trends* ...if someone who did the course 10 years ago comes along I'll tell him that his method is not up to scratch now it may be effective but for us it's not good enough...because in 10 years' time you can improve the training sessionbut they continue doing the same stuff ...

So, despite the fact that the MFA has, over the past year or two, employed a full time UEFA courses director who has increased the number of coaching courses being conducted and the level of these courses, it seems that, at times, coaches cannot implement what they have learnt during the courses due to lack of facilities, equipment, too many players and many other factors.

Practitioner-Researcher – however, what we now need to look into is ... what areas can the MFA commit to developing? So, we've already been working on certain areas... we need to see how this is going onwhat can we commit ourselves to doing? These (pointing to first column in focus groups themes table... *mental skills* etc.), we are already doing...can we push ahead with them?

Technical Director – yes ... *maybe, we can try and improve what we are already doing....* I don't know ... You know....

Having been the sport psychologist of the MFA for three years or so, I had, inevitably, already worked with a number of our youth teams on mental skills training and psychological support. This had been done with the 1998 and 1997 groups; however, I had not yet started on a regular basis with the 1999 and 2000 groups, although they had had an introduction to the subject. This, unfortunately, hadn't taken off well yet, due to the fact that over the previous months, due to the Technical Director's absence, organisation had been rather poor and the players, unlike the previous groups, had not been brought over to the MFA technical centre once a week to eat together and have talks and individual sessions with me.

Reflective Stop off

At times I felt frustrated at how long things take to get done. I so often asked when we could have the players' sessions organised, including lunch after school, meetings with parents and so on. Unfortunately the lack of organisation and lethargy then showed in the younger players' attitude and performance when compared to the older groups who had had a regular programme of weekly sessions with me, speakers on other subjects, individual sessions, and team sessions, where they would eat together every week, help in the clearing up, etc. I felt that it was going to be my project rather than the MFA's project. I needed support on this.

Practitioner-Researcher - and this (pointing to parents' education on focus group table), we already did it in the parents' course How do you think the parents' course went? Did you get any feedback from it?

Technical Director – we did that course for those who were already co-operative parents ...the people who attended were already willing to work with us We didn't reach our objective...

The parents' course was conducted over a couple of weeks some months previously. I was very much involved in its organisation together with Stephen Grima, who runs coaching courses at the MFA. A circular was sent out to all nurseries in Malta, however, there was little participation and this was rather disappointing. Unfortunately, very often, we find that it is the parents who do not need to attend such courses who do, in fact, attend them.

Technical Director – *players need to become more responsible* ... for instance, this morning we had seven players coming over, they went to the gym on their own ... they are self-driven ...you don't need to tell them... they have a programme and they are able to work on it We need to give them more responsibilities, after all they are responsible for themselves on what is most important, not only for football The parent or coach is responsible at the time that the player is with them ...so, when the parent or coach is not with them, then, who is responsible for them ...? Should they not be responsible for themselves?

Practitioner-Researcher – they are old enough

Technical Director – at 12 years they need to become more responsible...these days, you cannot control them Because of the internet and these other things...drugs and doping....from 11 years upwards...

Practitioner-Researcher – young people are not aware enough

Technical Director – I think we need to educate children about these dangersI don't know if it's your subject line

Practitioner-Researcher – *we can get someone to speak to them* about these things

Technical Director- on my part I will try ...but I need to know what everyone is doing ... 'if staff tell me, 'I have this'....or 'I want to do this, what do you think?' It is my job to see what they want to do and encourage them ...I never tell them no without listening....because you know what the staff's motivation is like...if someone comes with an initiative I don't want to tell them no...I tell them 'let's have a look at itcan we fix something up?' I cannot tell them, 'you have to take the decision...isn't that what you're here for? Don't worry ...all you need to do is tell me so that if someone speaks to me about it I know what is happening' ...if the President tells me ...you wrote that...I tell him yesonce I know people do their work well when people have initiative you need to let them do it, and then you see the outcomeif its' not against the principles or the philosophy of this place (MFA)

you need to let them do itotherwise, you will make him or her lose motivationand it is the same with childrenif they come up with somethingyou discuss it with them.

Reflective stop off

Here, one can see that the Technical Director will very often let you get on with things. However, as a part-timer it is not easy to run after players, parents and other individuals to get things done, and this may be frustrating as well as time consuming. Unfortunately, in Malta, there are still too many part-timers in sport and with part-timers who have a full-time job elsewhere, this is tough. Funding has always been the problem.

5.7.2 Summary and Action

Thanks to this meeting plans were made so that the mental skills and psychological support sessions would continue to take place on an individual basis with the current U19 and U17 squads.

The Technical Director was to continue to work on the academy system and encourage the MFA executive board to get this up and running. However, this depended on other items on the MFA executive board's agenda which may, at this moment in time, be of higher importance. Moreover, whilst coaching standards are currently being improved through more courses being available, a push for coaches to take on further and higher education, including the introduction of the Pro license would be made.

It was now mainly up to me, as the sport psychologist, to organise the psychological sessions for the players. This was something I was looking forward to since I felt that the young players needed some guidance and I was keen to help them better themselves and be more prepared for the transitions they were to face in the coming years.

All the agreed change strategies at NSS and MFA will now be discussed in depth, and also in table format in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

Implementation and Monitoring Review and Reflection

6.0 Aims and Objectives

Aim I: Implementation and Monitoring Phase: To facilitate and manage change strategies together with NSS and MFA management.

Aim II: Review and Reflection Phase: To evaluate the change strategies conducted together with all stakeholders.

Objective I: Implementation and Monitoring Phase: To facilitate NSS and MFA management in organising activities to enhance the preparation of footballers for migration to play professional football overseas.

Objective II: Review and Reflection Phase: To evaluate, together with coaches, players, parents, NSS and MFA management, the efficacy of the change strategies conducted and continue to enhance them while they are still being effected.

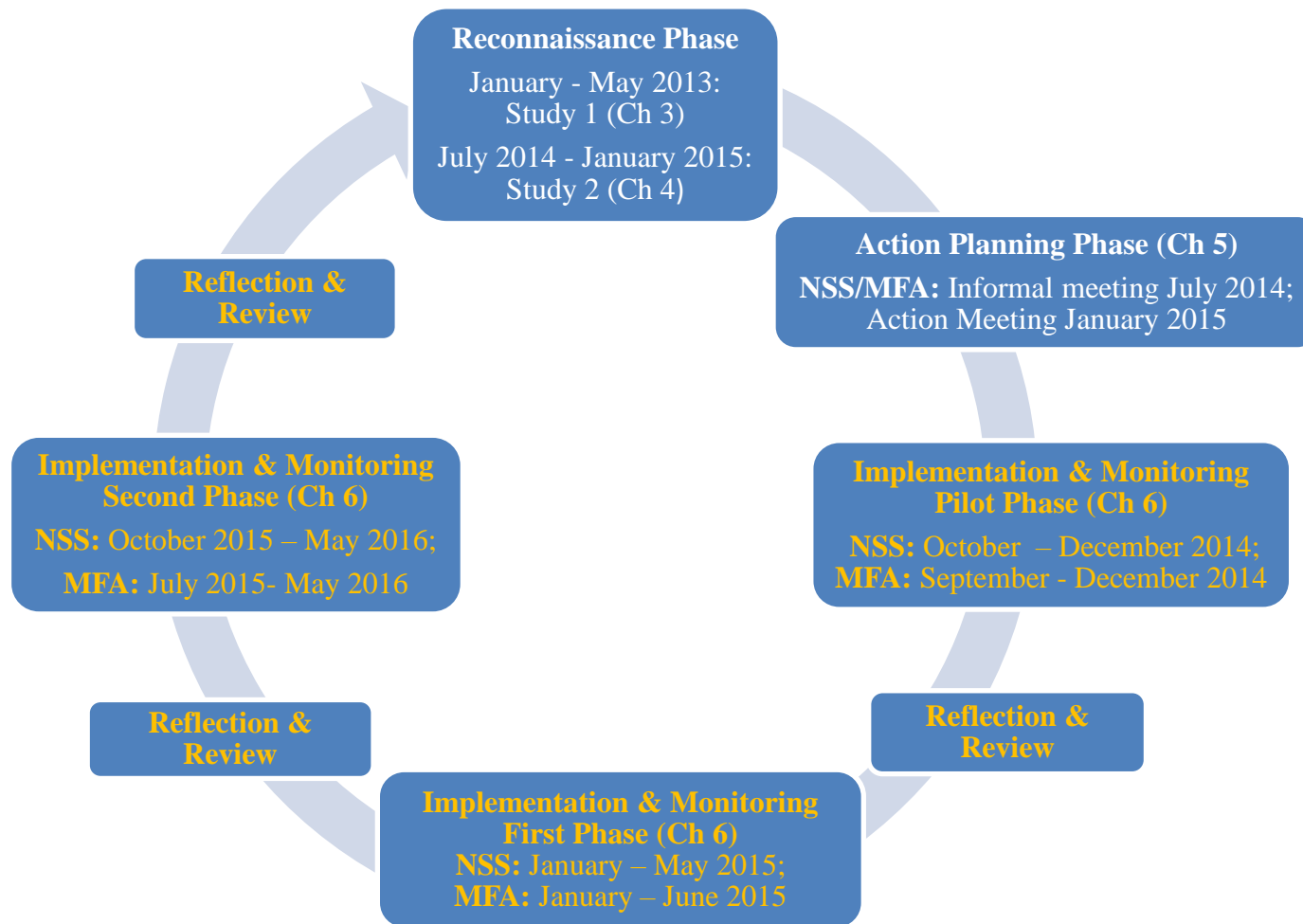


Figure 6.1: The Action Research Cycle

6.1. Introduction

Within this chapter, the author engages in formal reflection, a crucial part of the action research process, stemming from development meetings with the participants (i.e. NSS, MFA management, parents, players & coaches). The emphasis is on decisive action, originating from and inextricably linked to reflection, facilitated by the practitioner-researcher. The reflection allows the participants to improve practice within the field of specialisation (Gilbourne, 2001). An emphasis has also been placed by Huntley et al. (2014) for researchers beyond the UK to engage in reflective practice in sport, as this is still viewed as somewhat limited to promote personal, professional and organisational change and development.

The narratives below are presented through a chronological approach following the action meetings and provide details of collaborative case study cycles that attempt to highlight the distinct action research cycles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Verbatim citations give detailed insight into the working practices of the participants (including barriers and self-reflections) during the change process. The action strategies are presented in an 'Introduction', an 'Implementation and Monitoring' and a 'Reflection and Review' Section. The 'Introduction' section refers to the actions that had been agreed upon in the action meetings presented in the previous chapter. The 'Implementation and Monitoring' section refers to a description of what was done in conducting the action. In a number of the activities organised, the practitioner-researcher was very much involved in the implementation of the activities themselves (and thus her voice can be heard here too), whilst in others the practitioner was marginally involved or simply monitored the activity. In the 'Reflection and Review' section, one can find all the evaluations conducted with the various stakeholders as well as the practitioner-researcher reflections.

6.2 Development of Change Strategy

Informal meetings were held with the Head of NSS and the Technical Director of the MFA in July 2014, where it was decided that change strategies needed to be employed to better prepare young players for transitions, in particular, migratory based transitions. Importance was also placed on educating parents on several matters related to sport, and in particular, on how to provide their children with the appropriate pre and post-transition related support.

Both the NSS and the MFA engaged in initial work to improve the above areas over the months from September till December 2014, with the school concentrating on monthly talks with players and parents, whilst the MFA engaged in player, coach and parent education sessions, including a course for parents. This phase of the action research cycle was developed as a ‘pilot’ study to the actual action research cycle.

I have therefore, divided my action research into three cycles. After the initial informal meetings held with the Head of NSS and the MFA Technical Director in July 2014, the pilot cycle was conducted between September and December 2014. In January 2015, a formal action meeting was held both with the MFA and NSS management and the first phase then covered the period between January and June 2015. The second phase was conducted between July 2015 and May 2016. (See Table 6.2 for full breakdown).

6.3 Biographical Positioning as a Practitioner-Researcher

My position as a practitioner-researcher in this study and having worked at the MFA and NSS for a few years, meant that I was given a lot of the responsibility to get things done within the action research cycle, despite some responsibilities being beyond my remit as a sport psychologist within these organisations. However, having had 13 years of sports man-

agement experience at the college, as well as having been a Director on the Olympic Committee for four and a half years prior to starting my PhD, gave me the confidence that I could manage these tasks. The two years or so which followed, documented throughout this chapter, show the evolution of the agreed action research change strategies and seeks to outline the complexities associated with this process.

6.4 Player and Coach Focused Change Strategies

6.4.1. Strategy One: Experiencing Migration and Independent Living

As had been agreed in the action meeting with the NSS Head of School and parent body, one of the strategies to be implemented was: *To experience migration and independent living to enhance players' (and coaches) knowledge and understanding of the challenges associated with a migratory-based transition.* The sub aims were:

- i. To enhance **players'** knowledge and understanding of the psycho-social challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates to play professional football overseas,
- ii. To develop **players'** psycho-social competencies (such as communication, confidence, responsibility & emotional control) to be able to manage transitional related challenges,
- iii. To enhance **coaches'** knowledge and understanding of the above in order to be able to prepare young players better for transitional related challenges.

These aims were intended to be achieved by organising the activities below for NSS students (also referred to as players throughout this chapter):

1a. **NSS** staff to collaborate with the Dutch FA to organise a training camp, matches and other activities for **NSS** students together with young foreign players from top clubs in Holland. **NSS** students to experience temporary migration by living together in a facility away from parents so as to learn to adjust to living alone.

2a. Conduct local live ins/training camps for **NSS** students where they are given responsibilities, take part in workshops, train, compete and live together. (See macro overview in Table 6.1).

The actions conducted will be described one by one in this chapter. The planning, implementation and reflection of the Trip to Holland will be discussed first, followed by the live-ins conducted in the pilot, first and second phase.

Table 6.1: Strategy One: Experience migration and independent living to enhance knowledge and understanding of the challenges associated with a migratory-based transition

Actions Delivery	Aims	Stakeholders of Delivery	Methods of Evaluation	Findings
1a. NSS staff to collaborate with Dutch FA to organise activities for NSS students together with young players from clubs in Holland. NSS students to experience temporary migration by living together in a facility away from parents to learn to adjust to living alone.	i. To enhance players' knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates to play professional football overseas (method of evaluation: 1.1; 1.2; 1.3; 1.4; 1.5; 1.6; 1.7; 1.8; 1.9) ii. To develop players' psycho-social competencies to be able to handle transitional challenges (1.1; 1.2; 1.3; 1.4; 1.5; 1.6; 1.7; 1.8; 1.9)	NSS School management NSS Parent committee NSS/MFA Football coaching staff Dutch FA	1.1. Interviews (3) players 1.2. Presentations players 1.3. Interviews (2) coaches 1.4. Parent feedback (1) 1.8. Practitioner-researcher's reflections 1.9. Interview NSS Head	- Students reported enhancement of knowledge, understanding & skills needed to play overseas - A few students experienced homesickness - Players developed a number of psycho-social competencies - Coaches learnt from the students
2a. To conduct local live ins/training camps for NSS students where they are given responsibilities, take part in workshops, train, compete and live together.	iii. To enhance coaching staff's knowledge and understanding of the above in order to be able to prepare young players better for transitional challenges (1.3; 1.8; 1.9)	NSS Sport Psychologist Senior Role models NSS coaching staff NSS management staff NSS parents Other speakers	1.3. Interviews (2) coaches 1.4. Parent feedback (2) 1.5. Parent Focus Group (12) 1.6. Players' written feedback (all participants) 1.7. Players' verbal feedback (all participants) 1.8. Practitioner-researcher's reflections 1.9. Interview NSS Head	

Table 6.2: Timeline Strategy One NSS: Experiencing Migration and Independent Living

PILOT PHASE							FIRST PHASE						
2014/ 2015	July 14	Aug 14	Sept 14	Oct 14	Nov 14	Dec 14		Jan 15	Feb 15	March 15	April 15	May 15	June 15
Action/ Evaluation Meetings	Informal Action Meeting MFA; NSS			*1	*1	*1		Action Meeting NSS/ MFA	Live-in student/ practitioner- researcher evaluation (1.6; 1.7; 1.8)			Evaluation NSS players Holland trip (1.1; 1.2)	NSS coach evaluation live ins/Holland trip (1.3)
Action Change Strategy 1					2a. Live in NSS				2a. Live in NSS	EU Project application submitted	1a. NSS Holland Trip/ Collaboration Dutch FA		

**1-Talks held over my move to the NSS full-time; also ACL surgery and rehabilitation*

SECOND PHASE											
2015/2016	July 15	Aug 15	Sept 15	Oct 15	Nov 15	Dec 15	Jan 16	Feb 16	Mar 16	Apr 16	May 16
Action/ Evaluation Meetings	Evaluation NSS parent on Holland/ live ins (1.4)	Evaluation Meeting Head of NSS (1.8; 1.9)			Live-in student evaluation (1.6; 1.7)		Parent evaluation (1.5)	Parent/ organiser evaluation (1.4)			
Action Change Strategy 1					2a. NSS live in			2a. NSS Camp	EU Project Application submitted		

6.4.2 Phase One (January-June 2015): Introduction NSS Trip to Holland

Research by (Bourke, 2002; Coakley, 1998; Magee & Sugden, 2002) has suggested that to improve professional career prospects, athletes (players) may need to migrate for the purpose of work. Organising a trip abroad for the NSS players to play against foreign teams and to experience a temporary migration was considered one of the most vital actions that had been discussed in the action meeting held at the NSS in January 2015. This was deemed important since the majority of NSS players were aiming to achieve a professional career in football. Thus, it was imperative to enhance players' knowledge and understanding of the psycho-social challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates, and to develop players' psycho-social competencies to be able to handle transitional related challenges.

When experiencing a temporary migration, an individual may start to develop new behavioural assumptions that help him or her to understand aspects of the culture, as well as the social behaviour of the locals, and they may remain anxious and confused until they can predict these (Weissman & Furnham, 1987). The trip to Holland, which was planned for March 2015, was aimed to help young players understand better the challenges that footballers face when they move from their (donor) country, to another (host) to play football, a transition described as complex and challenging (Bourke, 2002; Richardson et al., 2012). Students would experience what it means to live away from home, in a foreign country. The coaches, head of school and I, tried to prepare the young players for this trip by questioning them on what they were expecting to find in Holland, by providing them with the information we had about the places and clubs the team was visiting and by instilling discipline within the students from months beforehand. However, they would possibly feel homesick and need to see how best to cope. Players would need to understand better the different philosophies of training and playing; adapt to the culture and environment around

them, including the food, weather and travelling, and would need to be responsible for their belongings, including finances. Students would develop a number of life skills and psychosocial skills that would be required as they grew up. It would also enhance coaching staff's knowledge in order for them to be able to prepare young players better for transitional challenges. Thus, thanks to the contacts that had been established between the MFA, the NSS and the Dutch FA, as from early 2015, arrangements started being made so that the NSS football students aged 11-12 years, that is Forms One and Two, (The secondary school system in Malta runs from ages 11-15/16; Form One to Form Five) would have the opportunity to go and play football in Holland and experience a temporary migration.

6.4.3 Implementation and Monitoring

The narrative below outlines the reflective vignette that one of the NSS coaches produced during and after the visit to Holland. The account aims to describe his interpretations of the visit and key moments that the players experienced with respect to the aims of the change strategy.

On Sunday 29th March 2015, a group of thirty one football students from the NSS took a flight to Amsterdam together with their coaches Peter and Stanley. The group were also accompanied by the Acting Head and the Assistant Head of School.

On arrival at the King Kong Hostel, despite its name, we didn't find a gorilla waiting for us but rather, very nice staff who really looked after us during our stay there. When we went down for lunch it was the first time we realised that some of the children were already missing home as they asked to phone their parents and one or two were seen in tears. For most of them this was their first experience outside Malta without their parents. However, this feeling of homesickness did not last long. After a day, they started to settle down, grew accustomed to the place, after having some time to look around and adapted to being with

their team-mates and coaches. By the time we had to return back to Malta, some were so comfortable there that they weren't sure they wanted to come back!

The six days were very full. On arriving in Holland the group visited the Amsterdam Arena. The spectacular arena is breath-taking, and walking onto the pitch of such a majestic stadium was an awesome experience for the students. However, this was just the beginning of this magnificent trip. On their second day, the students had the opportunity to visit the zoo where they had close encounters with various animals of all sizes and colours.

We had three matches for the Form Ones, Under 12s, who played against the amateur Under 13 team of Sparta Rotterdam (win 3-0), against the Under 12s of Feyenoord (a loss of 1-6) and against the Under 12 of Spartaan 20 (win 3-2). The Form Twos, Under 13s, played against the Under 12 team of Sparta Rotterdam, the club with the longest history in Holland (win 3-0), with Spartaan 20 (win 6-3, after an initial 0-2), and against the Under 13s of Feyenoord (loss of 0-6). It was a very fruitful experience for our students in which they met all types of opponents and had to learn to adapt. It is, of course, our wish to aim for the level of football of Feyenoord, who happen to have a massive Sports Complex.

Our students had the opportunity to train with two coaches at Sparta Rotterdam. The team also had lunch with them and we, the coaches, discussed for over two hours a number of issues with the technical staff of this club. Thanks to the contacts the Headmaster had made with the Dutch FA, we managed to get tickets for the friendly match between Spain and Holland which Holland won 2-0 and which was a great experience for the students.

6.4.4 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: NSS Coaches (1.3)

As a practitioner-researcher working with the young players as well as the coaches, I believed that the best people to give me feedback on this trip would be the NSS coaches

since the players themselves were very young. These coaches were the same coaches who had previously been involved in the focus group discussions in the Reconnaissance Phase and who are described in Chapter Two as well. Below, one can see parts of the discussion conducted at the NSS some weeks after the experience had taken place. My reflections as a practitioner-researcher are given in italics and smaller font throughout this chapter. Such reflection is an essential part of being an applied practitioner as it explicitly allows consideration of how effective service delivery can be shaped and developed by challenging existing attitudes and beliefs (Cropley, Hanton, Miles & Niven, 2010).

Planning the Trip

One of the coaches, Peter, reported that the initial idea for this trip started from the UEFA U17 championships 2014 (finals in Malta). A meeting had been organised between the NSS staff and the Dutch coaches. A number of items were discussed, including the possibility of organising a trip for NSS students to go to Holland to play against Dutch teams and to experience a temporary migration, as the school was looking at providing the students with any experience they couldn't have at the school itself. Coach Stanley stated that this would help to improve the level of football of the players as well as help them develop psycho-social skills needed for independent living. This initial meeting was then followed up in the next scholastic year with meetings the school management had with parents in January 2015. The MFA too helped out with the use of grass pitches to train. The coach emphasized that the NSS was doing a lot of work so that the MFA finds a base when it calls these players up to the national youth teams.

For young Maltese players, some of whom had never travelled before, such an experience abroad provided a great opportunity to help them understand other cultures, other philosophies of training and how to cope with transitional challenges. Stambulova (2003)

noted that a lack of preparation for transition, a lack of knowledge or skills, interpersonal conflicts, a lack of appropriate training conditions, as well as financial and social support and difficulties in combining sport and other commitments can have adverse effects on transition. Thus, it was imperative to prepare the young players in the best way possible, in particular in the light of the results found in Study One during the reconnaissance phase. Academies, and in this case, the sport school, through the contribution of the NSS coaches, must keep on looking for ways to improve player development and look at creating the right environmental conditions for success in youth football (Harwood et al., 2010).

The coaches felt that they should work with any FA that was willing to cooperate in order to enhance students' and staff knowledge. Definitely, working together with the Dutch FA to collaborate on this trip helped to reach the aims that were set prior to this trip. The NSS staff, including myself, were carrying the weight of the results of Study One of the reconnaissance phase. The coaches were aware that it was not enough to coach the players to play good football; they also needed to provide opportunities for the students to experience and understand what playing football professionally outside Malta would really involve. At the time when this trip was being organised I had just started working full-time at the school and thus was not fully involved in the organisation of the programme and the trip itself. This was in the hands of the Head and the coaches. Thus, I did not feel fully immersed in this experience and feel that I cannot reflect much about an experience I was not part of. However, from what I heard from the young players, the coaches, the Head and the parents, this was an experience that they found very useful and that had a great impact on the players' development in attitude, responsibility, accountability and independence skills (1.8).

Funding

According to coach Peter, the trip to Holland was subsidised by the government. Thus, for the students, from a financial point of view, this was very much worth it. The involvement of the parliamentary secretary for sports, through the funding provided by the ministry, was important in terms of dissemination of the results of such an experience. He took a great interest, in that he went to see off the students at the airport and visited the school

when the presentations by the students were conducted. He was a vital person to us, in terms of passing on the message on a national scale that young people needed to be ready to leave the island to improve on their career and to enhance their skills.

I wish I could have gone on this trip too, however, funds were limited and I had just started working at the school full time. Though the coaches and players all stated that the trip went very well, I was not there to evaluate critically the experience for the students and staff. This was frustrating as I was given no level of depth in the evaluations conducted. I resolved to prepare from beforehand the relevant monitoring forms if such a trip would be organised once again. Despite the fact that I was not present, I had had several experiences travelling with the MFA to tournaments or qualifiers and thus I, too, as a sport psychologist, was maturing in my experiences. I had met up with the Dutch FA myself when they had been in Malta for the UEFA U17 finals held here in May 2014. I had enjoyed getting to know them, and had actually interviewed them in relation to my PhD so that I could enhance my knowledge. Every occasion I get to speak with qualified or experienced football personnel from the top footballing class, I try to get the most out of it since this is a great way for me to grow in my work, I believe. Formal education and research are important in learning skills which are relevant to practice and which give a deeper understanding to coping. Learning needs to be seen as a dynamic process by which an individual connects new information they come across with knowledge they had before, to achieve a higher level of understanding (Mesquita, Ribeiro, Santon & Morgan, 2014). I felt that discussing with those who have gone through the ranks gives one very valuable data that cannot be achieved by formal education. Such reflective practice with others can be particularly beneficial (Cropley et al., 2010) and in doing so, helps sport psychology consultants develop a better understanding of challenging situations that come about, by creating a link between theory and inferred knowledge (Knowles, Gilbourne, Cropley & Dugdill, 2014). In our discussion, I still recall one of the coaches stating that the biggest problem they had to face in Malta when the team came over for the UEFA finals was the fact that the players were away from home, and for such a long time. Luckily enough the hotel was good, likewise the food and the atmosphere was great, all of which helped. So, such a challenge, being away from home, missing it, is going to be very much present in younger players who still live at home. I then met the Dutch team again in October 2014 when I accompanied the Malta U17's for the qualifiers in Serbia. Once again we faced Holland, but, by this time, the Maltese and the Dutch technical staff had become good friends and this was great for further collaboration to take place on projects such as that conducted by the NSS later on in the following months (1.8).

The experience in Holland: Developing psycho-social skills for independent living

According to coach Stanley, during the week the students were in Holland,

They learnt how to be more responsible for their belongings, they learnt how to live with their friends in rooms accommodating six to eight students, and were they needed to be punctual. The children had to look after their things, of course we had to check on them... but they did a lot of things. The fact that we spent five days there, in such a small place, was a very good experience ...the way they coped...even at breakfast, we had one group having to stay on one side of the room, another on the other side because there were other people in the hostel. They lived these days as a team, they had fun together, celebrated together, they joked, they got offended, they cried and laughed together but, all in all they definitely matured from this experience, they became more independent. We hope we will have more of these experiences because they help a lot in the players' holistic development.

Coach Peter went on to say that to him, there were many positive things in this trip: the way the children behaved, they really looked after their belongings; the fact that they were seven in a room, there was no place where to move and even to eat, it was uncomfortable. However, the students really worked well with the coaches and it was a very positive experience. The players didn't have much time to be inside, they either had a match or training, or some visits. The programme was tight but they did not grumble at all. Coach Peter believes that the players were well prepared beforehand and well-behaved too.

Even in our sessions, we have tried so much to put in some structure so that they get organised immediately. In fact, the footballers are very organised. I am sure it's because we started it from school. They know what to expect.

As suggested by Martindale and colleagues (2005), our organisation, the NSS (and also the MFA) needed to focus on highlighting early development rather than early success. This could be enhanced by focusing on the characteristics required to become successful athletes, in particular life skills and mental skills. The coaches at NSS were doing all they could to create discipline and a positive mentality that players would hopefully carry with them as they went through the football ranks.

Coaches Peter and Stanley are two very respected coaches in Malta and I am sure the young players look up to them in the same way as adult players and parents would look up to them. Peter is very well known

as probably the best Premier league coach on the island having led two Maltese teams to Premier league titles over the past years. He himself was a striker before becoming a coach. Stanley is the most prolific scorer Malta has ever had, and of course, formed part of the national team some years back. He is now head coach of a top nursery in Malta. However, the respect these two coaches generate I believe, does not simply come from their successes on the field but also in the way they deliver. Both coaches show calmness and do not like to make themselves heard so much. I find it truly amazing to see how they never need to shout at the young players who quieten down immediately when the coaches approach to speak to them. They are two coaches who show great care, look at the players they coach as human beings and in no way do they flaunt around their status as two of Malta's greats on the football scene. Personally, I myself feel very privileged to be working with them, I myself feel that I have learnt so much from watching how they relate to the young players and by observing their coaching methods (1.8).

The coaches reported that unfortunately the young Maltese players had little opportunity to integrate with the foreign players. However, when the students had some free time to explore the surroundings they could clearly see that the young players were developing and enhancing a number of psycho-social skills such as communication skills, decision-making, management of finances and more.

When we went shopping we divided them into groups and we each took six or so with us, they impressed me, they really know how to shop, not even I know how to shop like that! I was looking and seeing them comparing prices and saying "I don't think this is worth it," and then they come and ask me, "Do you think this is good for my sister?" They managed well. (Peter)

The trip was such a perfect one, the coaches stated, that there is not much that can be amended for next time. Despite the fact that the hostel was crowded, it helped them to get along better with each other. Peter goes on to say:

There was a couple, tourists, who came up to us and said "it's incredible, you are such a big group and you aren't making any noise"...we were at the airport. Even on the plane, they were so good...but as Stanley said.... What we had done at the school, paid dividends.

When discipline is taught at a young age, children tend to grow up more mature and able to handle life situations. However, coaches state that the problem arises when the system changes, they go back to the old routine, they go back to their clubs and do not continue with the same rhythm they had before. It is very easy to lose

everything if coaching and technical staff do not continue pushing children and adolescents in the right direction on this island because Maltese culture is one which is, as stated in earlier chapters, easy going and not competitive enough. I had seen this myself so many times; I so often had to help young players with issues they had with the club due to a lack of professionalism. However, a number of clubs worked with volunteers, with coaches who did not have enough qualifications and awareness and with administrators who were just keen on the game rather than having the right skills to lead young players, coaches and the club in the right direction (1.8).

Challenges experienced: Lifestyle and Environment

Coach Stanley reported that the students did experience a number of challenges and this helped to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates; a few of them were homesick on the first day, some didn't like the food but when the majority adapted, then, even those few adapted.

Coach Peter goes on to say:

I was certain that at least one particular student would have a problem because this child is always just with his parents but, after the first day, he got into it. He was very quiet on the first day, he didn't want to eat much in the beginning.

Once again, the homesickness issue arises here, being away from home without parents and loved ones and experiencing the negative effects of attachment and loss (Fisher, 1989).

Homesickness was likely to be present as the players were young and within the early stages of transition (Thurber & Sigman, 1998). There has been little attempt to see for whom the culture shock would be more or less intense, what determines the reaction of a person and how long they remain in a state of shock and which factors help to prevent or deal with the shock (Weissman & Furnham, 1987). The young players needed to try to adapt to a different culture where even the food may have been somewhat different. The fact that they knew

each other well, and had only each other, however, made it possible for them to adapt. Undoubtedly, the hectic programme and competitive matches did not give them much opportunity to hang around thinking about home and how much they missed it.

Challenges experienced: Football

Stanley reported that both the Form Ones and Two's found difficulty against Feyenoord, the toughest team they played against. He believes that the coaches need to work with the teams on some particular issues. In two games, they did not play at their full potential because they were afraid of the rival's name (team name). The opponents were still that little bit better than the NSS team, however, there wasn't as big a difference as the players' thought. Peter says:

Because we played against Feyenoord we were afraid to hold the ball. Even though Feyenoord were that little bit better than us, we were not up to our level. But, overall, I was very happy. To mention case by case, I was disappointed against Feyenoord with the Form Two's, because they were totally different from the other matches.

There were other occasions when they really needed to pull up their socks, for example, the young grouper against Spartak 20 in the last match. They played exceptionally well because they really wanted to finish off the week by winning the match. Thus, students could be seen to be developing more knowledge and understanding of how the game is played in different countries and needed to work further on enhancing their mental toughness and psycho-social skills necessary to survive and perform in such a pressurized situation.

As a small nation we constantly feel inferior when playing bigger nations, bigger clubs...it seems to be ingrained in our mentality and it is something we really need to challenge ourselves to remove from our mind. We constantly think that others are better than us, have more funds than us, are more talented than us, they have made it, we haven't.... Definitely, it was important to create awareness of and experience, different philosophies of training and playing through the different playing styles of the various teams NSS students played against. As a sport psychologist, working with Malta's top athletes, I constantly seek ways to help athletes understand and manage their thoughts of how other teams are bigger and better than us and develop the

necessary coping skills. Such reflection helps me to improve my understanding of how reflective practice may help athletes improve their performance (Neil, Cropley, Wilson & Faull, 2013). Working to develop skills such as critical thinking and keeping an open mind is important as asking individuals to engage in reflective practice may not engage them in effective experiential learning. Reflective practice, needs to be influenced not only by the mentioned skills/attributes but also by the knowledge and understanding an individual possesses of how to engage in such a process (Cropley et al., 2010). The Maltese, need to go back and think of how our little nation fought so hard in so many ways over the years to make sure our island remained in our hands.... Despite our smallness we have had our successes and we need to focus on this rather than the things we cannot control...our opponents... our lack of funding and so on (1.8).

The coaches' experience

The coaches have a lot of experience in football, as former players and as coaches and they believe they have seen nearly everything, however, Peter believes he learnt from the children themselves whilst Stanley stated that 'You always take something with you'. Mills and colleagues' (2014) study suggests that those working within elite youth football settings (e.g., coaches, sport psychologists) need to thoroughly consider expert perceptions of best-practice as this may help academies to improve their environment and lay the groundwork for a strong organizational culture. Both coaches have vast experience, have travelled extensively for football reasons and are capable of applying what they have seen and what they have learnt from others. The coaches are also very approachable and this trip helped the young players to build their confidence around these coaches due to the time spent together. Thus, as suggested by Park and colleagues (2013), identifying the specific roles of coaches and significant others, and their influence on athletes' career development may help athletes use their support system effectively to deal with the challenges of transition. The coaches who were present with the children on the trip believed that they enhanced their relationship with the students and, thus, students saw the coaches as more approachable and will in the future, be more comfortable discussing with them challenges they may face. Thus

aim (iii) of enhancing coaching staff's knowledge and understanding so as to be able to prepare young players better, was achieved.

So, despite the coaches feeling that possibly they didn't learn all that much from the experience itself, due to the fact that they have been abroad in so many countries as players and coaches, with both young and top players, still, they felt they did learn from the children themselves (and their relationship with the students was enhanced) and this helped to achieve aim (iii) since coaching staff's awareness and experience of the challenges the young players experience including cultural differences and different philosophies of training was enhanced through this experience in Holland. Being able to reflect on a more critical level may be more useful to learning achieved from reflective practice (Neil et. al., 2013) as the coaches can now go on to develop more awareness with other players in the school. One of the areas I believe we can improve on in Malta, in sport, is experience. As a sport psychologist practicing on the island, I felt stuck in a rut after a few years practicing here. I realised that if I was not going to pursue my education further, attend international conferences, go abroad and visit clubs, discuss with and observe other sport psychologists in action, were possible, I would remain in the same place, with the same knowledge. Within just a few months of commencing my PhD studies, I felt a change in the way I was working with athletes, I felt myself growing in my work. This is similar to what was reported by a practitioner in Tod and Bond's (2010) study, who stated that reflecting on formal education influenced her practice by widening her theoretical positioning and by increasing awareness of her influence during practice (Cropley, Baldock, Mellalieu, Neil, Wagstaff & Wadey, 2016). The same can be said for coaches, players and any other professions really. Effort needed to be made to provide opportunities for coaches to travel overseas and learn from the experience. However, sadly, funding was always going to be an issue I felt. It was up to the coaches, professionals concerned, to provide opportunities for themselves to learn (1.8).

Evaluation: Parent (1.4)

Evaluation from one of the parents whose son was on the trip was also integrated into the action change strategy that aimed to provide a balanced perspective with regards to stakeholder evaluations. In this regard, the parent regarded the trip as largely successful, mainly due to two reasons: a) The fact that most of the children started experiencing what an independent life means and how to tackle certain situations, even relying on the help of friends,

apart from the headmaster and coaches; b) The experience of playing against one of the best football schools in Europe. This should have made all stakeholders concerned, aware of how much we need to work in order to compete at the highest levels.

Further, the parent reported that his son enjoyed the game against Feyenoord in which he felt that, although his team was overshadowed, he persevered, stood up to the challenge with no excuses and played as hard as he could, ultimately obtaining a very good performance. Secondly, his son appreciated the constant support he got from the administration staff throughout the trip. Thirdly, activities and excursions were very enjoyable. The parent went on to say that he sent his son on this trip with one objective in mind – that is; for him to continue the process of maturity following another trip which he had taken him on some months before. The parent felt that his expectations were met.

This was the first time that no family member was in the proximity and he did cope very well indeed, considering his character and attachment to us.

The parent believed that the itinerary has been scrutinised so many times that it would have been practically impossible to get something wrong. He believed however that next time round it would be beneficial to select the hotel based on more research, given that this was probably the only negative aspect. His son was homesick for the first day or so, mainly due to the fact that once he got in the hotel room, he realised that the rooms were tiny and that others anticipated him in selecting the top level bed (and didn't want to exchange beds). He felt claustrophobic, and this augmented his anxiety of being far away from his parents.

We did communicate with him in the first two nights, but he did his best to stand up to the challenge. He was the first to wake up and get ready in the morning so that he could place everything back in its place thus avoiding the confusion and clutter once everyone else was trying to prepare themselves. He kept his suitcase always closed and double checked everything to ensure that he doesn't lose or damage anything. As regards adapting to playing conditions, he did adapt well especially in the second and third game, but I do not recall him pointing out any particular specific communication with the foreign players; it was mainly casual playing dialogue.

The young player may have experienced physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional symptoms, including negative thoughts about the new environment as well as thoughts about home. He may have felt insecure, unhappy, anxious and lonely (Thurber & Walton, 2007). To manage homesickness, the coaches tried to keep the young players occupied in several activities, when in Holland, as suggested by Thurber & Walton (2007).

The parent felt that the aims of the trip had been achieved and that his son's knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates had been enhanced. His son had also developed a number of psycho-social competencies including the ability to adapt to living away from home, as well as responsibility, punctuality, communication and social skills needed to handle transitional related challenges.

In hindsight, I should have asked more parents for their feedback, so as to gather a better picture of what the parents felt their son had experienced. I asked this particular parent for his feedback since I knew that his son was the one who faced the most difficulty on this trip during the first two days due to homesickness. This parent also forms part of the parents' board of the school and is constantly involved in school decisions. Months later, his son is now so much better in communicating with others, in adapting to what is going on around him. Through my, as well as the parent's reflection, we believe that this has come about thanks to this trip and to the effort put in by the coaches, other staff, the parents and the child himself. It is not easy to adapt, even for children, to a tiny room with seven or so young people all crammed together... noises ... lack of space ... no time for yourself. But this is what they may have to face if they do migrate to play professional football overseas and, thus, it was a good test for them (1.8).

Evaluation: Students (1.1)

Face to face feedback was generated from three of the young football players who went on the trip to Holland. The boys felt it had been a great experience and one from which they learnt a lot. They reported that it took them a while to get used to the pitch conditions, weather conditions and other environmental conditions since these were different from

Malta. The first game turned out well especially since they scored immediately and this helped to boost their morale and show them that they had the level to give the opponents a good game. They were excited until they started their match, however, settled in after the first goal and felt focused. During the second match they faced a challenge and felt rather out of control since

the ball was getting stuck in the grass; we aren't used to playing on grass and we only trained on it three times before going abroad.

The boys expressed the wish that their club in Malta would adapt Spartak's way of doing things. After school they would like to go to the club, do their homework there, eat there, and train together. According to one of the young player's interviewed, "in his club they actually do this on Fridays". The boys believed that in the second game they were overconfident, the other team opened up too much and they did not adapt their game. They felt that, on the whole, they were responsible and things had gone well, they had enjoyed the experience and most importantly had learnt from the experience and developed a number of psycho-social competencies.

The young student athletes were also asked to give their feedback about their trip through power point presentations. The presentations were very good, coach Peter reported as it helped the staff understand the students' perspective better and this was vital to help the staff be able to prepare other young players better for transitional challenges. These presentations can be found in Appendix C (1.2).

Summary of Aims

As evidenced by the feedback from players, coaches and parents, it was felt that the aims of the change strategy (i.e., enhancing players' and coaches knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced during migration and developing players' psycho-social competencies to handle transitions), were met through the experience

in Holland. One can spend hours with young players trying to prepare them for transitions, but once they actually experience a temporary migration this can have so many more added benefits than just having educational based pre-migratory based workshops. Organisations may try to prepare those about to experience a migration with what they might expect and how to handle certain challenges. However, it frequently happens, that important but mundane issues are ignored whilst other issues handled superficially (Weissman & Furnham, 1987).

Whilst possibly the feedback gathered from students was not at the depth desired, one must keep in mind that it is not easy to get feedback from 11 year old children who are shy, still lack self-awareness and may not be comfortable speaking to someone they do not know so much. They tend to describe what happened rather than how they felt about the experience. In fact, a question arose as I was conducting this evaluation. At what age can children start reflecting? Practitioners in Neil and colleagues (2013) study have stated that reflective practice is a process that engages individuals in experiential learning, puts the 'whole self' at the core of learning, is prompted through questioning, results in change and requires clear learning. Being involved in such a process leads to a new understanding of the self and the environment one is in and this may help individuals in their daily lives. Through the experiences in Holland and by attempting to reflect on them, self-awareness is enhanced and this may not only help sport psychologists understand their coping needs and seek new ways to cope in future stressful situations (as stated in Cropley et al. 2016), but may also help athletes too. I find it rather amusing that whenever I enter the classrooms of young athletes and ask who would like to have a chat, most will put up their hand not knowing what they are going in for. It is even more amusing when I ask what they want to discuss and they are stuckvery often they are just curious to see how it all works! I find that it is so important at this age to build a comfortable relationship with these young players so that whenever they have any difficulties they do not hold back from seeking support. The same feeling was expressed by the coaches. It may still be taboo for some young players to show that they are facing difficulties, so, I believe, I need to work hard on this to show them that this is the norm, rather than something to be embarrassed about. It also helps tremendously, I believe, when an older talented player tells them about how useful they have found psycho-social support to be. Practice is seen to be effective when it is athlete-centred and when the practitioner is able to meet the needs of the client (Cropley et al., 2010). Helping young athletes develop an

ability to discuss and reflect on the challenges they face has been seen to enhance self-efficacy (Hanton, Cropley & Lee, 2009). It also encourages athlete autonomy (Faull & Cropley, 2009). (1.8).

Evaluation: Head of NSS (1.9)

The evaluation with the Head of NSS, who was also present on this trip took place some months later, during the summer holidays, when it was slightly easier to sit down and have a discussion with him. He commented on how happy he was with the way the NSS trip to Holland went and how much he felt that the players had grown from the experience, in terms of psycho-social development. However, he was not able to properly articulate this and unfortunately he did not allow me much time to delve deeper, but immediately went into how great it would be if the school could have more such opportunities.

I would like you to keep on working on the EU project, despite our application not being accepted last time round, so that, maybe, we get funds to organise such a trip once again. But, not because I want to dump it on you, you know I have a million and one things to do...I just don't have the time...it's become such a massive chore here ...so when I delegate don't take it that I am trying to get rid of doing it myself...I believe in you...

At the end of March 2015 the school had submitted an application for EU funds as had been agreed to in the action meeting in January 2015. The activities to be conducted if we were to be successful in achieving such funds were: (i) a training camp/competitive matches between the partner countries, (ii) workshops on psycho-social skills needed for transition, (iii) activities to promote responsibility and self-sufficiency, (iv) activities to enhance knowledge of other cultures, (v) and a conference in each partner country on a related topic of interest. However, since time was limited and our knowledge of these applications was inadequate we failed to receive a positive reply and, thus, failed to acquire the funds (See report received from the European Union Programmes Agency (EUPA) in Appendix E). However, we would work on it again and hope that this time round we would be successful.

I like working with the Head of NSS because he will tell you things as they are, no beating around the bush. He makes it a point to praise his staff where possible, he is a good motivator and is flexible in his approach. He also expects flexibility from others and gets disappointed if people let him down. I was afraid of what he would say once the application did not get accepted but he was very understanding and, although, no doubt, was disappointed, he once again put it into my hands to develop the programme better. Unfortunately the proposal, though seen as a positive application, needed to be amended with more detail, in particular with regard the funding needed. This was rather disappointing. I felt upset that it hadn't gone through but, somehow, I was relieved to, I must admit. I was wondering how I would cope with my PhD and also fully manage this EU project at the same time, besides my everyday work and lecturing. The number of roles that many practitioners have that may or may not be related to their work as applied sport psychologists is another stressor that may affect performance if it is not managed appropriately (Tod & Andersen, 2005). I was somewhat angry because I was left to manage the application of this project on my own at a time when I was still settling down into my new full time job at the NSS. The person who had promised to help was nowhere around when needed and I felt pretty lost in the financial section in particular. After receiving this report, I tried not to feel disheartened and pulled myself together immediately and looked for help by asking the foreign partners to help devise a structured programme we were to follow. I also emailed the stakeholders at the NSS demanding more help as this was an impossible task to do alone. It was then decided that we would resubmit the amended application by the next deadline in March 2016. Embracing this difficult situation allowed me to learn from the experience and I hoped it would help me improve on my work (Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004) (1.8).

6.5 Phase Two (July 2015-May 2016): Introduction EU Project to experience temporary migration/independent living

As had been agreed in the action and evaluation meeting at NSS, further work was to be conducted on the EU project application in the hope that we would get the necessary funds to travel once again with a different group of students so as to experience a temporary migration. Thus, at the end of September 2015 contact was made once again with one of the partners of the project who had more experience and expertise than we had. The Finnish partner promised to work on the application with us to help polish up our previous one in the hope that it would be accepted with our second try.

6.5.1 Application resubmitted in March 2016

The application was resubmitted at the end of March 2016, according to the EU deadline. We were then to wait for the results which would be out in around July 2016.

I had, once again, struggled so much to get this application fully completed. So many hours had been spent on researching and understanding all the technicalities of such application forms and projects. I got stuck once again on the financial part of the application and on Easter Sunday 2016, already highly pressurized with an International School Sport Federation World Championships that I, together with the Malta School Sport Federation, of which I was secretary, were organising, I was ready to throw in the towel. I am not sure how I didn't engage in plate throwing at home that day! I was so exhausted and stressed with it all. I wanted to submit the application that day as I knew I would be too busy in the following days with the tournament, however my online application could not get submitted without some major changes to the numbers of students to be involved. It really was not worth it, I felt.... All this work for the funds....and I had just found out that it would not be possible to engage as many students and staff as we had hoped. I was so frustrated and upset at once again getting so little help, apart from the Finnish partners and some help from the EUPA in Malta. I felt that I was not coping very well with this situation. Despite all the professional training and expertise I possessed in helping others cope with difficult situations, I did not seem to have the necessary coping strategies here and was feeling drained similar to what has been described by Fletcher, Rumbold, Tester and Coombes (2011). Despite trying to engage in problem focused coping by putting in a huge amount of effort and by trying to engage in time management (Cropley et al., 2016), this did not seem to be lowering the stress levels. At this point, I should have allocated myself some time and sought support from my supervisor to help me reflect so that I could be more effective (Cropley et al., 2010). This was the second and last time I would resubmit this application. In a way I even hoped it wouldn't get through, because this would only be the start of the project! So much more work needed to be done to then organise the exchanges with Cyprus and Finland. Finally I managed to send it through. That was a relief, and I made sure I let the Head know this time round that this just was not worth it. I needed to learn how to say no, I am not good at that at all. But I think this situation really woke me up to that fact and I was adamant this would not be my project, this would be the schools' project. I was not going to be working alone on it anymore I decided (1.8).

6.6 Pilot Phase (July-December 2014): Introduction Live in's/training camps NSS

In the focus groups conducted as part of the reconnaissance phase, live in's for NSS students where they are given responsibilities such as helping in the cooking and cleaning, take part in workshops, train, compete and live together were greatly emphasized by the parents. These were also given importance in the NSS action meeting. The Head and I, in our informal meeting prior to my moving full time to the school, had strategically planned live-ins for NSS students, in preparation, especially, for trips abroad with the school. The aim of such live ins was to develop players' psycho-social skills to be able to handle transitional challenges. Thus, an attempt was made to try and organise such a live in in November 2014 as part of the pilot phase of this action research programme. The Headmaster roped in a number of staff members to help organise the event and a plan was set out by him, focused on what he believed would be useful to the students, together with suggestions from me as to what I could be delivering myself as can be seen in the programme further below. At the point of planning of this live-in I was not yet a full-timer at the school and also I needed to undergo Anterior Cruciate and Meniscus Surgery and Rehabilitation, thus my input was not as extensive as I would have liked it to be.

6.6.1 Implementation and Monitoring

The first live in for students aged 11 and 12 was organised in the students' mid-term holidays. The location of the live in was in a school which also had a residential centre in a rural part of Malta. The live-in was run by a number of school staff members, including the Head of school and coaches as well as a few parents. The programme can be seen on the next page. During the live in, the students had the opportunity to practice their sport, meet a role model, engage in team building exercises, learn more about their sport and how to be better athletes, and also were obliged to help in domestic skills such as clearing up and other

chores (such as clean the showers) which might have been necessary during those two days. Engaging in domestic skills was seen to be important since players in Study One (Chapter Three) had reported that they did not have such skills and this caused additional challenges for them when they moved abroad to play professional football. Such skills helped students develop responsibility and independent living skills.



LIVE IN FORMS 1 & 2

Programme

Time	Monday 3 rd November, 2014	Time	Tuesday 4 th November, 2014
08:15	Arrival at Savio College. Brief Introduction followed by allocation of rooms and settling down.	7.17	Wake up Call
08:45	Meeting a Role Model – Gilbert Agius	8.00	Breakfast
10:00	Short Break	8.30	Self Confidence with Ms Adele Muscat
10:15	Teamwork and Team-play – Ms Adele Muscat	10.00	Students gather in changing room – pep talk.
12:15	Basic Manners	10.30	Match vs Hamrun Spartans U14 (Three sessions of 30 minutes)
12:45	Lunch & Washing Up	12.15	Showers
13:30	Group Walk	12.45	Lunch & Washing Up
14:15	Rest Time – students in respective rooms	13.30	Rest Time – students in respective rooms
16:00	Pep Talk	15.00	Snack Time
16:30	Training Session	15.30	Plenary Session – Evaluation & Conclusion
18:00	Showers	16.40	Room Check
18:30	Dinner & Washing Up	17.00	Mass with other Live In group– Parents invited
19:30	Fair Play & Basic Rules of the Game – Mr Adrian Casha Head of Referees	17.45	Farewell Reception
20:30	Animation Night & Football Quiz	18.30	Departure
22:00	Students all in respective rooms and in bed – Sleep		

Figure 6.2: Programme 1

6.6.2 Reflection and Review

Practitioner-Researcher Reflections (1.8)

Although I had been asked to conduct the evaluation session myself for the live-in conducted in November 2014, I abstained from doing this. Officially, I was away from work on sick leave due to the fact that I had just had anterior cruciate and meniscus surgery a week before. I was not even supposed to be out of the house, however, I did not want to let the headmaster down and, thus, informed him that I would be present to conduct my sessions. I had only been informed about the knee surgery a couple of days before the surgery itself since the surgeon who had conducted it was a sports colleague of mine who had fitted me in as soon as he managed to find a free slot. This left me with no time to make any plans or to change them. I was, at this point, in my last couple of weeks at the College where I was a sports co-ordinator and lecturer and just a few weeks before I was going to start work full-time at the NSS. I did not want to start on a sour note at the NSS with the cancellation of a work-related appointment; more over I did not want to finish off on a bad note at the College by being seen outside during what was supposed to be my sick leave period. Since the Head of NSS had invited the Parliamentary Secretary for Sports for this first live in, I felt I shouldn't be present and, thus, did not conduct or attend the evaluation. For this reason, I did not have any written or direct verbal feedback from the students regarding this live in. This was rather a difficult time. Surgery left its toll on me. I was without any energy, just trying to recover. The daily grind of rehabilitation exercises was exacerbating. Morning, afternoon and evening I would do an hour of painful exercises. At the same time I was trying to finish off the work I needed to do at the College before I left and I was also thinking about my upcoming work at the school. This was on top of the fact that I was trying to get my action meetings carried out and get on with my action research project. However, due to my inability to move much during this phase this had to be postponed for a while. Thus, the period July-December 2014 was seen as the pilot phase of the action research project since the work conducted was a test, far from being properly structured and appropriate action meetings had not officially been conducted as yet. However, this tentative phase was useful in helping me reflect and understand how the first phase was to work and how evaluation should be conducted as a need to evaluate practice and improve delivery effectiveness is vital (Cropley et al., 2007).

Although I knew some of the students at NSS since I had been involved at the school part-time for a while, I did not know the younger group. Students away from home are bound to be more boisterous and it was not easy to conduct my sessions hobbling along on crutches. However, they seemed to thoroughly enjoy a teamwork exercise which involved them preparing a costume that one of them needed to parade in, with paper

and cardboard. Young students need a lot of direction and you will always find those three or four who you will need to keep a special eye on because they will either laze around or mess up the team dynamics. I was not used to working with groups of such young players and it was a real challenge for me to cope and to manage to keep them under control. Young student-athletes will get easily bored and distracted, thus, one had to make sure that directions were clear and that the exercise needed to be amended depending on how they were reacting during that time. Reflecting on coping gave emphasis and purpose for my reflective practice (Cropley et al., 2016). Such reflection should be purposeful (Hanton et al., 2009) and in this case has helped me understand the usefulness of an athlete-centred approach and see how psychological techniques can be adapted to fit a client's personality or the situation the skills will be used in (Cropley et al., 2007). Gaining experience through reflective practice helped me familiarize myself with the stress of keeping boisterous children under control and engaged. Such familiarization and rationalization of the effects of such a stressor was bound to help me cope better in future similar situations (Hanton, Cropley, Neil, Mellalieu & Miles, 2007). Although evaluation was not formally done, students reported and were seen to be having fun and found attending the live in useful in developing skills.

6.6.3 Phase One (January-June 2015): Introduction Live in (2)

It was felt by the Head of NSS that the first live-in had been successful in terms of the development of players' psycho-social competencies as parents' had reported to him the enhancement of a number of skills including basic manners and the ability to get on with others. The live-in was well enjoyed by the students and thus a second was planned for February 2015 with some amendments to the programme to cater for an older year group who were already experiencing more challenging situations in their sport including attending trials overseas. Thus it was felt by the practitioner-researcher and the coaches that players need to know more about the challenges of migration. The location was kept the same due to its great location and which also offered suitable accommodation and sports facilities.

6.6.4 Implementation and Monitoring

The programme of live-in (2) can be seen on the next page (Fig. 6.3). Together with the Head, staff and parents of the NSS, the Form Three students (21 in all) attended a two day live in away from the school premises in February 2015. Over these two days the players attended several talks and conducted activities specifically designed to help them develop specific migration related knowledge and independence skills. Students had to clean and wash the dishes after each meal, thus giving them the opportunity to be more responsible and independent as recommended by Stambulova & Ryba (2013) who have looked at athletes' narratives and have seen that many careers are terminated because the athletes were unable to adapt in transitions. During these two days, in which the students also slept there, they had sessions with a role model in football as suggested by Martindale and colleagues (2005). I, as the sport psychologist of the school, conducted four sessions solely directed to help them through transitions and the many challenges they might have to face over the next couple of years. This was in line with sessions conducted in the United Kingdom as reported by Park and colleagues (2013). The sessions were entitled 'Challenges Faced by Top Maltese Players' which dealt with challenges of migration, in particular the challenges players in the reconnaissance phase spoke about. Quotes by the players were also discussed and players promised to become more aware of taking on responsibility. The session on the 5C's (Harwood, 2008) was met well with students individually being asked questions to create awareness of the communication, confidence, commitment, concentration and control they may be required to demonstrate in training and matches. The session on preparing for trials and dealing with scouts was met well as they had no knowledge whatsoever of the subject and were curious about what to expect.



LIVE IN FORM 3

Programme

Time	Monday 16 th February, 2015	Time	Tuesday 17 th February, 2015
08:15	Arrival at Savio College. Brief Introduction followed by allocation of rooms and settling down.	7.15	Wake up Call
08:45	Talk by Role Models in Sport	8.00	Breakfast
10:15	Short Break	8.30	<i>'Dealing with Scouts and being prepared for trials'</i> - Ms Adele Muscat
10:45	<i>'Challenges faced by athletes when they move abroad to become professional players'</i> – Ms Adele Muscat	10.00	Students gather in changing room – pep talk
12:15	Short break	10.30	Match (football vs Hamrun Spartans)
12:30	Lunch & Washing Up	12.15	Showers
13:30	Group Walk	12.45	Lunch and Washing up
14:30	Rest Time – students in respective rooms	13.30	Rest Time – students in respective rooms
15:30	Training Session	15.00	Snack Time
17:30	Showers	15.30	Evaluation & Conclusion
18:30	Dinner & Washing Up	16.40	Room Check
19:30	The 5C's (Commitment, Communication, Concentration, Control, Confidence) Ms Adele Muscat	16.50	Departure
20:30	Animation Night & Sports Quiz		
21:30	Relaxation Session – Ms Adele Muscat		
22:00	Students all in respective rooms and in bed – Sleep		

Figure 6.3: Programme 2

6.6.5 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Students (1.6; 1.7)

The evaluation session was conducted with the students at the end of the two days live-in by the Head of School and myself, the practitioner-researcher, and took approximately one hour to conduct. Reflection and evaluation needs to be ‘honest’ and a good way to do this would be by getting feedback from the clients, in this case, the student-athletes themselves (Cropley et al., 2010). Students were divided into groups of four or five and were asked to reflect and answer the following questions ‘What are you taking back with you from this live-in?’ and ‘What would you suggest including in future live ins?’.

Answers to the first question included: respect; maturity; the 5C’s; more independence from, and living without parents; identifying and dealing with scouts; the five pillars of football; table-manners; washing up (all students having a role in this) and teamwork. This showed that players’ felt they were developing the required psycho-social competencies to be able to handle future transitional challenges. Answers to the second question included: Having a longer live-in (ideally five days); wearing casual clothes rather than the uniform; having more fun games; a later bedtime (here the issue of having a match the next day was discussed); more role model talks; more activities; film in the evening; longer rest time in which they could also go for a walk or play games; a better breakfast; a small reception with parents at the end; a night hike or treasure hunt; more workshops where they could work together; training camp abroad; visit to the chapel rather than mass.

Students were also asked; ‘How did you feel about the live-in?’ Scores were given on a likert scale from one being ‘I did not enjoy it at all’ to ten being ‘I really enjoyed the live-in’. All students scored above eight and had the following to say: we laughed a lot but were serious during training; would have liked Wi-Fi; would have liked a longer live in and

more role models; felt part of the group; we talked a lot, we enjoyed it; creative live in and got to know teammates better.

Wi-Fi was probably the area most mentioned as the reason for not giving a full score of 10 which shows just how difficult today's teenagers find it to be without the means of technology and social media. I referred to an example of a player who recently went on a trial to Italy and felt unable to survive in this place due to the fact that there was no Wi-Fi available and he felt he couldn't communicate. On my part, I expected them to speak more about the topics we had had sessions on, making me doubt what information they actually did take in, and fearing that most of it just went in and out of their mind. This was rather frustrating after all the work and energy put into the presentations and delivery. However, effective practice needs to be athlete-centered so as to meet the athletes' needs. Thus, it is important to develop a working agreement with the client, create activities that are evidence-based and engage in reflective practice so as to learn from the experience (Cropley et al., 2010). One may need to look at different ways of getting the message across, not resorting to just talks and discussions. It is also important to engage different stakeholders into this educational process. Parents may be vital here since students spend so much time with them at home. One-to-one work with the players would also be beneficial to get the information across better. Since the session with the role model went so well, mentoring by senior players may be a better way of getting the message across. The players (21 in all) are still young, 13 years of age, and may still be too immature to realise the significance of all of this (1.8).

6.6.4 Implementation and Monitoring

Evaluation: NSS Coaches (1.3)

Evaluation for the first and second live-ins was also conducted with the coaches of the NSS who were involved in the live-ins conducted so far. This was conducted in June 2015.

Developing Psycho-Social Competencies

According to coach Peter, live-ins are useful in helping to develop life skills, knowledge and understanding needed for life and sport transitions, however, possibly,

we weight it down too much with lectures. There must be more variety, we need to include other things, not just lectures, training, lectures.

Peter felt that the educational process of such live-ins should happen not just through formal methods (such as lectures) but through informal and practical ways since this was more likely to be remembered and accepted by the students. This was also something the students mentioned in their feedback. Peter felt that there are other activities that can be organised as sometimes he feels it may be dull.

But a live in for me is very important; getting used to eating together as a group You don't just get up and move away when you're ready, you wait for your friends. Do not forget that these players at home they don't eat as a whole family together, these days. That's very bad...and, most probably, we eat with an open tablet in front of us. When we're ready we get up and leave... in the live in they are not allowed to do this.

A number of students today were not being taught psycho-social skills at home due to the fact that parents' worked long hours and possibly did not have the time or energy to invest in teaching their children such skills. Thus it was becoming more and more the responsibility of schools to try and do this. Stanley goes on to say that certain guidelines had been established for the live in so that there is more team work and so that players' would enhance their knowledge and understanding of what it means and what skills are required to be able to live in harmony with others, something some of them might have to do later on in life, if they moved abroad for football reasons and had to live in an academy with others.

The reality is that coach Peter and I are the two most involved in the design of the live in programmes as well as the running of the said programmes. We worked on a draft the Head had given us and inserted our own ideas, however, young people get bored easily, and thus, at every live in, this programme will need to be amended to make sure students attend and enjoy the experience and will hopefully want to attend again in the future. These students are very active and sitting still for a long time listening to invited speakers might not be the best way to teach them certain aspects. Maybe, I took on too much responsibility for the live in's in February 2015 and delivered too many of the sessions myself and spent too much time with the students. This exhausted me to the extent that I was unwell during and after the live in itself. Whilst other staff members kept away and took the mid-term holidays off, Coach Peter and I were taken up by the live in and spent most of the two days there keeping the lively students occupied. Though the end result is very satisfying, especially when you receive good feedback from students, parents and the Head, the reality is that it is very tiring, the two days

are packed and, thus, we need to introduce people the students do not know to deliver some of the sessions. For the live in of November 2015, I decided to deliver less sessions myself and bring in more speakers and role models to help out to make the sessions more diverse. Possibly, they have got used to me too much at the school and they need someone else they are not used to in order to deliver a different perspective in certain areas. I was also noticing that I was spending more time at work and away from home and thus was exposing myself to a disproportionate work-life balance. This needed to change and I felt the need to engage more in emotion focused coping strategies (Cropley et al., 2016), such as trying to work less and having breaks in the countryside where I felt I was truly able to relax and unwind (1.8).

Evaluation: Parent (1.4)

Feedback was also sought from a parent who was on the parent board of the school. He believes live-ins are very useful especially because they aim at addressing cooperation and relationship building, skills needed to be able to handle transitional challenges (Larsen et al., 2014). For him, teamwork is something which needs to be taught and practiced repeatedly because the more time passes the more selfish people are becoming and the more relationships form for the wrong reasons, based on mutual short term objectives rather than trust and respect. In fact, he believed that more team live ins should be organised in the future so as to strengthen the character of the athletes by allowing them to face real life situations in a controlled learning environment. Applying psychological principles and techniques to induce psych behavioural change in athletes, so as to enhance personal growth as well as performance and the sport experience, has been seen to be an effective practice (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney & Robinson, 2002). The parent believed that three days would be the ideal time frame for such objectives to be met. From his son's point of view, he enjoys every moment of such activities. However, the parent believed that the children should be grouped differently. He suggested to group children alphabetically so that cliques do not form, since these, potentially disrupt the scope of the live-in. It would also be beneficial to appoint different leaders for each day in the live-in who will take care of groups (such as ensuring that

the group cleans up after lunch, drink appropriate amounts of water, follow the dress code, and so on).

Definitely, leadership is one area we greatly need to work on. Due to the fact that most parents do everything for their children in Malta, as stated in the reconnaissance phase by the players who migrated to play professional football overseas, and also, by parents and coaches in the focus groups, children do not have much opportunity to develop their leadership skills unless these are pushed at the school and in their sport sessions. In my work as a sport psychologist with young players at the MFA and several clubs, I find that we have very few leaders on the pitch. Few players are able to move their team mates when things are not going well, communication is weak and, often, players will blame each other if something goes wrong in a match. Unless young players are given responsibilities at home, school and at the football nursery when they are young, I believe that they will not develop leadership qualities they will need later on in their life. Thus, such responsibilities would be emphasized even further in future live ins (1.8).

Evaluation: Head of NSS (1.9)

An evaluation session was then conducted with the Head of NSS in the summer, prior to the next scholastic year. With regards to the live ins, the Head felt that the students needed a bit of a change in the environment to be created to help develop certain life skills such as coping in less comfortable environments (possibly cramped and uncomfortable accommodation - tents), respecting other's privacy and looking after their belongings amongst others. Whilst there would be a live-in once again in November for the older students, the school would try to organise a camp for the Form Two students later on during the year. One of the parents had already offered to help to organise it together with one of the teachers. I, the practitioner-researcher was asked to liaise with the teacher and parent to see how I could help out.

The above strategy was part of a longer evaluation meeting which dealt with a number of topics apart from the live ins. The Head is always in a rush with too many things to do and, rather than discussing and reflecting on what had already been done, he was intent on moving forward and focusing on conducting further live ins.

I felt, at times, that we (Staff development team) were trying to do too much at the school, it seemed that the Head wanted or felt the need to prove himself. He was constantly trying to invent new things, new projects, but was failing to stop, evaluate and reflect. Whilst, I was doing this myself, in terms of the areas related to my work and research, since reflection helps practitioners look at how they can apply their knowledge and skills to the context they are working in so as to be more effective (Cropley et al., 2010), he never really listened to what was coming out in the evaluation sessions. He was just keen to do more, to continue on what we were doing. This was frustrating at times, it seemed we were in a constant rush against time to keep up with the many activities the Head wanted to organise. We did however, at times, focus on doing something different rather than doing more of the same, and this, I guess, served well as it gave the students more opportunity to experience different situations and learn from them. (1.8).

6.6.6 Phase Two (July 2015-May 2016): Introduction Live in (3)

Following on from the mostly positive feedback received by the students, staff and parent, it was agreed during a meeting at the beginning of the scholastic year, that live-ins would take place once again as they were seen as a good opportunity to help young student-athletes to develop psycho-social and independence skills which would help them in various areas of their life. Following on from the previous live-ins, it was felt that students should learn how to prepare simple and nutritious meals since many reported that when parents were not at home to prepare food for them, most would just cook some ‘instant noodles’ or pizza ‘out of a box’. Importance was also placed on students being able to communicate ‘the right things’ to the media when the time came for them to be interviewed as they progressed through their footballing career. The next live-in would take place in November 2015 with a camp then taking place for a younger age group later on during the scholastic year (second phase table on pg. 171). This time round, I was given full responsibility for the planning of

this live-in with just some minor feedback from the Head of School. The programme of Live in Three can be seen in Figure 6.4.

6.6.7 Implementation and Monitoring

During the mid-term holidays in November 2015, 25 Form Three and Form Four students attended a Live in. Over these two days the students attended several workshops and conducted activities that aimed to develop skills related to independence, as had been emphasized in the evaluations of previous live in's, and as suggested by several Practitioner-Researchers (Littlewood, 2005; Richardson et al., 2005; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Students were divided into groups and had to clean and wash the dishes after each meal, thus giving them the opportunity to be more responsible and independent. During these two days, the students had a talk with a well-known role model in football, Luis Oliviera, who spoke to them about the challenges he had had as a young player, in particular, the lack of food available at home when he was just a child. The students then learnt how to prepare a healthy meal with nutritious ingredients – couscous, together with a nutritionist. Ms Gerada also spoke to the students about her career as an athlete and how tough dealing with injury had been for her. After lunch the students went for a walk and then trained with two guest coaches. In the evening we all watched a film.

The next day the students had an interesting session with a sports journalist on what to expect in an interview and how to go around answering certain tricky questions. The students then played a match against a local U15 team. Later on in the afternoon another walk was organised for them with the live in ending with an evaluation of all that had happened. The students reported enjoying the two days together and were looking forward to developing the skills learnt even further.



LIVE IN FORM 3 & 4

2nd and 3rd November, 2015

Programme

Time	Monday 2 nd November, 2015	Time	Tuesday 3 rd November, 2015
08:15	Arrival at Savio College. Brief Introduction followed by allocation of rooms and settling down.	7.00	Wake up Call
08:45	Talk by Role Model in Sport	7.45	Breakfast
10:15	Short Break	8.30	Workshop on Handling the Media - Sports Journalist Chris Cauchi
10:45	Preparing Healthy Snacks Practical Session – Nutritionist Ms Lara Gerada	10.00	Students gather in changing room – pep talk (football)
12:15	Short break	10.30	Match
12:30	Lunch & Washing Up	12.15	Showers
13:30	Walk	12.45	Lunch and Washing Up
14:30	Rest Time – students in respective rooms	13.30	Rest Time – students in respective rooms
15:30	Training Session	15.00	Snack Time
17:30	Showers	15.30	Plenary Session – Evaluation & Conclusion
18:30	Dinner & Washing Up	16.15	Room Check
19:30	Sports Film	16.30	Departure
21.00	Board Games		
22:00	Students all in respective rooms and in bed – Sleep		

Figure 6.4: Programme 3

6.6.8 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Students (1.6; 1.7)

Evaluation was conducted at the end of the live in, as suggested by Alferman and Stambulova (2007). This lasted approximately 30 minutes. It was decided that a written evaluation and verbal feedback would be obtained from the students. A written evaluation was sought so that students could report back anonymously, and say what they really felt the live in meant for them. As the students were restless and tired after a match and a walk, a written evaluation helped to calm them down and conduct the evaluation better than if it were done verbally.

Students reported that the activities they enjoyed the most were: the football match (x 10 students); training (x 9); rest time (x 6); film (x 12); talks (x 5) (media talk x 4; role model talk x 6). Students were happy with the food provided and with being allowed to choose their rooms/roommates. They believed that the following could be improved: more rest/sleep (x 10) (rest time got changed to walks x 11); more interesting walks (walk was long) x 2); more special guests (x 2); less talks; a longer live in (x 4); movie; more football sessions (x 2); Wi-Fi (x 2); juice (x 9); breakfast/food (x 3); fun games (x 2) (games room x 2; table tennis x 3; futsal x 3; table soccer x 2; treasure hunt; board games x 3). Students believed that they learnt: how to be independent/responsible/organised (x 10); how to sweep/wash and clean (x 2); how to work as a group (x 3); how to be professional; how to handle interviews/journalists (x 6); about the life of a footballer (x 3); show respect; how to cook (x 10).

An overview of the above gives us an indication that the students believed that they had acquired a number of skills for independent living: they also wanted more spirited activities, including fun games, and more sport. However, the walks did not go down well on the other hand. One must also note that the rest time was changed to a walk on the second

day because the students were making too much noise inside and it was believed that they would not calm down. More active workshops with our guest speakers seem to have gone down well and so did the film.

Evaluation: Parents (1.5)

The parents' perceptions on live ins was seen as being important and thus evaluation was conducted with a group of 10 parents (female) who stayed over after a parent talk in January 2016 to give feedback on a number of issues. This was conducted in a focus group setting. I, as Practitioner-Researcher spoke about the importance of live-ins in helping to develop independence skills. However, I wanted to understand better why some students didn't attend. Parents felt that the live-ins were centred only round football and they believed that students should be practicing other sports activities as well, not just football. They also stated that their children have training with the club at times during these live-ins and wouldn't be in a position to miss the club training.

Parent (ix) – Maybe, there should be a camping activity at the beginning of the year and another towards the end. Just pick a weekend because these children always have something; maybe they could leave after school and stay till Saturday evening. If you try and change certain things you will be able to target different children.

Certain things in the programme could be amended to accommodate the students and to develop social and other skills as requested by the parents.

One is bound not to be able to please everyone. Some students wanted more football, others wanted less. Some wanted walks, others didn't. Some wanted more rest time, some wanted less rest time. But a recurrent reason for not attending the live-ins was the fact that students already had other commitments: trips abroad for sport, their clubs' training camps, league matches, private lessons, training sessions, etc., on the days of the live ins. You would always find some who could not make it for these reasons. This was understandable. However, there were always those who, you realised, never attended, because their parents seemed to think that the live ins were not useful, and a waste of time. Were these children being given enough opportunity by their parents to develop skills related to independence, leadership and teamwork? If we were trying to change the mentality in

the country, did we have to make the live in's and such activities compulsory and conduct them during school hours so that all the students had to attend? This was not a bad idea, however, it would require so much more human resources and, no doubt, the Head would be involved in so many more arguments with some of the parents who make it so difficult for him and the school to run certain activities (1.8).

6.6.9 Introduction Camping Trip

Following on from the live ins, and, as had been discussed in the evaluation meeting with the Head prior to the start of the scholastic year, a camping trip was planned to be organised next for the NSS students, the Form Two students, in February 2016. It was felt that a more challenging environment should be adopted to put the students in a more demanding environment where they needed to learn how to cope. One of the parents, who was a soldier in the Armed Forces of Malta, was the leader and organiser of this camping trip and he, together with one of the Physical Education teachers at the school, who was also their Form co-ordinator, engaged in preparing the programme of the camping activity. This was to take place in an enclosed place in the countryside and students would sleep in tents, with very little personal space and comfort. Players who moved abroad needed to be able to adapt to any kind of living arrangements and in close proximity to other players.

6.6.10 Implementation and Monitoring

The programme of this camping trip can be seen in Figure 6.5. During these two days, students had the opportunity to participate in a number of activities they had never engaged in before, such as, camping itself, archery, campfire time and a night hike. Adapting to new activities would be challenging for some and the staff and I who were present at certain times during this camping trip to give a helping hand in running the events were keen to see how some of the students would cope and adapt.

Friday 26th February 11.30am Departure from school 12.00am Arrival at Dwejra and settling-in 1.30pm Team-building games 2.30pm Wasteserv talk 4.00pm Tea and snack time; Clearing-up 5.00pm Free time 6.00pm Campfire story telling 7.30pm Campfire dinner; Clearing-up 9.00pm Night hike 10.30pm Back to camp	Saturday 27th February 7.00am Rise and Shine! Preparation for breakfast 7.30am Breakfast; Clearing-up 9.00am Archery Session 11.30am Karate Session 12.30pm Preparation for walk and clearing-up 1.00pm Historical Walk 2.30pm Art Workshop 4.00pm Teatime and Clearing-up 5.00pm Free-time 6.30pm BBQ Final preparations 7.00pm Camp-fire BBQ night with parents	Sunday 28th February 8.00am Rise and Shine! Breakfast; Clearing-up 9.30am Mass 10.30am Mini tournaments 12.30am Lunch 1.30pm Clearing-up 2.30pm Striking the camp 3.30pm Departure
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Figure 6.5: Schedule Camping

6.6.11 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Students (written description)

Three students were asked to collectively write an evaluative report on the camping experience. Initially the plan was to conduct a focus group discussion with the students at the end of the camping trip, however, due to the weather conditions worsening this could not be done and thus students were asked to write a written report which can be found below.

After all that studying, at least the exams were over and we, the Form Two students, were looking forward to the camping trip where we were going to spend the weekend together. On Friday morning we (the students) went to school as usual, however, at 11.00am we left school for the camping site. When we arrived we met the people who were going to be our leaders and they explained to us what was going to happen during the stay. Later, we were divided into three groups and we went into our tents. We were 11 in a tent. After settling down we had some free time and so we played volleyball and a game we call 'prisoners' with our teachers who had come to visit us. Then, we had an interesting talk on recycling.

Before dinner we had more opportunity to play games and also met an author who came over to read us some stories by the campfire. After dinner we prepared for the night

hike. A lot of us were excited as this was our first time we were camping and on a night hike, and, armed with torches, we took off with our leaders. The next morning we woke up earlier than usual since we were feeling cold and we were also excited at being together away from home. The weather was great and so we went for a walk in the valley. Here, we could see where they used to bury the dead in the past. After the walk we had archery and karate. Archery required one to be relaxed and we found it to be a very technical sport. During karate we were taught how to defend ourselves. Then we were given some time to relax after lunch. In the evening our parents were invited to join us for a barbeque. The Head was there too. After a busy day we all slept early. In the morning we had difficulty waking up however the smell of breakfast helped. Unfortunately, it was very windy on Sunday and our camping trip had to stop there. We dismantled everything and then our parents picked us up. It was a great opportunity which we really enjoyed. We learned how to be more independent and how to work together as a team.

Evaluation: Camp Organiser/Parent (1.4)

In his written report, the camp organiser had the following to say. This camping activity, held in February 2016 at Dwejra, Malta was part of the informal education programme related to outdoor education of Form Two students attending the NSS. Organising an activity for students, the majority of whom had never experienced any form of outdoor activity, required meticulous planning especially where related to logistics and safety of participants. Logistical planning included choosing the right tents, equipping the area with the necessary safety equipment and sanitary facilities and compiling a list of things needed to prepare meals for the whole group. In order to organise all this, setting-up a team of human resources was a must, with each member of the team assigned a specific role. This led to the smooth running of both the pre-planning and the actual camp. A varied programme of events was the result of numerous brainstorming sessions during which the whole team participated. It included a range of activities ranging from actual camping skills to trekking, creativity sessions, informative sessions and also free time during which our students had the opportunity to get to know each other better.

Some of the students adapted well to the camping environment while others struggled more to settle down. Maybe, a bit more briefing, beforehand, on what was expected from them when working in groups, could have worked better. Some of the groups ignored their duties completely, with others always ending up covering for them. Students also needed

more time to let off steam and more space where to let their creativity develop. Certain activities might have been too structured for an outdoor environment that invited continuous exploring and discovery.

On the whole, this camping activity was a success. Feedback by leaders, parents and the students themselves was very positive. The students experienced what it means to live so close to the environment, they learnt a number of psycho-social skills including what it means to live with a group where mutual help and trust are a must and, above all, sharing a learning and enjoyable experience with their closest friends.

I, myself, was present for part of this camping trip and could see that some students did not have much experience of camping and of coping in such an environment. Sleeping was an issue, behaviour too was an issue, and in an outdoor environment there are so many more risks one has to keep note of with young students. However, I believe that this was a good change from the live-ins and change is sometimes necessary to help the students grow, develop new psycho-social and life-skills including coping with living in a cramped environment, taking personal responsibility for their belongings and that of others and adapting to environmental conditions. It is also important to keep the students interested in attending activities organised by the school, aimed to help develop a holistic education. I am a strong believer of the benefits of outdoor education and this camping trip reminded me greatly of the many challenges I myself faced when engaging in one of my overseas adventure trips. I love adventure sports, have climbed a couple of mountains all over the world and have collected a number of nerve-wrecking experiences along the way. These included getting lost on Mt. Etna volcano on the island of Sicily due to the very heavy fog and needing to be rescued. I needed to be able to cope in a situation where a friend of mine developed hypothermia whilst another had panic attacks. I still recall holding his hand throughout the stressful hours and engaging in the same techniques I taught my athletes to keep him calm. Some months later I attempted Mt. Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa at 5895m. We experienced the worst snowfall and rainfall in 25 years and I started to develop cerebral oedema on the final push to the summit. I dug deep into my mental strength and I believe that my mind won over my body that day. I summited successfully but I had risked my life. I still believe, even though this experience happened ten years ago, that what happened on that night strongly affected the way I work with athletes. Reflecting on such life experiences where I, myself needed to be mentally tough helped me develop a number of coping skills (Cropley et al., 2016). Students too needed to develop mental toughness and survival skills if they were hoping to have a professional career in football in an environment characterized by high tension and pressure as well as

insecurity. Camping in the outdoors created tense situations due to the lack of personal space and students needed to adapt and cope with situations they were not used to such as the lack of home comforts (1.8).

6.7 Summary and Conclusion: Strategy One

It was felt that the range of activities implemented within Strategy One were effective in achieving the original aims. Specifically, feedback indicated that the **temporary migratory trip to Holland** was found to be highly useful and successful, to the extent that it was reported that little else could be improved for a future trip. It appeared that players gained considerable knowledge on the challenges to be faced when migrating and have developed a number of important psycho-social skills, such as personal responsibility, leadership, communication to be better equipped to cope with future challenges within a migratory based transition. Whilst coaches reported having had a lot of experience already, they too believed that they learnt from the students themselves. The NSS embarked on applying for **EU grants** so as to continue to provide such opportunities for other students. In August 2016, the NSS was informed that it has been successful in achieving an EU grant of 98,000 Euro (in total; 38,000 Euro of them to be administered by the NSS) to be used to develop further the preparation for migration of future players (Appendix E).

In addition to the temporary overseas migration that players experienced, the domestic **live ins** were considered highly popular, with improvements being made in the subsequent live in's that were planned for the players. More specifically, this related to enhancing the psycho-social learning experience and skill based development for the NSS students. The final live in was changed to a **camping** trip so as to provide an alternative activity for the students. Such activities are intended to continue taking place into the next scholastic year so as to target other students and to continue developing the important psycho-social competencies of coping with the demands of transition, goal-setting as well as reflection

amongst others as recognised by several authors (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Harwood, 2008; Larsen et al., 2014). In summary it is believed that the aims of Strategy One have been achieved through the activities organised for student-athletes and their coaches:

- i. To enhance **players'** knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates to play professional football overseas
- ii. To develop **players'** psycho-social competencies to be able to handle transitional challenges
- iii. To **enhance coaching staff's** knowledge and understanding of the above in order to be able to prepare young players better for transitional challenges.

Sport psychologists, and other support staff within organisations, must keep in mind that it may not be enough to teach young players psycho-social skills, but may need to provide opportunities where players can fully engage in such skills. Players must be put into challenging situations where they need to survive on their own, albeit with support from others. Creating opportunities for coaching/ support staff to learn more about the challenges faced in different countries and cultures, by providing them with the opportunity to connect with organisations and personnel in other countries is vital in creating more awareness.

6.8 Strategy Two: Psycho-Social Support and Development of Young Players

In consultation with the NSS and MFA management, the following aims were developed to specifically focus on the psycho-social support and development of young players in preparation for migratory based transitions:

- i. To enhance **players** (coaches) knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates to play professional football overseas,
- ii. To develop **players'** psycho-social competencies and skills to be able to manage transitional challenges.

It was expected that these aims would be achieved by holding regular player education sessions (including role-model sessions with top athletes some of whom had experienced a migration) for **NSS** and **MFA** footballers (and coaches) on psycho-social competencies, skills, and transition awareness. A job exposure experience where students were sent out to different workplaces for a week to experience what it would be like working in a particular setting was also included (See macro overview in Table 6.3).

Table 6.3. Strategy Two: Psycho-Social Support and Development of Young Players

Actions Delivery	Aims	Stakeholders of Delivery	Methods of Evaluation	Findings
1b. To hold regular player education sessions for NSS and MFA footballers on psycho-social skills and transition awareness.	i. To enhance players' knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates to play professional football overseas (2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 2.4; 2.5; 2.9)	NSS/MFA Psychologist Senior Role Models Other speakers NSS/MFA staff NSS parents NSS guidance teachers Job exposure managers	2.1. Interview with MFA Director 2.2. Written/ verbal feedback from all U16/U17/U19 MFA players 2.3. Written feedback (1), focus group (10) NSS parents 2.4. Focus groups (2) NSS players 2.5. Interview (2) coaches 2.6. Reflective journal job exposure NSS students (2) 2.7. Interview on job exposure with NSS guidance teacher 2.8. Focus group on job exposure with NSS students (6) 2.9. Written comments from job exposure managers (2) 2.10. Practitioner-researcher's reflections 2.11. Interview with NSS Head	- Individual cases a priority - Role model sessions favoured - More practical sessions and variety of topics for NSS students - More sport psychology sessions requested at NSS - Players at the FA to be given chores - Players at NSS and MFA found to have benefitted greatly from the sessions conducted.
To include, too, a job exposure experience and role model sessions for NSS students.	ii. To develop players' psycho-social competencies to be able to handle transitional challenges (2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 2.4; 2.6; 2.7; 2.8; 2.9; 2.10)			

Table 6.4: Timeline: Strategy Two Pilot and Phase One NSS

PILOT PHASE							FIRST PHASE					
2014/2015	July 14	Aug 14	Sept 14	Oct 14	Nov 14	Dec 14	Jan 15	Feb 15	March 15	April 15	May 15	June 15
Action/ Evaluation Meetings	Informal Action Meeting NSS			*1	*1	*1	Action Meeting NSS					NSS coach evaluation of player sessions (2.5)
Action Change Strategy 2 (list of all workshops conducted at NSS in appendix D)		*2	*2	1b. NSS Player Sessions (weekly)	1b. NSS Player Sessions - NSS Role model talk ZM, MB	1b. NSS Player Sessions	1b. NSS Player sessions	1b. NSS Player Sessions	1b. NSS Player sessions	1b. NSS Player sessions	1b. NSS Player sessions - NSS Role model AH	*2

**1-Talks held over my move to the NSS full-time; also ACL surgery and rehabilitation; *2 – exams and/or school holidays*

6.8.1 Strategy Two NSS Pilot (July-December 2014) and Phase One (January-June 2015): Psycho-social Support and Development of Young Players

Introduction Player Education Sessions

At NSS, it had been agreed in the action meeting that the school would hold regular player education sessions for NSS footballers on psycho-social skills and transition awareness. When strongly motivated athletes experience within-career transitions, this can bring on a number of psychological challenges, where pressure to become successful brought on by themselves or significant others is common. Due to the challenges encountered, it is possible that a number of players making within-career transitions will be unsuccessful and then have to deal with the consequences of failure (Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2016).

Thus, it has been suggested that academic institutions should promote all-round development and a well-rounded identity, and thus, further efforts are needed to link the demands of transitions with the necessary resources (Lavallee & Andersen, 2000). The school would also plan and organise a job exposure experience and role model sessions for NSS students. The aim of the sessions was to enhance players' knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates to play professional football overseas, and to develop players' psycho-social competencies to be able to handle transitional challenges. Such programmes of player education, run by sport psychologists and other qualified personnel, are designed specifically to help athletes cope with the challenges that come about, and may help in preparing young players better for transitions (Stambulova, 2003). The timeline of the Pilot Phase and Phase One can be seen in Table 6.4, whilst Phase Two of Action Change Strategy Two is illustrated later in the chapter.

6.8.2 Implementation and Monitoring

Players at NSS were subjected to a number of player education sessions between October 2014 and May 2015; known by the students and staff as group tutorials. In certain cases, individual psychological support was also provided; either to enhance performance or to provide emotional support and care (Anderson, 2009; Nesti, 2011; Singer, 1996). These were conducted with all the year groups at the school, from Form One (age 11) to Form Four (age 14) in the scholastic year 2014/2015, starting off with the pilot phase and continuing in the formal first phase of the agreed change strategy. Different members of staff at the school or selected speakers invited to the school conducted sessions on topics such as sport psychology, transition awareness, role models, boy-girl relationships, nutrition, study skills, the correct use of social media and more. These align with Stambulova's (2003) youth-to-senior transition model, which places importance on psychological and other interventions to support the development of athletes. Close to exam time, tutorial time was used for study skills pertaining to specific subjects. (See example of player education sessions (tutorials) in Table 6.4.1 and all tutorial sheets in Appendix D)

Table: 6.4.1 Form 1 Tutorials Scholastic Year 2014/2015

Date	Form 1 Yellow/Green	Speaker
28-Sep	Settling-in	Tutorial Teachers
05-Oct	Meet the Sports Psychologist	Adele Muscat
26-Oct	Sports Nutrition	Marika Micallef
09-Nov	Politics in Sports	Anna Maria Gatt
23-Nov	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt
30-Nov	The Correct Use of Social Media	Marisa Bugeja
07-Dec	Fundamentals	Anna Maria Gatt
14-Dec	Meeting the Role Model	Athlete
21-Dec	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Samantha Mercieca
29-Feb	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Anna Maria Gatt
14-Mar	Sports Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt
04-Apr	Girl - Boy Relationship	Rita Galea
25-Apr	Photography	Stephen Gatt
09-May	How to study for Exams	Tutorial Teachers

6.8.3 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Coaches NSS (2.5)

Reflection and review was carried out with the football coaches at NSS after the scholastic year's tutorials had been implemented, that is, in June 2015. The two coaches reported that player education sessions/tutorials were useful in enhancing not just the players' knowledge and understanding of the challenges of transitions, but have also helped to increase the coaches own knowledge. Coaches felt that they had seen an improvement in players' psycho-social competencies, such as decision-making, responsibility and leadership on the pitch in training and matches. Coach Stanley stated that there was still a need to work

on certain psychological skills, in particular, anxiety management skills, concentration skills and attitude management skills on an individual level. Some players needed to work on these skills more than others due to their specific needs and so as to become more mentally tough since mental toughness is seen as one of the most important attributes in achieving success (Thelwell, Weston & Greenlees, 2005). Practicing such psychological skills has been seen to enhance performance (Thelwell, Weston & Greenlees, 2006) and emotional intelligence (Lane, Thelwell, Lowther & Davenport, 2009). This would help players be more focused on the game, help them handle their anxiety levels and cope with the pressure. He stated:

I think you need to work with them more individually ... I think some kids are too pampered and then that is why they find the going tough and with Feynourd they had a hard time trying to cope with the pressures of the game...we need to prepare them for this. In fact coach Peter told them that we need to play such tough matches. It is useless going somewhere and you win 8-0 because you will be laughing at yourself.

Footballers need to have a resilient character, where self-belief is undeterred even at a high level of competition. Footballers need to be professional in all they do and do not give up. Their mind-set should be one that permits them to be rationale, methodical, confident and focused to cope with the many demands of football at all times (Thelwell et al, 2005).

Coach Peter goes on to say that overall, it is their attitude, their way of thinking, which mainly comes about from the clubs that is the issue. They think that it's easy, but then they find it's not. He says:

One of the things I see in a lot of them, I don't know if this is a Maltese characteristic, but one thing that comes to mind is that when you speak to a student he always says 'but', 'because' and I hate that...not just in sport...in everything.

Both coaches believed that (most) Maltese players are always on the defensive and Peter admitted to even his own children being like this. He believes that schools are also to blame for this, 'I see it from when they are young' he says and:

I think we [Maltese] are the kind of people who, if others come to open up our eyes we are afraid of being criticisedThese days we are using Dvds to show players their mistakes

because they keep on insisting they are right...even though you are not shouting at them. It doesn't matter if you do a mistake...we see our mistakes so that next time we can do it better.

The desire of the coaches to work on specific individual cases and on players' attitudes was considered so this would be a priority for the coming months. In turn, they would keep me informed of particular student-athletes who they felt required individual support. This would be even more necessary since the first group of students at the NSS, the Form Fours, would be attending trials at the MFA, and if selected, would form part of the academy national team. As a sport psychologist, and my applied philosophy, it would be important for me to encourage players to examine their attitudes and beliefs, and to understand and accept any anxiety they might face about their identity, especially in the light of the selections, and provide the appropriate support to encourage personal responsibility for the choices they make (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

Players at NSS were monitored so much I felt. This was good. The coaches were very dedicated and looked out for each and every one of the players. They did not allow the players to be 'soft', but they gave them all the support that they needed. However, they too at times found that it was a constant battle with some players being always on the defensive, to want to seem in the right. This was part of our culture I felt, part of our history and we seemed to carry this with us wherever we went. Maybe we constantly feel inferior than others because of the smallness of our nation and because through the years, historically, we have needed the help of other nations. I found Maltese players to always be ready with excuses for their lack of performance. They did not stop and evaluate in a robust and rigorous manner, they just 'blurted' out an excuse. I felt it was vital for me, as a sport psychologist, but also the NSS as an organisation, to commit to teaching the appropriate mental skills to young athletes (Hanton et al., 2009). I needed to help players develop awareness, reflection and at times understand that they may have different views about a game, result or any other matter, than other people (2.10).

Evaluation: NSS Parent (2.3)

Feedback about players' sessions in the first phase was also asked for from one of the parents who formed part of the parent's board of the school and was gathered in July

2015. The parent interviewed believed that the education sessions for players helped greatly to improve players' knowledge and understanding on what it takes to be a professional player. More specifically, he felt that sessions helped greatly to enhance players' psycho-social competencies. For example, he felt that his son had improved tremendously in skills such as communication and decision-making both on the pitch and in his personal life, in relationships with others. For this parent, the primary focus in player education sessions should be given to character formation with an emphasis on intimidation on the pitch in particular as too many players were being affected by what others said about them. He felt that specific tutorials demonstrating the effects of such psychological aspects should be organised frequently. Ultimately, the school should aim at delivering role models to society apart from them being professional sportsmen. He also believed that senior players could be encouraged to offer advice and support where required. Offering youth player's sessions where they get advice from senior players may help to make best use of the perceived support (Morris et al., 2016). Role model sessions were seen as an important part of tutorials and live-in sessions, as young players were very keen to listen to top players and emulate them. Thus, it was considered important to see who the right candidates for role model talks should be. Unfortunately, since so few Maltese players have migrated to play abroad, good role models, present in Malta at some point during the scholastic year, were not so accessible.

Thank goodness, there are still parents who want to see the holistic development of their son or daughter, rather than just seeing their child becoming a top sportsman or a top academic. However, there are too many parents who just see the 'glory' of their son or daughter becoming well known in sports or in a profession, rather than looking at their holistic development and broader identity. Society still greatly lacks awareness on this, and in a society where we are faced by competitiveness and stress on a daily basis, and where values may be lacking or aligned to achievement, I believe we need to become increasingly more aware of this. However, young players need to also be streetwise. At times, it is difficult to influence young players to develop the values

of honesty, sincerity, kindness and so on, together with the characteristics needed to become a top player – competitiveness at all costs, dynamism and self-assertiveness (2.10).

Evaluation: Head of NSS (2.11)

An evaluation session was held with the Head of NSS in the summer of 2015 after Phase One had ended. This was done to clarify the positive and negative aspects of the sessions conducted in the scholastic year that had just ended, and to see how we could improve in the coming scholastic year. The Head felt satisfied with the way most sessions had gone and with the development of players' psycho-social skills. He reported seeing players coping better with the demands of school and sport and seemed to be able to be more responsible and independent. Always keen to move forward, he wanted to provide students with more sessions that would be useful to players such as role model sessions as suggested by the parent and also more individual psychology support sessions, to enhance mental toughness the same as was requested by the coaches. He also expressed his concern that some parents wanted their children to do more sports sessions, and the only way to manage this was unfortunately for them not to attend tutorial sessions and instead do extra sport. This was not ideal, but some athletes would need to miss some tutorials.

While content to see that the actions being conducted seemed to be having the desired effect, that is, students were seen to enhance their knowledge, understanding and psych-social skills, I was once again seeing the same pattern of a lack of proper evaluation in my sessions with the Head of NSS. That same week a coach had also expressed his frustrations with me about how impossible it had become to speak with him since he was always on the go and seemed to be only concerned about doing more and more rather than evaluating what had been done and adapting future work to the suggestions being given by others who had a stake in the school. I had tried pointing this out to him, that he needed to slow down, that the school programme could be enhanced not just by looking at his perceptions but by really sitting down and reflecting on the ideas and suggestions that others put to him. However, he seemed unable to do this, despite not just me trying to get this information across but also other staff members including the assistant heads of school. We felt at a standstill

sometimes..... He had 'built' this school himself, this was his 'baby' and he believed that everything he was doing was the right thing for the school.

It is well recognised that young players need to be provided with a suitable learning environment to achieve their potential (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Moreover, this may be achieved through career assistance programmes that consist of career planning/guidance, educational guidance, lifestyle management, life skills training, media training, retirement guidance and support. Often, psychological career assistance services are combined with performance enhancement programmes, financial management and other support (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Tutorials at the school became a necessary part of the students' week. The Head believed in the holistic development of the children and provided great importance to values and ethics. Thus, tutorials and individual sessions were to continue taking place over the following months. However, as one can see, not all parents felt the same way; some were keener to see their son training three times a day because they felt that this was the way to improve.

Some parents were driving the Head and the staff, including me, up the wall. There were parents who never had anything positive to say about the school, who always found something to moan about. How difficult some people could be! And how demanding! I would get some five phone calls a day, sometimes from particular parents. They would phone at all hours, in weekends, during holidays. Though I love my work with the athletes, I refuse to be at the parents' beck and call. They needed to learn that staff members need their free time and privacy too. However, it seems they were not very good at taking a hint and one of these days I would need to make it clear with some of them that calls outside school hours were not on unless it was an emergency. For some of them, everything was an emergency, though. One particular parent whose son had a league match in the weekend asked me to speak to his son on Thursday, Friday and Saturday before the match. This was a player who I regularly followed up. I challenged the dad and asked him what point there was in seeing his son three days in a row. The young player simply needed reminding of what skills to engage in prior to and during the match. Why should I repeat the same thing three days in a row? Some parents had no idea of how much they could be harming their child's physical and/or mental health with the pressures they were placing on

them. I was not very good myself at pointing things out clearly when I feel that it might hurt the person. I needed to work on myself to learn to be more assertive in such situations. Experiencing a variety of relatively 'new' consultancy situations (in a school setting) was helping me develop new coping skills and I hoped, would help me manage future consulting situations. (2.10).

Table 6.5: Timeline: Strategy Two Phase Two NSS											
<i>2015/2016</i>	<i>July 15</i>	<i>Aug 15</i>	<i>Sept 15</i>	<i>Oct 15</i>	<i>Nov 15</i>	<i>Dec 15</i>	<i>Jan 16</i>	<i>Feb 16</i>	<i>Mar 16</i>	<i>Apr 16</i>	<i>May 16</i>
<i>Evaluation Meetings</i>	Evaluation NSS (parent) on tutorials (2.3)	Evaluation Meeting Head of NSS (2.10; 2.11)				Evaluation: job exposure students, guidance teacher, employers (2.6; 2.7; 2.8; 2.9)	Evaluation parents (2.3)				Evaluation by students on sessions (tutorials) (2.4)
<i>Action Change Strategy 2 (list of all workshops conducted at NSS in appendix)</i>	*2	*2	*2	1b. NSS Player Sessions (weekly throughout the year)	1b. NSS Player sessions	1b. NSS Player sessions + job exposure	1b. NSS Player sessions	1b. NSS Player Sessions	1b. NSS Player Sessions	1b. NSS Player Sessions	1b. NSS Player Sessions + 1b. MFA & NSS (selected) player talk 2001 (U15's) – Being an MFA academy player

**2 – exams and/or school holidays*

6.9.0 Phase Two (July-May 2016)

Introduction Player Education Sessions

As had been agreed in the evaluation meeting with the Head of NSS, player education sessions/tutorials would once again take place as from the start of the scholastic year 2015/2016. As had been suggested in the evaluation sessions conducted with the coaches, parent and head of NSS, future sessions would focus more on varied topics related to sport and life transitions including developing psychological skills for performance in order to further enhance mental toughness and emotional intelligence. Enhancing emotional intelligence develops an individual's awareness of the benefits of, self-regulatory strategies typically characterized in mental skills training programmes, such as self-talk, imagery, and coping strategies such as utilizing social support. Enhancing emotional intelligence should help footballers' cope with stressors, including those experienced in competition and also in everyday life (Lane et al., 2009). Young players experiencing within-career transition need to be equipped with the coping resources to successfully negotiate their transition. By educating the athletes, their coaches, teachers and parents, a practitioner can prepare individuals for the challenges associated with transitions at the athletic, academic, social, and psychological levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

During such sessions, in which coaches and teachers were at times also present, it was planned that students would spend time with different speakers discussing topics both related to school and sport as well as life issues in a bid to enhance their knowledge in order to be able to cope and adapt to the many challenges they will face as they grow older. In fact, Devonport (2007) emphasized the importance of teaching athletes regulatory strategies that they can use across different domains. Such interventions should be specifically designed to help athletes cope with stressors resulting from the pursuit of academic and sporting goals.

It is important to consider pre-emptive work with young players. Attention to psycho-social and mental skills may enable young players to cope more effectively with the increased competitive pressure and expectations (Pummell et al., 2007). During the adolescent phase, it is also important to work to maintain a healthy level of athletic identity and prevent identity foreclosure through exploring other social roles that the players have in their life. Players should be encouraged to acknowledge, and celebrate, their achievement(s) in other areas apart from football, since this provides essential buffering in case of failure or premature career-termination (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). Student-athletes will also benefit from time-management training to minimize the athletic-academic conflict (Lavalley & Andersen, 2000).

6.9.1 Implementation and Monitoring

Player education sessions resumed in October 2015 with all age groups at the school being given sessions conducted by staff members and professionals in the area being tackled brought in from outside the school setting in the case of subjects that NSS personnel were not qualified or knowledgeable in. Emphasis was made to enhance the programme of tutorials by adopting a preventive/educational perspective, a whole career approach (for sport and academic subjects), an ecological perspective, an empowerment perspective and a whole person approach as suggested by Stambulova and Ryba (2013). Sessions were different from previous ones as they were now aimed to be more focused on the needs of the athlete in the sport setting, speakers presenting the various topics were asked to keep in mind the dual career perspective and the challenges such student-athletes may face (Cosh & Tully, 2015). Effort was made to include further leadership skills as well as life skills. Social and personal responsibility was emphasized since this was seen as essential to the students' ability to meet emerging challenges in their life (Swaner, 2005). The list of tutorials for the scholastic year 2015/2016 can be found in appendix D.

6.9.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Parents (2.3)

An evaluation session in a focus group setting was conducted with 10 parents in January 2016. These parents volunteered to be present for this meeting which was conducted after one of the parents' sessions (Strategy 3). One of the items on the agenda for this evaluation session was the psycho-social educational talks for students. Parents felt that the sessions were a great way of developing psycho-social skills and knowledge as it created awareness of what was needed to transition successfully with practical session being even more effective. They felt that it helped greatly for the young student-athletes to be introduced to different speakers and in particular role models in sport who could speak to them about the challenges they faced when they migrated to play professionally overseas and how they coped. This kept their interest up and provided a different viewpoint from that already given by the coaches, practitioner-researcher and other staff members. This, in turn, helped to enhance their knowledge and understanding for potential migratory based transitions.

Developing Psycho-social skills

Parents mentioned wanting more mental skills sessions for their children with one asking for a time management talk because she felt that at times her daughter couldn't cope with training and homeworks. Her daughter was one of the most talented athletes in the school, she was also one of the top students in the school, academically. The student was still just eleven years old. Everything was timetabled perfectly. Her mother was one of those parents who could always be seen at every single event her daughter was involved in and at every event at the school. The child was highly competitive, not just in sports but also at school, and had suffered from some anxiety earlier on during the year. It was vital to show

parents that they must give support without exerting pressure, as this can increase the level of stress on the athlete (Gould et al., 2002).

Another parent goes on to say:

Our children come home drained from training, so much so that my son doesn't even realise the effort his sister puts in to help me with some things. He was suffering at training but we too were suffering.... no one likes to do housework and I feel that these are things that keep the person from being at peace. They expect to go to training and then go out ...and your bed when are you going to do it? And when will you help mum? Still, at this school there are a lot of positive things. The children feel special here.

So parents believed that their children needed to develop further skills of personal responsibility, however, there is a lack of consensus in the literature about the meaning of terms such as morality, responsibility, and character which makes it difficult to develop and educate for them (Swaner, 2005). One parent believes that we need to take them out of their comfort zone since they don't know what they are going to have to face. Another parent goes on to say that, thanks to the talks given to the students, they were learning a number of life skills and psycho-social skills.

Thanks to you, I taught her how to use the washing machineso even these things ... because I tell her, there is a lot of grumbling, but because you said it, she was okay with it...and she used the washing machine the first time I was sick.

Self-reflection has helped me to apply theory and an athlete-centred approach to service delivery (Cropley et al., 2007). I was glad that at least some parents and students had listened to what I had said and had actually acted upon it. It was imperative to keep on supporting and guiding them to help their children develop life skills and mental toughness through the use of mental skills for performance and also by putting them in challenging environmental situations and helping them find ways of coping as Thelwell and colleagues (2005) believe that if young players are exposed to environmental challenges these may be of benefit later on in their career. It was not easy, for some of them, to keep a balance in the household. If young athletes were training after school and then had to do their homework and study, there was not much time for them left to engage in the household chores and, inevitably, siblings who were not into sport or extracurricular activities were not

happy to do chores whilst their brothers or sisters were training. Providing support for the athlete was not always easy for families, as the rest of the family usually took on the burden of the intense lifestyle too (2.10).

Seeking Support

In terms of the individual psychological support sessions, one of the parents felt that unfortunately, at times, children feel awkward coming to speak to the sport psychologist whilst another parent said that it might be taboo to do so, to admit you have a problem. However, the parent expressed concern that she was unable to help her daughter as she was emotional about the issue herself. Agreement was made that parents would send me, the practitioner-researcher, a message and I would discreetly call students up myself. Having a session with the sport psychologist or the guidance teachers was at times seen by other students as ‘you have a problem and need help’. In fact, in Littlewood’s (2010) fieldwork, we find that the academy players did not engage much in psychologically based support. The guidance team and I tried our best to be discreet when calling up students for sessions and our counselling room was in one of the most remote areas of the school. Still, at times, young boys did tease each other for the macho culture in football prevents players from showing their feelings (Roderick, 2006). Thus, I tried my best, during break time, to have a casual chat with different groups of students so that they would get used to seeing me around and not feel in any way uncomfortable when coming over for a psycho-social support session. The effectiveness of the support from the sport psychologist has in fact, been seen to depend very much on the relationship between the psychologist and athletes (Gilbourne & Richardson 2005; Petitpas et al., 1999).

A parent then went on to speak about the choice of subjects and how she believed her daughter would not be able to cope if she did choose the science subjects. However, another parent believed that if you really want it you will manage. Her husband was a footballer, however he managed to cope both with football and with studies.

(Practitioner-Researcher) Still, they also need to be mature enough to know that they need to work hard from now; in this country we are in such a rush to go from one level of education to the next ...it's all right if we occasionally make a mistake, we need to support them. Ideally, we would like them not to experience mistakes but it's not the end of the world if they do and if they will have to stop for a year and redo some exams.

However, parents were too concerned that other people are too ready to comment negatively if their child didn't make it.

I tried my best to pass on an indirect message to the demanding parent, that maybe she was just pushing her daughter way too much. She was so conscious of what others would say about her daughter that that seemed to me her main concern, rather than the pressure her child had. Sometimes I could not understand the fuss parents made about GCSE's. Of course they were important..... But honestly does your child need to take exams in all the school subjects? Eleven, twelve exams.... All at one go? I, myself, had sat for all my school subjects but, sincerely, I don't believe I needed them all. French? Religion? English literature? Chemistry? I knew I would not be taking up these subjects ever again. It was good to have learnt French, but did I really need to sit for an exam? These students already couldn't cope with all their training, homework's and other demands at 11 years of age. How would they cope with 11 or 12 GCSEs and selections for national teams and international competitions at the same time once they were 15 or 16 years old? We would see how this will work out in the scholastic year 2016/2017 when our first group of young athletes would face such a situation (2.10).

In their development programme young players should be given psychological and sociological support including counselling, life skills and related areas which may help them understand better what to expect in transitions (Richardson et al., 2005; Littlewood, 2005). Effort was to be made, in the next few months, to focus on study skills and on the well-being of the students.

Evaluation: Students (2.4)

Feedback from the older students was necessary since they were the ones on the receiving end of these tutorials. The evaluation session was done during their Personal and Social Education lesson (PSD) at the end of the scholastic year, in May 2016. Two focus

groups of nine students each was conducted. Focus groups are recognised as an appropriate method of data collection since they promote group interaction to generate data (Bloor et al. 2001). In a focus group setting, students could reflect with others, including the PSD teacher who was also present (Cropley et al., 2010), and it was felt that such reflection would aid in their personal and professional development (Neil et al., 2013).

As noted by Alferman and Stambulova (2007), there is a lack of research on the effectiveness of career assistance and/or development programmes; thus, evaluation is vital since it might suggest criteria for individualized interventions, or for organised psychological services. It is also important that athletes are trained to develop reflective skills and are given guidance to ensure an effective process that brings on appropriate developmental changes within a specific time frame (Anderson et al., 2004). Inevitably, in the tutorials conducted at NSS, there was going to be some overlap somewhere. Tutorials that were repeated from year to year were possible and students mentioned this. The same topic, at times, was being discussed in a tutorial and in PSD lessons too. Different speakers who were not aware of what had been done previously might find that students were not interested in their session as they already knew what was going to be said. Thus, it was imperative that this evaluation was taking place that it would be taken seriously as there was no point in conducting tutorial sessions if students lost interest within the first five minutes of the session. Students expressed their wish of having more sessions on: sport in general, including different kinds of sports, sport psychology, how to prevent injuries, since such subjects had helped to enhance their knowledge and understanding of what was needed to be a professional athlete. They wanted the possible participation of referees and role model athletes, a physiotherapist or other sport specialist. Students were adamant that speakers needed to know their subject well.

Practitioner-Researcher – What else would you like?

Student G- Relaxation sessions

Student J- Something more practical, that you do not have to listen to

Students expected speakers to be well prepared, interesting and able to deliver, however not all of them turned out to be so.

Student C- The creativity, when that old guy came, it was boring, nothing to do with sport, he spoke about tattoos and paintings

Student D- Then there was that physiotherapist who came from abroad, she didn't know how to do a presentation.

They were now at an age in which they wanted to know more about possible careers and where they could go in the next phase of their life, whether that would be as a professional athlete or otherwise. Quite a few students were interested in having a sports career, possibly in coaching, sports science or sports medicine. They were keen to hear about the life journey of successful individuals. In fact, it is imperative that young athletes understand the complexity of the transition process and the associated heightened stress. Understanding that the process can be difficult may help them prepare better as they won't assume that they will be successful straight away, and will work hard to try and achieve success (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016). The students also desired more sporting activities in which they could use up their energy and practice a new sport. However, students weren't happy with having tutorials on school subjects since they felt that sometimes they had an overload of information.

I, myself gave a couple of tutorials. However, I felt that I should be conducting more of these, especially with the senior students. In fact, this wish had originated from both the parents and the students in the evaluation meetings. Nonetheless, I found that giving tutorials was no mean feat. Most often, two classes would be present and, thus, one would face around fifty students full of energy. Especially with the younger students, I found this really exhausting and tough to keep the discipline. Such episodes reminded me of the reason I never wanted to be a teacher. I love lecturing at the university, with older students, where I do not need to discipline anyone, but I find it too tiring with young, boisterous students who cannot sit still. I felt that as soon as you tried to do something involving an activity so as to keep them interested, you would lose them! They would start talking,

get distracted and you would need to raise your voice higher. Besides, the students at the NSS seemed to be fast at everything! Every time I gave them some task they would do it in no time at all! I would need to look at ways of how to get the message across better to the younger students in the next scholastic year. Once again, reflective practice was helping me develop my self-awareness of the professional skills I have and the ways I try to use them in practice (Cropley et al., 2007). My positive attitude, being approachable and perceptive were skills that I felt I had developed further through the work I had been doing at the school with young athletes over the past months (2.10).

The feedback gathered was passed on to the School Development team as well as the guidance teachers who were all responsible for organising the tutorials for students. In June 2016, based on the feedback generated during parent and student evaluation sessions, meetings were held between the assistant heads, guidance team, personal and social education teachers and me, the sport psychologist, to devise the programme of tutorials for the next scholastic year. It was felt that this practice should continue to take place since review and reflection of this action had been met well. The school would try to meet further the needs of the students as related to sport and to academic goals since such preparation for transition may increase athletes' knowledge and skills and, thus, help them adapt better (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Stambulova et al., 2009). Three aspects were seen to be needed to be developed further to assist young players - knowledge of their sport and the transition process, personal characteristics (skills), and access to social support. By having knowledge of the demands of their sport and the transition process and personal characteristics, such as the ability to control emotions, athletes may be able to self-regulate better as they move to senior sport (Morris et al., 2016).

I felt that these evaluation were very important as, at times, I felt that more could be done in these tutorials. I wished for more tutorials with the students and asked for this for the scholastic year 2016/2017. I felt we needed to develop more skills such as awareness and reflection with the students. With my PhD coming to an end, I would definitely have more time on my hands to develop the action change strategies even further. Every action

that was being conducted was being improved with each cycle, I felt, and this was exactly what we had hoped for. Reflective practice has been vital in the development of effectiveness and has been an important tool for experiential learning (Cropley et. al., 2010). It was good to see that most of what had initially been discussed in the first action meetings in 2014/2015 had taken place and more was being done to improve on it. The staff was dedicated, willing and motivated. This helped no end. Thank goodness, I was not doing this on my own but had the backing of the Headmaster and the staff as well as the parents. It felt good, reflection was helping me improve my self-confidence and this in turn was enhancing my practice (Cox, 2005) (2.10).

6.10 Introduction Role Model Sessions

As part of the psycho-social education sessions a number of role model talks were planned for the NSS students, to aid in the development of young athletes as suggested by Martindale and colleagues (2005) who believed that organisations need to have youth development programmes with long term goals to enhance young players 'skills and should also use role models and other support mechanisms for both technical and emotional issues young athletes may face. The role model talks were felt to be necessary, since it was reported in Study One in the Reconnaissance Phase that Maltese players had faced a number of challenges when they migrated to play professionally overseas. Thus, these same players and others who had migrated, were the ideal candidates to inform and discuss with young future players the challenges they may face and how they could possibly be prepared and cope. To ensure athletes have the required knowledge more needs to be done to get young players to speak to other players who have been through it and get an understanding of what they might face, so that they know how hard the process of transition can be, how hard they need to work to be physically and mentally prepared, and also what their role within the team is (Morris et. al., 2016). A number of athletes, mainly top footballers, some of whom were playing professionally overseas, were specifically selected by NSS coaches and management due to their good qualities as footballers, their professional attitude as well as their experiences abroad in professional football. Such role models would help young players

understand what psychosocial and mental skills and competencies they may need to work on further in order to be able to cope with the demands of professional football.

6.10.1 Implementation and Monitoring

The top athletes selected to give role model talks at the NSS included: Myles Beerman – a Maltese player who was at that time playing at Manchester City; Zach Muscat who was playing with Arezzo (Italy Lega Pro), a Maltese national team player who is also qualified as an architect; Andrew Hogg, the national team goalkeeper and Kalloni FC (Greek league) player; Rebecca Camilleri, a national team long jumper and also a psychologist; Luis Oliveira, Floriana Football Club (Maltese league) coach, a former Belgian national team player who played in a number of top Italian clubs. These sessions took place either at the school itself, or else in one of the live-ins that were organised and were held between October 2014 and May 2016.

6.10.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: NSS Coaches (2.5)

The coaches gave their feedback regarding the role model sessions just before the start of Phase Two. Coach Stanley and Peter both believed that the students enjoyed the role model sessions and found them highly effective in enhancing their knowledge of transitions, since students get first-hand knowledge from senior players who were once in the same position as them. They proposed that a different format could be used in presenting role models in the future.

They enjoy them but maybe we can do them differently... Andrew's was good...because of the fact that we inserted some clips. Maybe, if we get Andrei or Gilbert, we'll do something different, not just having them address the students and that's it; even if it's just that we take them outside to sit It's different. When the first student starts speaking then they all will ...because, otherwise, they might not open their mouths (Peter).

He went on to say that even if someone achieves something really considerable in another sport, even in the papers, there's nearly nothing. When they had invited a long jumper, 70%

of the students did not know who she was. He felt this was unfair and that the school needed to always make a presentation of the invited athlete and his or her achievements so the students will know who he/she is and their achievements.

If she just comes to speak to them, for the students it's just someone giving information. We always need to prepare them from beforehand. Some time ago, I open the paper and I find a page on one of our student-athletes, this is a big thing for us (Peter).

I suggested also getting some athletes, possibly retired, who had success in sport and in their career as this would help to motivate the young athletes further.

I find that most footballers tend to be rather narrow minded about the interest and participation of other athletes in other sport. It doesn't help much, too, that on television and in other forms of media we hear mostly about footballers. However, it is vital that we teach them about other top athletes, the dedication they show and how they approach top level competitions, as our young footballers can learn a lot from athletes who practice an individual sport. The ability to set targets, to not hide in the crowd, to have the will and determination to move forward ...on their own...without a team ...and without funds, too, at times is highly exemplary. In reality, in individual and in most other team sports in Malta, we have fared much better than we ever did in football (2.10).

Evaluation: Parent (2.3)

Parents in the focus group evaluation on player education sessions (section 6.9.2 as well as players in the live-in evaluation, section 6.6.8) had spoken about the positive benefits brought about by role model sessions. However further specific feedback from one particular parent who sat on the Parent Board was also requested and took place just before the start of Phase Two. The parent pointed out that the role model sessions were a very good way of teaching the reality of sport to our young athletes and enhancing their knowledge and competencies to be able to handle transitional challenges. He believed that extending the dialogue over to sportsmen from various sports was ideal for children to link and correlate the effort that generally sportsmen undertake to become professionals. His recommendation

would be to try and find people who experienced, at least slightly, sports at a high level and then, for whatever reason, had to quit. He believed that we need to see how they managed to utilise other things in life to help them achieve happiness. Failure in sport needs to be compensated by other successes. We could also include people who used sports to help them become better men/women, he said.

Despite the good intentions of the NSS management team and the coaches, and despite role model sessions being recognised as highly important to the pre-transition programme for the players, (unfortunately sessions with role models in the scholastic year 2015/2016 were few. In fact, only one took place during the November live-in. We had mentioned several times that it was time to invite another athlete role model; however, we never got down to doing it again in 2016. I felt that sometimes the school timetable was so packed, and we were all so busy, that some things kept being postponed. Also, due to the lack of sport culture in Malta and thus lack of athletes and role models in sport we were finding ourselves in a difficult position to find new, suitable role models to bring to the school. We kept falling back to players/ athletes we had already previously invited to the school. The guidance teacher and I had even mentioned the fact that the Olympic Games were upon us and we had not even discussed the true meaning of Olympism with the students. We had not even brought in one of the potential athletes going to the Olympics or even a past Olympian. Some were not seen as being good role models in terms of both sport and academic areas, others were based abroad and the Olympic team was made up of only five athletes. We should have planned better and invited one of the foreign based role models to visit the school when he or she was in Malta. The lack of human resources at the school to help organise such activities was evident and frustrating to me as practitioner-researcher who wanted to do so much but felt could not be as effective and organised as I would have liked. There was so much multi-tasking I could do. I needed more help with this but who would help if everyone seemed to be overloaded. (2.10).

6.11.0 Introduction Psycho-Social Support (Individual Sessions)

Individual sessions on psycho-social support took place daily at the NSS with some students (or parents) coming over for sessions, some related to performance, others related to transition challenges they were experiencing. It has been suggested that athletes within transition benefit when they have support from others who understand what they are going

through (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011). An emphatic counselling relationship may also help participants set goals and use other strategies to cope with transitions (Lavalle, 2005). Due to the length of this chapter, two examples of individual sessions that took place in Phase Two can be found in Appendix F.

6.12.0 Introduction Job Exposure

It is well regosnised that sports psychologists and other qualified personnel may help in preparing young players better for transition through programmes designed specifically to help athletes cope with the challenges that come about (Stambulova, 2003). During the week 7th till the 11th of December 2015, the NSS made plans to send out the senior students, 36 in all, on a work placement, also referred to as 'job exposure'. Students were sent to different organisations to learn more about the job, after an exercise conducted to see in which area they would like to work in, in the future. Such an experience would help prepare them for one of the bigger transitions they would face over the next couple of years – that of moving from being a student to getting a job, whether as a professional footballer or otherwise.

6.12.1 Implementation and Monitoring

Students were sent to various entities, a number of which were in the sport sector, including the MFA, a local sports merchandise, physiotherapy clinics at the government run hospitals, gyms, hotels, the Sports Promotion Unit and others. Students were shown around the venues, given small tasks and observed people working so that they could understand more what the job entailed. Students were encouraged to go to these work places by public transport, rather than having their parents drive them there, parents were also asked to refrain from phoning the workplace.

Staff members at the school were sent out to visit the students at the workplace, to get feedback from the employers and the students themselves and to help guide the students with any questions they might have had. I, as practitioner-researcher, visited a number of students on their placement. Evaluation of the job exposure was conducted through an interview with the guidance teacher and a focus group discussion with a group of students. Evaluation was also made through the use of log books and feedback provided by employers and parents. One can find excerpts of these in Appendix G and further reference to these in the sections below.

6.12.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Guidance Teacher (2.7)

Workplace visit

The observations that the guidance teacher and I made (we had gone to see a number of the students together, and, thus had ample time to discuss outcomes) was that a number of students showed a lack of confidence and some insecurity, but this may have been because they were still in awe of their new experience and surroundings. Some seemed to be lost, not sure of where to sit or stand, not sure of what to do and seemed to be too self-conscious to ask the employer any questions. They had never been in such work places before and this was all a new experience to them. This was in fact, confirmed by them in their evaluation. However, on the other hand, a student who was at the sports merchandise shop, and who is usually quite a reserved student, seemed to have blossomed in his surroundings, to the extent that, at times, the comments he passed showed some over confidence with the employer and the surroundings. He was happily carrying boxes, putting clothes on a hanger. It seemed like he owned the place! Nonetheless, the employer was very happy with both him and the other student present and offered them a summer job if they so wished.

The guidance teacher reported that when he visited the students at the work place, there were those who were settled doing tasks and he felt guilty for disrupting them during work. A particular case was Stephen;

he was working hard, talking to me at the same time, in a way like he was telling me, ‘Sir, do not distract me, because I am busy’. He told me about what he had got down to the day before and he had already been told what he was going to be doing the next day and the day after. The programme was ready, he was looking forward to it and was happy.

But then there were others, whom he found sitting around waiting for people to give them something to do. In one particular case the manager was a foreigner, he didn’t speak much English, he didn’t have many leadership skills either. The student said he didn’t understand him, however the guidance teacher admitted to being able to understand the manager. He felt the student did not put in any effort into working with people he didn’t really like or get on with. He did not want to go there right from the start, even though it was an environment he was familiar with. The guidance teacher went on to say:

We meet all kinds of people. It doesn’t mean that if you don’t take a fancy to someone you cannot work with him. Maybe, it is still too early for him, maybe, he is not mature enough yet. Positive or negative, this will still serve him as an experience. Some others even were told that they could go for a summer job there. Another got a great reference letter.

At times our prejudice affects our approach to a new situation. Here, we can see that this student had a negative reaction to his workplace before having even gone there. Since he lived in the north and had to travel to the south, this was an issue, even in social terms. The south areas of the island are said to be less developed, with the people living there being less educated and of a lower socio-economic status. This student is a very talented player, popular with the girls and now he had to go to the south. He might not have been ready for this. (2.10)?

Developing Psycho-Social Competencies

Evaluation was conducted at the school with one of the guidance teachers with whom I worked closely and who had visited the students with me. He reported to me that it had been decided to send the Form Four students to the work placement since they were still a bit young and depending on their experience, whether it was positive or negative, they

would then be able to focus more on their choice of careers and they would have more time to decide in Form Five, their final year in secondary school, whether they would still want to continue in that line of work. If it was a negative experience for them, there are still some benefits to be had from it he said:

they will get used to employers, they will get used to working in a team, with people who have much more experience at the place of work; They will need to find out how to learn more; they will need to show interest in the place of work and take initiative to learn. A lot of our students got positive comments from the employers; 'he shows interest, initiative,' and similar things. Some waited for instructions rather than take the first step themselves however.

In fact, youth services and supports grounded in a developmental approach were seen to enable youth to acquire academic and work readiness skills and personal attributes employers sought and which helped avoid self-destructive behaviours (Brown & Thakur, 2006). Such personal attributes and related skills were also necessary for their sport career. The guidance teacher went on to explain that sometimes, he felt that our educational system in Malta was based on following instructions rather than offering children the opportunity to take decisions, and thus, such a work placement helped to develop players' psycho-social competencies such as leadership, communication, decision-making and accountability. In fact, it has been found that the organisations which had the most success in connecting youth with work and education were the ones who designed their programmes with structures to support a comprehensive support including transition support from education to the workplace and which did not focus on just one area such as work but helped youth build a range of competencies: knowledge, skills and attributes that will help them make a successful transition (Brown & Thakur, 2006). However, when prompted by myself, he said that it could also be as a result of the upbringing they had and thus their early formation during childhood:

if parents are always fussing around, then what spurs the children on? They either obey or they don't. So, if young people are not taught to take initiative it may affect them. However, in this case, initiative may also come about with some more confidence at the place of work.

Sometimes, I too, fear that our educational system, apart from the parents' pampering of their children, is responsible for doing too much for the children. The Head is also constantly saying that we are pampering the students and that this needs to stop. If, at school, the teacher insists on a 2.50 cm margin, and wants the students to write in blue ink and skip a line; If homework needs to be done in a certain way only, according to the teacher's instructions; if students are afraid they will go out of point..... Then how are they going to learn how to think with their own mind and how to take decisions? If parents do everything for them and do not give them any tasks at home, where they need to take decisions, then how are students going to use their own mind and be able to take vital decisions when under pressure in matches? Students need to be given more opportunity to take on responsibility and make their own decisions, even though they might not be the right ones. Reflecting on my consultancy helped me to become very focused on my work with athletes. It was vital not to give them all the answers myself but rather, help them formulate their own solutions and empower them to use mental skills in training and competition (Cropley et al., 2007) (2.10).

The guidance teacher believed that some parents really stuck to the rules set not to contact the workplace themselves and to allow children to make their own way to the workplace and their children experienced fully the whole exercise, from start to finish, they were able to develop independence and decision-making skills. There were other parents, who, maybe, were overprotective and said, 'Am I going to let my son go on his own? It's so far off', and they gave them a lift. There were some concerned parents who phoned the school, others called the employer directly when they had an issue. Once again we were seeing challenges related to the Maltese culture similar to what had emerged in Study One in the Reconnaissance Phase.

Parents can be seen, once again, to be overprotective and afraid to let their children go. Despite the clear instructions to allow the students to get used to public transport and travel on their own and to let them phone the school or the employer themselves if for some reason they couldn't make it on the day, some parents still felt that their child was not yet ready for this. They felt sorry for them having to travel by public transport and gave them a lift, or phoned the employer themselves to get their child out of a sticky situation. On reflecting on this, I questioned why we weren't getting through to some of the parents. Could it be that maybe I was spending too much time thinking on what I was doing rather than focusing on what they were saying? Becoming more

aware of the parents, their personalities and learning preferences might make me make more informed decisions (Cropley et al., 2007) (2.10).

Student Perceptions of the Experience (as seen by the guidance teacher)

The students at the Sports Promotion Unit found the job stressful at times, especially when they needed to be referees/judges for tournaments. This made them realise what a tough job it is for the referee and it was good for them to be able to experience this as it helped them understand how tough the referee's job is in making decisions especially under pressure. They developed important psycho-social competencies such as assertiveness, dealing with conflict and attitude management.

The majority of students enjoyed the experience, the guidance teacher said, "I would say 99%, all enjoyed it, it was beneficial to them." However, one student in particular, reported that he didn't learn anything, so for him it was a negative experience. The guidance teacher thought it might have been the student's attitude that accounted for this as another student who was in the same environment really enjoyed it.

When I saw his comments in the log book, he claimed that it had been a negative experience for he hadn't learn anything. He blamed the employer who hadn't given him anything to do. But we know the boy well, his kind of character, even at school. I need to find out the real reason behind it all.

Evaluation: Students (2.8)

A focus group discussion and reflection on the job exposure experience was conducted with four students together with the guidance teacher and the practitioner-researcher. It was hoped that such reflection would bring on a range of intrinsic benefits such as self-awareness and such reflection would become a habit to the students, something they would be able to do on their own when experiencing new challenges especially (Huntley et al., 2014). Two students were working in a gym. For them, the experience was great, and

they developed various skills such as communication, people management skills and decision-making. They really took to the gym instructress looking after them, who showed them the ropes. They hoped the school would get her to give a tutorial as,

our tutorials are always on bullying....Last year it was always the same.... that, and relationships, and then in PSD relationships again.

Here, again, we got some more indirect feedback about the tutorials that had been conducted.

Once again, we can see that some students feel that there was too much repetition in the tutorials and that they had heard it all before. These students, too, seemed to want more role models and personnel who could advice the students on sports.

The students explained their tasks at the gym and their experience there. The fact that they had each other helped since they could discuss what they were doing together and this gave them more confidence.

Another student was minding babies in a child care centre. She admitted to getting somewhat bored as everyday was the same, it was very much the same routine and there was not all that much she could do.

Maybe, if I were there for longer I would have got used to it more. I was sick and was not there every day.

For Stef, the job exposure was not so great even though she tried to take initiative she said. She felt that, on the whole, she coped but it was not what she was looking for as she wanted to work with older children. However, she felt that she enhanced a number of psycho-social skills such as communication, initiative and attention.

For John who was working at the airport, he felt he learned a lot and never got bored since there was so much to do. John, too, seemed to have had a good experience which helped to motivate him to want to work harder at the subjects he was not so good at so as to be able to continue working for the career he wanted.

Enhancement of job exposure experience

One of the two students who was at the gym wished the experience had been longer as a week was not enough she felt. The students, inevitably, were excited about being away from school for a week. They were excited about this new adventure.... work and having a job, even though they were not getting paid. This experience was aimed at getting them prepared for the world of work. Some of them only had a year or so left at school and then would need to find a job if they did not want to keep on studying or if they didn't manage to make it as professional athletes. A lack of preparation and skills, interpersonal conflicts, lack of appropriate conditions, as well as a lack of financial and social support together with difficulties in combining sport and other commitments can have adverse effects on transition (Stambulova, 2003). Thus, experiencing the transitional challenge that had been created for them to help them understand better what the world of work involved and where they wanted to be working was one of the best ways to get them ready for the challenges they might face in the coming years.

It was interesting to see that, despite all the students being promising athletes, not all of them wanted to be working in sport. Some knew that it would be difficult to be professional athletes, for the girls it was that much harder to be in professional football. It would also be more difficult for them if they decided they wanted to have a family early on in their life. This was why the school focused so much on a dual-career pathway. It would be great to see these young athletes moving on and becoming top sportsmen but, really and truly, how many of them would actually make it as professional athletes?

Evaluation: Student, Parent and Employer (2.6; 2.3; 2.9)

Feedback on the job exposure was also gathered through log books the students needed to fill in daily to help them be more aware and critical of the experience. In Appendix G one can see excerpts of the students' log book for the week that they were at the job exposure experience. When conducting a thorough analysis of the students' logbooks only two students from 36 reported not having a good and useful experience. Thus, this shows

that this exercise has been found to be useful in enhancing students' knowledge and understanding of skills needed in the future and helped in developing a number of psychosocial skills such as leadership, communication and decision-making (Brown & Thurber, 2006), skills also highly required in their sport and especially if they were to make a migratory based transition as evidenced in Study One. Such a job exposure experience helped to move the youth from participating in such a programme to independent engagement in positive activities such as work (Brown & Thurber, 2006).

One must note that whilst certain entities/organisations were well prepared for hosting students, others might not have been so prepared and might not have really given the student much opportunity and, thus, as a result, the student was bored. Students were aligned to their preferred job experience, however one could not put all students interested in a particular area, such as sport, all within the same entity. The guidance team could only align the students to the organisations which had volunteered to participate in this project. The student too should make an effort however. I find that young Maltese students do not have confidence, feel intimidated and do not know how to communicate their thoughts and feelings to their seniors, whether it's the coach, the teacher, or in this case, the employer. I think this is because of reasons of seniority. In Maltese schools students are strongly disciplined for everything and this might make them uncomfortable in expressing themselves. Sometimes, I struggled to get certain players to talk during my sessions, especially those who were pushed to come for a session, possibly by their parents or the headmaster. Communication was also an issue between themselves. Several coaches often remarked, or even complained, that the team was unable to communicate on the pitch and, thus, mistakes were made because of a lack of communication. I recall a case in particular with our U17s at the beginning of 2014, prior to the UEFA finals which were to be held in Malta. The coach was not happy with the way things were going, players lacked confidence, weren't as concentrated as he wished, did not communicate well, were not committed and in control. I, too, felt that despite the many sessions I had had with them we weren't moving forward. Such reflection helped me improve my self-awareness and helped me seek knowledge that could enhance my delivery (Cropley et al., 2007). After a thorough analysis of the players in training and during matches I decided to introduce them to the 5Cs exercise (Harwood, 2008) in order to improve their commitment, control, concentration, confidence and communication. I prepared a questionnaire related to performance, based on Harwood's (2008) article, and got the players to answer this questionnaire both after training and matches and also during a tournament in Rome. The coaches were also

present and could agree or not with the players' evaluation of themselves. This exercise seemed to have helped the players immensely, with not only very satisfactory results in that tournament but also in terms of what the technical staff could see in the performance and attitude of the players. I felt relieved that finally, despite all the work that had already been done with the players on psycho-social skills, this awareness exercise had helped create the desired effect. I, as the sport psychologist had to keep on learning and adapting to the client's needs and engage in more complex practice than just applying theory to practice (Neil et al., 2013). Some of the students at the school eventually, had also been introduced to this exercise during one of the school's live-ins (2.10).

Table 6.6: Timeline: Strategy Two Pilot and First Phase MFA

PILOT PHASE								FIRST PHASE					
2014/2015	July 14	Aug 14	Sept 14	Oct 14	Nov 14	Dec 14		Jan 15	Feb 15	March 15	April 15	May 15	June 15
Action/ Evaluation Meetings	Informal Action Meeting MFA			*1	*1	*1		Action Meeting MFA					MFA Evaluation Player Sessions (2.1; 2.10)
Action Change Strategy 2		*2	*2 1b. Coach Session Youth FA	1b. MFA U17 Player 1998 sessions (Serbia (qualifiers)				1b. MFA U19 (1998); U17 1999) Player individual sessions	1b. MFA U19/U17 Player individual sessions	1b. MFA Player team/ individual sessions U19 (Rome Tournament)	1b. MFA U17 Player individual sessions	1b. Malta Football Coaches Association Coach session	*2 1b. MFA U17’s Player individual sessions

**1-Talks held over my move to the NSS full-time; also ACL surgery and rehabilitation; *2 – exams and/or school holidays*

6.13.0 Action Strategy Two MFA Pilot Phase (July-December 2014) and Phase One (January – June 2015)

Introduction Psycho-Social Education Sessions MFA

As described in Chapter Five, an informal action meeting was held in July 2014 with pilot work on psycho-social education conducted over the following few months at the MFA. However, a more formal action meeting took place in January 2015 which started more individualised work, as well as teamwork with the U17 and U19 national teams. It was felt by the Technical Director that our players needed to develop mental toughness for international matches, as well as develop skills which would help them cope in transitions. In Thelwell and colleagues (2005) study on defining and understanding mental toughness in soccer, some players reported that they developed mental toughness from the experiences they had in the different environments during their developmental years. This point is important for practitioners to take into account, as it is not enough for players to have a tough character, but they must also be able to adopt a tough approach to thinking during competitive matches. It was reported that engaging in a psychological skills intervention programme with players, also keeping their specific roles in the match in mind, helped footballers experience at least small improvements (Thelwell et al., 2006). However, as a practitioner-researcher, it would be vital for me not to just teach players mental skills, but also to see how the players used such skills in competitive international matches.

6.13.1 Implementation and Monitoring

Psycho-social education was given prominence in the action meetings conducted at the MFA as it was believed that psychological interventions that focus on coping strategies could positively influence the quality of transitions that players experience (Stambulova, 2009). All psycho-social educational sessions were held at the MFA Technical Centre.

Sessions conducted were mainly on an individual basis, however a few team sessions prior to tournaments were also delivered. These were mostly focused on tournament preparation and performance enhancement skills such as imagery, motivational self-talk and relaxation strategies, as suggested by Thelwell and colleagues (2010). For them, relaxation may help a player be more focused when performing well or when erroneous decisions are made, whilst motivational self-talk may be used to increase drive and focus. Participants who use self-talk are also more likely to be able to appraise their own emotions and regulate them, as well as appraise others (Lane et al., 2009). Imagery, as suggested by Taylor (1995), can help players be more motivated and can improve perceived competence, where players are able to imagine themselves completing tasks successfully. Imagery may also help players to prepare for the match by imagining behaviour they may need to engage in, passing strategies and performance responses based on the opponent's play (Thelwell et al., 2010). For such psychological skills (as well as goal-setting) used in competition, results show that the use of these skills was significantly associated with one or more subcomponents of emotional intelligence and it has been reported that applied practitioners should consider enhancing this area when working with players (Lane et al., 2009).

6.13.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: MFA Technical Director

Below, one can see parts of the discussion that were held with the Technical Director, (June 2015), regarding what had been delivered and was to be done to prepare better the young players at the MFA for transitions as well as competitive matches. I asked the Technical Director what we could commit to doing over the next couple of months. I believed that we should continue working on psycho-social education sessions for players since these had already been started on an individual and team basis.

(Technical Director) Yes, maybe, we can try and improve what we are already doing.... I don't know ... You know.... The players who are now 17 ... those born in 1997, 1998 ... those, you mean?

The Technical Director was indecisive. He was leaving it all in my hands. He seemed not to know how to move forward with this. I replied that those groups had already had a good programme and that the ones we will now work with most would be those born in the years 1999 and 2000. However, his answer was, 'but will you not be seeing the others anymore?' My reply was that I would see them only occasionally since they would not be coming up to the MFA as regularly anymore. Close to tournaments we would make an effort to follow them up but those players had had a good programme and we believed that they would be in a more informed position to be able to cope more effectively and consistently. However, the Technical Director was not so sure about this, 'Well, they are like small children, sometimes', he said.

(Practitioner-Researcher)— You are right. We'll follow them as much as possible but, we will prepare the young ones as well. Apart from this can we do something else?

His answer being 'I don't think so'.

I wanted to get down to doing things, I wanted the Technical Director to take my work, both as a practitioner-researcher and a sport psychologist within the MFA, seriously. However, he had been rather unwell over the previous few months, and he seemed to be tired out; we were seeing less and less of his influence on the players and staff and he knew very little of what had taken place over the past months. I also felt that without him being present I couldn't fully engage in the proper management of the psycho-social support sessions. This made me unsure of how much to push forward. It was a situation where I had to do everything myself, including organising everything, from room, to power point settings and parent meetings among other things. Of course, I appreciated the fact that he was struggling with his own issues at that moment, but I wanted to get going with the sessions for the players. I wanted to show that my research and my work was vital to such an organisation, I also wanted to prove that, despite what I felt at times was a lack of support, I would go ahead and keep trying to improve on the work that I had already done. However, it would have been much easier if I had had both the support and help needed to make this job simpler than it was actually turning out to be. At the same time, he questioned why I wasn't going to do more sessions with the 1998's and 1999's. Again here, I asked myself,

'But does he realise how much I am already doing within the FA? Is he aware that when I first started off this work it was just with one team, the 1998's... then I was asked to work with the 1997'sthen with the 1999's, eventually with the 2000's and, in a couple of months the 2001s too? And all of this with just two evenings a week at the FA where I also needed to attend training sessions, conduct individual sessions and, at times, even see to the senior and U21 players, the women's teams, the referees and, occasionally the parents?' Maybe, I should have voiced my feelings instead of letting it all bubble up inside me. However, I felt that it wouldn't change anything whether I expressed myself or not, and, being the kind of person who does not like confrontation, I avoided the whole issue since I felt it would be useless, anyway. This huge overload of work also affected the overall efficacy of this action strategy. I failed to conduct evaluations with the players at this point. This should have been done. I vowed to make sure that the second phase of this action strategy would be more organised with more evaluation and reflection taking place. By reflecting on this I hoped to learn from the experience and explore new ways of coping and doing things (Cropley et al., 2016) (2.10).

Table 6.7: Strategy Two Phase Two MFA

SECOND PHASE

2015/2016	July 15	Aug 15	Sept 15	Oct 15	Nov 15	Dec 15	Jan 16	Feb 16	Mar 16	Apr 16	May 16
<i>Action/ Evaluation Meetings</i>			Evaluation players U16/U17 (2.2)			Evaluation Meeting MFA (2.1; 2.10)			Evaluation players U19 (2.2)	Evaluation players U17 (2.2)	Evaluation Meeting MFA (2.1; 2.10)
<i>Action Change Strategy 2</i>	1b. MFA U16 (2000), U17 (1999) Team Sessions (these took place weekly from 01/07/15 - 15/09/15	1b. MFA Team Session U16/ U17	1b. MFA Team Session U16/ U17	1b. MFA U17 (born 2000) individual sessions	1b. MFA U19 (1998, 1999) team session MFA U17 individual session	1b. MFA U17 individual session	1b. MFA U17 Team Session (weekly from 19/01/16- 12/04/16l)	1b. MFA U17 Team Session + MFA U19 Individual sessions	1b. MFA U17 Team Sessions MFA U19 Team/ individual Sessions (Rome Tournament)	1b. NSS Player Sessions 1b. MFA U17 Team Session	1b. MFA player talk 2001 (U15's) – Being an MFA academy player

6.14.0 Phase Two MFA (July 2015-May 2016): Psycho-Social Education

It has been suggested by Morris and colleagues (2016) that programmes could be implemented which support athletes, through education sessions and performance profiling, to identify and develop appropriate skills that they could use through the transition to senior sport. Athletes believe profiling to be useful and beneficial especially in determining what they needed to work on, in motivating them to improve and train harder, set targets, take more responsibility for their development and it also helped them monitor and evaluate their performance (Thelwell, Such, Weston, Such & Greenlees, 2010). Thelwell and Greenlees (2003) also reported that it is becoming vital for practitioners to understand the benefits of a mental skills package rather than single skill delivery, since players interchange from one skill to another during a game. Thus, a number of player-education sessions on an individual basis were organised in the first few months of 2015. Individual sessions were seen as important, since Taylor (1995) stated that with the right information about the player and the sport, the practitioner can integrate this information to identify the focus of the intervention. Thus, the sport psychologist will be in a better position to develop well the competitive mental preparation strategies for top performance for the specific player. A programme of team sessions was also planned for the summer when the players were on school holidays and, thus, had more time to really focus on their football. In the development programme at the MFA, it was planned that players were to be given psychological and sociological support including counselling, life skills and related areas, which might help them to understand better what to expect in transitions, as suggested by Richardson and colleagues (2005) and Littlewood (2005).

6.14.1 Implementation and Monitoring

Table 6.8: Psycho-Social Education for U17's and U16's MFA national teams

Date	U17's (1999's)	U16's (2000)
01.07.15	Performance Profiling/Goal Setting	Performance Profiling/Goal Setting
07.07.15	Match Preparation/Dealing with Setbacks/Attitude Management	Match Preparation/Dealing with Setbacks/Attitude Management
14.07.15	Anxiety Regulation (for upcoming international tournament)	Anxiety Regulation (for upcoming international tournament)
21.07.15	Concentration Skills	Concentration Skills
28.07.15	Team Building and Communication Skills	Team Building and Communication Skills
25.08.15	Match Preparation (for international tournament)	Match Preparation (for international tournament)
01.09.15	Tournament Abroad	Challenges of Migration
09.09.15	Challenges of Migration	How to prepare for a Trial (input from coaches too) + evaluation
15.09.15	Qualifiers' Preparation; Team Building and Evaluation	No session
22.09.15	No session	Leadership

Table 6.8 outlines the sessions conducted for both the 1999 (U17's) and 2000 (U16's) groups. Each session took approximately an hour and followed a presentation and discussion format. At times written/drawing exercises and fun games were also included and coaches were present periodically. Sessions were planned around mental skills training since a multi-modal intervention programme that includes mental skills development could help players deal with anxiety-related symptoms (Hanton & Jones, 1999), and assist them in changing their thoughts, feelings and behaviours before performance (Hanton et. al., 2009), in particular in international games. Relaxation strategies were included so that players kept their focus on bodily feelings including muscle tension and breathing patterns together with other task relevant thoughts (Thelwell & Greenlees, 2003). Such anxiety reducing techniques, for example progressive muscle relaxation, helped participants understand when varying states of tension and relaxation may be beneficial in a competitive match situation (Thelwell et al., 2006). Concentration skills included imagery to help players for decision-

making and self-talk to create drive and to help focus better on the task (Thelwell & Greenlees, 2003). Other sessions focused more on life skills and psycho-social skills which would not just help players in a performance context, but also in their everyday life.

6.14.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Players (2.2)

In the case of the MFA player-education sessions, evaluation was conducted with the players themselves, in September 2015, as it was felt that, at the age of 15/16 they could form their own opinions and conclusions on what they felt was required to develop, both in their career and in life as a whole. According to Strean (1998), evaluation of the value of performance-enhancement interventions is one of “the most pressing needs in applied sport psychology” (p.340). It has been reported that only a few studies have examined athletes’ perceptions of programme involvement and the effectiveness of these programmes. Indeed, such evaluation may help improve current programmes (Park et al., 2013). Evaluation was conducted anonymously through questionnaires and also through focus groups.

MFA U17’s

Nineteen players (out of 23) from the U17 (1999) squad were present during the evaluation session. Players documented their answers anonymously on a questionnaire provided by the sport psychologist (practitioner-researcher). This was seen as a preferred way of conducting evaluation on the sessions as players may not have been comfortable in being totally truthful in a focus group or interview setting. In terms of the sessions, players found most useful in enhancing their knowledge and skills, they reported the following: match preparation – (x14 players); anxiety regulation (x10); team building (x9); performance issues/concentration skills (x7); goal-setting (x4); communication skills (x4); challenges faced by players who have played abroad (x2); attitude management (x1).

In terms of the second question, which asked if there had been any sessions they did not find useful, most players answered 'none' or that all sessions were useful. Three did not feel that 'anxiety regulation' was important to them since they felt they could manage to regulate it, another three opted for 'goal-setting' because most players would have to set their goals, and because self-development is so important. One player did not find 'performance profiling' useful.

Players would have liked even more information on the following areas: what to do when going through a tough time on the pitch; team building; timing of the ball/controlling of the ball; after match interview; game situations; one to one sessions; trials; nutrition; communication skills; challenges when playing abroad/ talking with players who have already played abroad. The players would also have liked to have the programme of travel at least a week beforehand, when they go abroad on a tournament, so that they could plan better.

MFA U16's (2000) (2.2)

Fourteen players (out of 21) were present for the evaluation of the summer educational sessions. Evaluation took place in a similar way to that of the U17's. The sessions players found most useful in enhancing their knowledge and skills were: match preparation (x7); team building (x3); performance profiling (x2); attitude management; trial information; goal setting.

In reply to question two, on whether they had found sessions useful, most players felt that all sessions were useful. One answered that he did not find 'anxiety regulation' useful because he did not get anxious, another mentioned 'communication skills' while one named 'concentration skills' as he felt quite sure of himself.

With regard to question three, on what would they have liked further information on, they replied: how to be more comfortable with older players; trial information; anxiety regulation; challenges faced by players who play abroad; communication; match preparation (x2); how to be prepared for playing abroad (x2); anxiety regulation (x 2); team building (x5).

Other areas they would have liked more information on included: football techniques; more feedback from coaches since, at times, they are not called to form part of the starting line-up without any explanation being given to them.

It seems that players felt they had gained a lot from the sessions conducted and enhanced their knowledge and understanding of the skills needed for top performance and for handling transitions. I was happy with the feedback they provided, it showed me that the work being conducted was being seen as useful and important to them. Evaluation was initially and informally tackled in a group discussion. However, it was felt that not much feedback had been acquired in this way due to the fact that I, the sport psychologist and practitioner-researcher conducted most of the sessions and players might have felt uncomfortable reporting back on these sessions with me and, thus, a short questionnaire was devised to evaluate such sessions. This was filled in anonymously so that players could feel they were at liberty to say whatever they felt. It seemed to me that players would also like to have more feedback from coaches and other technical staff on their performance and areas needing improvement and that, at times they felt that feedback was not altogether forthcoming, which made them feel insecure. It was also the case at the MFA that sometimes players were dropped from the team and were not given any explanation for this. I very often did not get to know myself who had been dropped and I felt that this was not right. It was the duty of the MFA, the Technical Director, the coach, to explain to players why they had been dropped. I too, should be involved in order to support young players through this difficult time. A lot of the MFA coaches had been players themselves, they should know how it felt to be dropped. Where players seen as number who fulfilled a purpose? As the sport psychologist working on providing the players with psychological support, both in team and individual sessions, I felt the need to try and involve the coaches further and pass on the feedback given (2.10).

The psychosocial development and support of MFA players would continue through both group and individual sessions over the following couple of months, since these had been viewed as beneficial in terms of preparation for competitions and in developing mental toughness. Indeed, players and the Technical Director had asked for more sessions to be delivered as can be seen in the evaluations above. The aims of equipping young players with the necessary knowledge and tools to be able to manage the pressures of life and top football, as they grow older, had started to be tackled and the topics of communication, transition awareness, performance enhancing skills, team work, time-management, attitude management and match preparation had been introduced to them. The players (as evidenced in the evaluations) and I felt that they were better equipped with the knowledge and skills for performance as well as the coping skills necessary to be able to manage future transitional challenges they might experience. For players will be in a position to cope with the demands placed upon them depending on the balance between the transitional challenges they are facing and the resources and support they have available to them (Morris et al., 2015).

Evaluation: MFA Technical Director (2.1)

An evaluative meeting took place, once again, with the MFA Technical Director at the end of 2015. He questioned what we could do further to prepare players better for transition, suggesting that the two young Maltese players that had been sent to Italy (some two years previously), had decided not to stay as they were homesick and thus, despite us having done some work with them prior to migrating, this seemed not to have been enough and we needed to do more to develop players' psycho-social competencies. This upset me a bit as I wondered whether I could have done more. However, from the feedback I got from coaches, players and parents, I felt that the biggest problem still existed at home as parents continued to do everything for their children and did not give them the opportunity to be

personally responsible. A case in point happened that same day; the mother of one of our U19 players contacted me so that I would fix an appointment with her son who was aged 17/18. He was one of the first players who had experienced this project, and had received all the transition preparation we could give. The parents had attended one of the focus groups and had admitted to “spoiling” their son. Here they were, still repeating the same behaviour, it seemed. This made me question how much of the work we were conducting was actually working in the long term.

I told the Technical Director that I felt that unless we got the players to take on personal responsibility at the FA and, possibly, hold a live in, we wouldn’t get anywhere. I explained to him what we did at the NSS with live ins. He was keen on getting them to help in certain areas such as the kitchen, however the problem was that the cook arrived early to cook and everything would be ready once the players came from school. However, it was agreed that when the players were to be at the training centre they were to be encouraged to take on more personal responsibility. These could include helping with washing kits, cleaning changing rooms and showers after use, helping in the cooking and cleaning of dishes and setting out the tea. This is in line with Martindale and colleagues (2005) belief that organisations need to focus on the characteristics needed to become successful players, including life skills. It also supports the work of Orellana (2003) who stated that children’s involvement in household related work may be seen as essential for their overall education, as it may facilitate their moral, social, and civic development.

This worked out well, I felt, though there were always players who evaded these tasks by saying they had homework. However, a number of players acquired some important personal responsibility skills they did not have previously. If parents were not going to instil in them these skills then we were going to do it ourselves. It was interesting how players got around to cleaning household items, amusing at best and frustrating at worst! Some got really into it and the MFA found themselves with a sparkling clean fridge, one player scoured

the sandwich maker so much that he removed the lining thinking it was dirt, another just cleaned around the items on the cupboards! But, as a team, in groups of three or four, they at least gave it a go. I was pleased that they were trying to take the initiative, even though a number of them always complained after having to clean up the mess they had made after tea. Inevitably, every week, there was spilled milk, tea and cake crumbs all over the cupboards and floor which was to be expected from a group of around 23 young football players! It was time to show them that mummy wasn't here and no one was going to clean up their mess, they needed to be more aware of taking on personal responsibility and to clean up afterwards themselves. However, I questioned whether the action strategies we were implementing would work in the long term. Players spent for more time at home than at the MFA and it was easy for them to let go of personal responsibilities if they found someone who was willing to do everything for them. The work needed to be done with the parents to instil in them the importance of developing personal responsibility in their children (2.10).

Evaluation: U19s (2.2)

I hadn't had a session with the U19s, (born in 1998) who had now been working with me on psycho-social support for about four years, for a while (this was the first group I worked with at the MFA, starting back in 2012 when I was first employed there and also this coincided with the commencement of my PhD). Thus, I was very glad to be travelling with them once again to a tournament in Italy in March 2016. I felt it was important to catch up with them and show them that I was there to support them, as a lack of support for still developing athletes may hinder their progress (Moore et al., 1998). I, therefore, took the opportunity to have individual sessions with all the players once we were there and I had easy access to the team. I also called up a group of players who had been at the MFA as long as I had been there (four years) and who had followed an intensive programme of preparation in all areas, including psychosocial skills and support. Morris and colleagues (2015) suggested that future research through longitudinal studies is needed to gain better understanding of the experiences of athletes, the provision of specific types of support and to measure transitional outcomes. Thus, I conducted a focus group with six players who I had followed closely over the past years. We reflected on the challenges they had faced over

the previous years, in particular, their transition to playing in the Premier league, despite their young age (17/18) and whether they felt the education sessions and support provided by the MFA had helped them cope better with the transitional demands. Cropley and colleagues (2011) highlighted the importance of training programmes designed to enhance reflective skills. For them, a multi-modal training programme aimed at increasing the chances that reflective practice would be beneficial to athletes was noteworthy. However, there was very little evidence of such reflective programmes being used in the development of athletes and sport psychology (Neil et al., 2013). I felt that this reflection session would be greatly beneficial to these young men who were now at an age where they could adopt reflective practice as a tool for personal and professional development (Cropley et al., 2007). In addition, to learn from the positive and negative experiences they encountered so that performance could be understood and improved (Hanton et al., 2009).

I explained to the players that the aim of the session was to reflect on where the players had arrived at in terms of their career, studies and football, but also life in general and asked them whether their knowledge and skills had improved through their experience as national team players. In football, over these past months, a number of the players had gone through several transitions. For example, some players were now training with the senior team in the Premier league, some of them having made their debut too. In the session, the team was supported by their peers, a coach and their sport psychologist (the practitioner-researcher) in this reflective process. The players were able to consider their approach to reflection as well as understand what they needed to attend to both in terms of their game performances and also in terms of their future in the game (Neil et al., 2013).

Transition to the Senior Team

The main challenge the players felt on their move from the junior to the senior squad at the club was the difference in physical size between them and established senior adult

players. In fact, Stambulova (2000) stated that the transition to adult sport is one of the toughest periods of athletic development. Sean reported feeling that he was not fully grown when compared to most of the other players and it affected him in the matches against other teams. Against the foreigners especially, he wasn't fully at ease. Kyle felt this was the case even during training, whilst Andrew said that other players' age and experience also played a part.

Its one thing last year I was with the U17's and now I am playing in Premier as a goalkeeper. For example, a cross, you have a foreigner who is very strong, you find it a bit difficult initially until you settle down. They are very tall, strong, so until you find your place in the team it takes some time.

He felt that the sense of belonging would come about with positive performances on the pitch, by proving himself when it really mattered. Kyle suggested that the sessions where we had worked on anxiety and pressure helped him greatly as this was a stressful time, one where he needed to mentally prepare to perform at his best.

I was happy to see how far this group of players had moved up. Most of our U19s, the 1998- born group were the first group to have had any psycho-social education. Having followed them from the start of my PhD in 2012, I recognised that the work we had done with the players must have helped them. They were a group who really engaged fully in everything the MFA provided them with, whether it was physical training, opportunity for more training, sport psychology sessions and more. Their parents too had been involved greatly in the programme conducted and communicated with the staff at the MFA regularly so as to provide the best kind of support. A good number of the players were playing in the Premier league in Malta already, despite the fact that the Maltese Premier League allowed eight foreign players at one go on the pitch, and despite the fact that physically they were not yet developed enough to cope with the strength of foreign players. A small number of them were also playing regularly and were not just on the substitute's bench, and could not even attend the tournament in Rome due to important league matches. Their future was bright, I hoped that they could get their opportunity abroad, too (2.10).

The players also reported that the first weeks playing in the Premier league were higher in stress levels. The young Maltese players still faced challenges within their own country in

their attempt to develop and progress. In fact, Kyle suggested that he still felt like an outsider; during training he stayed with players of his own age, with the minors until the senior players started including him in the team. Andrew, who is a goalkeeper, spent time with everyone, but, especially the defenders, as well as with the foreigners and the Maltese. He felt like an outsider because he was the youngest, but then after a couple of games, it got better; it was like he gained a lot of confidence at once, he said. For Jeremy:

There are certain players who will help you, but then there are others who, when you make a mistake its like the end of the world, they dishearten you as they are afraid that you will take their place.

As Littlewood (2005) reported, there is often a highly competitive, physical and psychological environment where provocation and behavioural issues can be tough for young players to deal with. Daniel too, found it difficult at the beginning to integrate with the team, even in terms of self-confidence, since he considered others to be strong and very experienced; but then, he said, once one starts getting used to it, you feel more at ease. He was given the opportunity to play in the Premier league for a whole twenty minutes. Such information given by the players may help educate other young players on the expectations that they may experience when they move to senior sport, and help them to develop coping strategies to manage any challenges they experience (Morris et al., 2016).

Although this group of players has not migrated to play overseas, they reported experiencing challenges similar to players who had migrated. They initially felt unaccepted in the senior team and overwhelmed by the experience of it all, and it took time to adapt to the high tempo and the physicality of the game (2.10).

For Richard, the older players in his team keep to themselves, both during training and in the dressing rooms. The younger players and some of the foreigners end up staying apart; they do not mix, they have formed a clique of their own; however, the senior players are okay with the younger players though he himself was not at ease with them yet. Senior players could be encouraged to offer advice and support where required, perhaps even via

the implementation of a 'buddy system', where senior players are allocated youth players to mentor (Morris et al., 2016). This may help younger players settle in quicker. For Kyle, even when the senior team and the minors both won their respective league and a double decker bus was hired for the parade, players stood in cliques. The older Maltese players were all at the front, on their own, whilst the foreigners were all at the back with the minors.

For Jeremy, if anyone from the older players tried to lower his morale he suggested that he tried not to take notice of them but that sometimes this was not easy. Whilst Richard suggested the following with respect to the captain of the team,

if you do an exercise badly in training, he will come and tell you. But, then, when you do something well, he will come and tell you "well done" too and he lifts your morale.

Kyle stated that some of the older players act one way in the dressing room, then on the pitch they act another way. He went on to say that certain players are all right in the changing room; they joke with you and they try to include you in the group, he says. "But during the match they just criticise, if you do something well they don't tell you anything, but then they scream at you if you mess up" and this can be very frustrating and intimidating for a young player trying to find his place within the team. As Richardson and colleagues (2012) stated, the culture in football clubs tends to be one inundated with banter, strong language and provocation, and the young Maltese players were experiencing this as other senior players in the team felt that the presence of some of the younger players might mean that they would soon take their place. However, the players felt that the many experiences the MFA had provided them with including the psycho-social education sessions and participation in tournaments at a young age against top teams, such as the youth teams of Manchester City, AC Milan and Inter Milan helped greatly in their development and in their ability to transition successfully to the top teams.

As one of the players in Study One had reported in his interview, the Maltese are jealous of those who make it, those who are successful and, thus, the senior Maltese players already in the team might have felt intimidated and afraid that these talented younger players could soon be taking their place. Instead of trying to help them out, other players, at times, made life difficult for them. Life is like that for everyone, however, the younger ones had to fight their own battles, be tough and learn to handle such situations. I felt that they were lucky that someone was there to try and support them through this, however too, players would need to go through these challenges to grow and develop in their game. I felt that I had to let go of them at times and see how they would cope on their own and I could not be there for them all the time throughout their career (2.10).

According to Thelwell and colleagues (2005), the environment plays an important role in the development of attributes for the mentally tough performer. Situations such as training with the senior squad, selection and de-selection, and having to gain the respect of the manager are all important environmental challenges that are likely to occur in a player's career. Players in Thelwell et al.'s (2005) study felt that if young players are exposed to similar situations in their younger years this may be beneficial to them later in their career.

In the case of the current research, Richard recalls the first time he played with the senior team. He played for eight minutes. That first time, he didn't feel much of a difference in the level between the minors and the senior team because his team were winning and his team mates kept passing the ball to each other in the same corner, just to let the time elapse. Richard played five times in the Premier League with the last time he played having possession of the ball for quite a lot.

It was then that I saw a great difference from the minors. It is evident that senior players use their strength much more and not because you're playing against smaller clubs. That kind of drive is there and there is not much of a difference between clubs at Premier level; you feel the strength since we are still young ...

He also believed that he was not yet confident on the pitch, because of a lack of experience and because he was fearful of making mistakes. With the senior team he felt it was a bit

difficult, so you had to try and give a bit extra effort to impress. Sean also confirmed that there was a lot of difference between the minors and the senior team:

When I played for the first time it was against Birkirkara, I went in for 15-20 minutesand felt it was very difficult. I felt they were very hard...physically, they were much stronger than me ...besides, when you first form part of the team you do not feel confident as you do with your friends in the minors ...You need to ask for the ball all the timeto have them pass it to you ...often they do not passif you are close to goal they never pass to you, they keep it themselves.

Daniel however found the going easier when he first got called up to play in the Premier league. His team were winning 5-0 so he felt at ease and the other players were passing the ball to him and they were looking out for him too because he had a lot of free space around him.

It is a good thing when coaches understand the challenges young players face, especially when moving from the youth to the senior team, and gradually introduce them to playing in the Premier League, such as Daniel's coach had done. Daniel felt comfortable as the team were winning by quite a bit; so, he did not feel that it was his first real experience in the Premier League and, also, that he did not need to change the game, or make drastic moves to save the game. Other senior players, too, were more ready to help him integrate as the result was positive. Sean, on the other hand, as a striker, felt the pressure more since the job of the striker is to score and his team mates were not yet confident enough of his abilities to give him the opportunity. Sean has now proved himself and is now a regular player in the first team (2.10).

Relationships with coaching staff:

A number of players felt intimidated with the senior team coaches. For example Kyle suggested:

I do not feel confident speaking to him. The assistant comes on his own to speak to you, the coach doesn't.

Kyle further notes that the club did not have a sports psychologist who you could speak to about your problems, which meant that he would need to speak to the assistant coach. However, the assistant coach would then tell the coach himself which may not always be a good thing as he feared looking weak in the coaches' eyes. Richard too, felt confident with

the assistants because the day after a match with the minors, it is the assistant coach rather than the coach who takes the initiative to speak to the players and organises everything for the coach. Sean on the other hand got on well with his coach as he describes him, “he is my kind of person; we get on well together, I don’t have anything to complain about him; he is okay with me”. Jeremy on the other hand finds it difficult to speak to the coach because he is a foreigner. Similar to the findings by Holt and Hogg (2002) and Bourke (2002), and as reported in Chapter Three, players found that the manager role is not a supportive one, and other personnel may be needed to provide appropriate social support. In this case, young players (appeared) more dependent on the assistant coach’s support. However, such support from coaches and managers (Pummell et. al., 2008; Bruner et. al., 2008), plays one of the most pivotal roles in the transition process (Stambulova et. al., 2012) and therefore coaches needed to be made aware of their effect on young players and the importance of making them feel accepted within the team.

We can see that young players feel intimidated and in awe of the senior team coach and prefer to communicate with the assistant coach since they find that he is the one who looks after them. One player reported how, suddenly, he realised that his actions as a boy had to change to those of a man, once he was in the senior team. Whilst, previously, mum or dad would phone the coach to tell him their son was unable to go to training, as a 17 year old, playing with the senior team, he was now responsible to do that himself. Failure to do so may cause unnecessary tension with the coach and, in this case, he learnt the hard way. This was one of the more responsible boys, but he had failed to communicate. How often I had waited, in vain, for players to answer my messages to come for a session. The excuses were endless – ‘I forgot’; ‘I had no credit in my mobile’; ‘I couldn’t make it’, and so on. Where was this basic lack of ethics coming from? Home? Our educational system had failed them? Who was responsible for teaching manners, accountability and responsibility to young boys? Did we have to do this, too, at the MFA (2.10)?

Tournament abroad – Pace of the game

The players then went on to speak about the tournament they were at, at that time, in Rome. Richard feels that when he plays against foreign players, he feels the huge difference from playing with the minors. Physically, he feels they are always better, they always have more stamina, and tactically they are much better too. He compared the tournament the players were at to the Premier League in Malta.

You get the same force, you feel the same rhythm of the ball, it keeps moving, it doesn't stop, and the players they keep running, they do not stop. It's not like with the minors. I felt the level of this tournament, compared to the little I have played in the Premier League, as the same. The fact that I have played a lot in this tournament will help me when I get to play in the Premier League.

For Kyle the level of the tournament is somewhere between that of the minors and the senior team. He feels that the foreigners in his senior team have a higher level of playing, possibly because of their experience, Andrew continued. Jeremy felt that in such games, if there is a goal kick they pounce immediately, the ball comes to you and you have no time to take a breath. Whilst Richard goes on to say:

You can't say "I will stop for a moment. I won't make that run," because they take the best of chances and they will drub you right away ...It's not like in Malta, when you say to yourself, "I'll miss this chance, maybe they won't score". If you do not do your job, they punish you immediately.

The players spoke about the level of football in Malta as compared to the pace of the game when they play abroad in tournaments. In Malta they can take it rather easily as compared to tournaments abroad, although some admitted that it was not so much now that they were playing in the Premier League. It is similar to what has been reported by Armstrong and Mitchell (2008). After playing in the Premier League they, inevitably, built up confidence which has helped them perform better in tournaments such as the one we were at. The same was also true of playing in such tournaments abroad as this helped them feel more comfortable playing in the Premier League.

Having attended this tournament in Rome with the players for three consecutive years I, too, was in awe of the sheer physicality of some players from other countries as well as of the technique and knowhow of these players. But, then again, some of the foreign players, playing at such tournaments, were already playing overseas in top clubs, mainly in England and Italy (2.10).

Transitional Challenges in other areas of their life

In their personal life, the players have experienced a number of challenges over the past months. For example some changed school, chose new subjects to study, others needed to see what they were going to wear every morning, some needed to wake themselves up in the morning. There were those who had decided not to work but others had started a new job. This is in line with Wylleman and Lavalley's (2004) development model which states that athletes pass through other important transitions in their life, and not just in their sport career and such changes in other areas of life may influence their athletic career (Ewing, 1998), thus, sport psychologists need to take a holistic approach to the study of transitions.

For Andrew the transition to a new school was not so big since he opted to attend a church school, similar to the one he was at before. He did however need to wake up much earlier at around 5.15 am to catch the school bus. Daniel too attends a church school and for him there is not much difference from last year because the students are still a bit spoon-fed there. Richard, on the other hand, decided he had had enough of school and started working. He recalls his first day at work:

I was a bit excited because it was the first time I was working and I didn't know what to expect, but, after three days, I settled down and it felt like I had been doing what I was doing for a long time.

Richard remarked on the psycho-social sessions he had had at the MFA and how despite the fact that he was never keen on school, he felt carried along by the team, because they were such a cohesive team. They, as well as the sport psychologist (practitioner-researcher) encouraged him to work harder on his studies. The Technical Director also asked to see the

players' school results and this pushed him to work harder as he did not want to lose his place on the team because he was not seen as working hard enough in other areas of his life. Despite the fact that he eventually decided to quit school, Richard felt that when he made the transition to full time work he had the coping resources available due to all the support he had received at the MFA. Stambulova (2003) proposed that transitions come with challenges which need to be overcome in order to have a successful transition. Richard was able to cope with the challenges of moving from education to full time employment as he believed he had the transition resources to do so.

For Jeremy who changed schools and thus had to learn to be more independent, there is a lot of difference between finishing lessons at 2.00pm and finishing lessons at 5.00pm. For it also affects training, because the senior players start their session at 4.15pm. Very often, he only gets the chance to train once a week with the senior team, because he also has training with the national team and matches with the minors. This, inevitably brings on comments from other players, "You don't come for training and the coach still chooses you for the matches". He feels he cannot do anything about this as he has school. This worries him, because there are the foreigners and he is afraid he won't get chosen. Kyle feels that this is a lot of pressure for Jeremy to handle.

Players spoke about the challenges they had to face in recent transitions they had experienced: moving schools, having to use public transport to get to school rather than having the school bus picking them up, coping with longer hours at school and coinciding training times, managing finances and so on. Whilst some of them could ease through the transition gently, as they either remained at the same school, or moved from a private/church school to another private/church school where numbers of students are small and they are given a lot of attention, others moved to far larger schools where they had to fend for themselves, whilst another had to adapt to the world of work and start managing his finances. This reminded me of when I was their age when I, too, had struggled through the changes experienced. There were change of subjects at school, new friendships, teenage crushes, summer jobs, saving up for a new car and living mostly on my own during the summer, aged

just 16-17, as the summer job I was doing involved transport duties at night and the company I worked for had provided me with an apartment (an apartment in the middle of Malta's busiest night spot, may I add – my parents were not happy about this!). That was such a good time, lots of fun but also lots of challenges and heart-ache, too (2.10).

Social Life Challenges

Changing school or starting work, brings with it a change in friends, too. Richard feels that this is good however Jeremy and Kyle say that it's got it's good and it's bad points because you lose close friends. When questioned about how they handle peer pressure, Sean says:

It depends. My friends aren't the best ('mhux mill-iktar helwin'), there are those who smoke and those who don't, but I keep back because of football ... if I did not have football, I think it would have been a different storybut I love football.

At times too, they push him to skip training and spend time with them. However, his mum is very strict regarding football and does not allow it. He asks himself, "Can't I go out to enjoy myself? Is it only training?". He has training from Monday to Friday, and matches in the weekend. He wishes he could have a day off. He is also careful to not go out the evening before a match however he finds it difficult to resist certain temptations such as staying out late when having fun. Kyle, feels that Sean's friends are not real friends if they cannot support him and not distract him when he has matches. Kyle feels he is lucky in that sense that he has supportive friends.

Sean was facing some big challenges as he grew up, or tried to grow up. I felt his mother was not helping him mature. Sean didn't have a job, he would just wake up at whatever time he felt like it and do nothing all day, just go to football training. He was never into studying and was just not interested in work. His mother was very attentive to his needs and allowed him not to work and not do anything much around the house. He also came from a difficult background. The crowd he was hanging around with was also, at times, a bad influence. But I hoped that his supportive teammates, who were a great group of young men, and all the psycho-social education we had done with the team and with him on an individual basis would help him. Some months after

I had written this however, Sean had been dropped from the national team because of the same attitude issues the staff at the MFA had always challenged him about. Sean was used to getting things his own way, all the time, it was time to see if he could 'fight his own battles' and return to the MFA at some point (2.10).

Use of mental skills learnt through the sessions held at the MFA

During the week, I had already spoken to many of the players individually and I was really happy to hear that many were putting to use many of the mental skills I had taught them. Richard states that most times he does prepare himself before a match, however occasionally, he is lazy, and he feels relaxed with the minor team. Sometimes, too, he has something else on his mind. He always tries to listen to music on the way to a match however.

At other times,

I imagine what I would like to do in the match and sometimes I also imagine playing with a top club (smiles), and then, in the match, I try to do what I would have imagined....

Kyle, more or less engages in the same mental preparation before the match.

It's the same with me – music; I imagine myself delivering a good performance; I think of what I would have done well in a previous match, and also badly ...the good try to keep it, the bad you try to fix.

Whilst Sean says he feels normal, when he goes into the pitch it's like he knows what is going to happen...he will play well. However, sometimes, he admits, everything seems to go against him and he remains very nervous and is unable to change things. Richard also feels that sometimes his body doesn't want to cooperate, however, when you are called up with the senior team you cannot afford not to play well. For him, this year, the minors' team is not doing very well and he goes down demotivated. Andrew, however, believes that one needs to be determined, to speak to himself positively and aggressively, and to have the will.

Previously, when I used to have that gut feeling, I did not do enough match preparation, especially if I had school in the morning. But I didn't always perform as well as when I had prepared myself mentally. ...so, now, I try to do it every time...even when I have the will to play, I try to do always the same preparation ... I listen to music I also use that application you had shown me some two years ago, the relaxation application, especially since as a goaler, if you do a mistake the other team can score.

Practitioners need to be aware of the role-specific requirements for the players they work with. Apart from this the practitioner would then also need to identify the appropriate psychological methods for psychological skills development that would help maximise performance within that particular role (Thelwell & Greenlees, 2003). Andrew had been a part of the squad for a number of years. I knew him well, he had had both team and individual sessions with me and thus I felt in a better position to select the tools I felt would be most beneficial to his characteristics as a player.

Jeremy too had been a part of the squad for a while and had attended psychological skills sessions. He used music with some pieces helping him visualize more.

Yesterday, you told me to talk to myself more during matches and I did it and it helped meand sometimes, if I take a photo before the match, and we win...I will want to take a photo before every match, but if I forget to do it ... I say... I forgot to take the photo so we will lose

So, at times he needs to fight his rituals too. Before a match with the minors he always pumps up the balls and sometimes he initially forgets to pump them and then he needs to try to do it quickly. Kyle also listens to motivational speeches, but performance and motivation also depend on how the team is doing, he says. When the team is winning its obvious the morale will go up. Daniel, on the other hand, likes to be by himself, and he tries to imagine the upcoming match and previous positive performances. He also speaks to himself positively during the match. This shows clearly that the mental skills the boys had been taught at the MFA had become an important part of their game preparation. Psychological skills training was seen to be beneficial to improving and increasing performance consistency. This was beneficial not just to the player, but also to me too as the sport psychologist who could see players becoming more focused and consistent in their performance similar to what has been

reported by Thelwell and Maynard (2003) in their study on ‘The effects of a mental skills package on ‘repeatable good performance’ in cricketers’.

These players have been provided with a lot of support at the MFA from all the technical staff working with them over the years and from their parents too. We can clearly pinpoint the transition from secondary to post-secondary school, or work, and all the changes that that brings, including managing finances, new friends and new subjects at school among others. We can see the transition from playing in the youth team to the senior team in the Premier League, involving more intensive matches, the need to prepare oneself more, mentally, and dealing with the changing room culture, as has been discussed in Chapter Three. Close collaboration between all parties concerned, players, staff, and parents has helped to facilitate the transitions. Players had developed the knowledge, understanding and psycho-social competencies to be able to handle transitional challenges.

Part of the psycho-social education that had taken place with this group included mental skills training, in particular preparing for competitive matches. It was a good thing that most of them were engaging in mental preparation and remembered well the skills we had worked on. I used to always help and remind players to prepare their mind set before matches in their early teenage years, but, it seems, this has paid off for they were now engaging in their own mental preparation before matches. I felt it was important not to just teach players the skills but to also see that they could do them on their own. These players were intrinsically motivated. Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory is appropriate here; the players' needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy helped them grow in their performance and handle transitional challenges too. I still remember conducting relaxation and visualization sessions with the whole group the night before matches. They were always receptive to these ideas and have conducted such exercises since they were just 13 years old, for they believe it is a necessary part of preparing for a match. This is what I had hoped for. I find it so much easier to get young athletes to use mental skills, and continue to adapt these skills to their needs as they grew older, rather than having to teach such skills to adults (2.10).

Readiness for Migration

I reminded the players that a few years ago, we had discussed the challenges they would be facing as they grew older, as well as, the challenges they might face if they get the opportunity to play abroad. I questioned how ready they felt to go and play abroad. Kyle stated that this is something he has often thought about and feels that he is ready, however Sean stated that it is not so easy to say this. For Richard, if he got the opportunity to go for a week's trial, that would be okay; he would feel a bit excited because he would be forming part of a new team and, also, he would be going completely on his own. But, if he were to be accepted and manage to sign a contract with the team, that wouldn't be easy.

I wouldn't know anyone there, I would be going away from family and, maybe, girlfriend.....But, then, one has to be determined enough to remain.... For there are some who only last a month and then they come back...

Andrew stated that he still remembers the speech in the boardroom, when I (the practitioner-researcher) had told them that if they were to go abroad they shouldn't come back to Malta straight away. He recalls the discussion about one particular player who did not return to Malta before six months because he was afraid that if he did, he would not go back. Richard's fear is that if he had to go abroad he would miss going out with his friends and there you might have nowhere to go. "Everywhere is far abroad, you wouldn't know anyone", he says. The fact that they didn't drive yet was also an issue to Kyle, whilst for Sean, language may also be a problem. You have to have the will to learn the language, Kyle states.

It was good to see that they remembered the work that we had done on the challenges Maltese players, who had gone to play abroad, experienced. I remember them asking so many questions. There had been a good couple of sessions discussing these challenges. I really believed in this team, I really believed a number of them could make it. However, I felt so disappointed, after all the work done, that the most promising player of the team had not remained in Italy. He had moved there young, aged 15, on his own and he felt homesick. He was

good at school and he felt he should sit for his O levels, but, then he got stuck in Malta. Had other players on this team lost opportunities in Italy because the Italian agent working with the MFA gave up on Maltese players, as a few of them had tried to make it in Italy and not succeeded? Hardly any other players had been offered opportunities, in the meantime. The one or two who had where unable to move as their club wanted an exorbitant fee for them (2.10).

Players in the focus group were aware of some of their teammates who had gone to play abroad and returned back to Malta. Richard felt that they have never experienced it, so they do not know what it feels like exactly, whilst Kyle stated that most of them say they were homesick, however, he thinks he knows how to handle that. Sean viewed it that that happens when you're not ready for these things, when you're not prepared enough mentally. Most felt that they could cope with the cleaning and cooking, but hoped that the club would look after these things for them! They had a solution for everything... if the clothes don't dry, they would dry them with the hairdryer and they would simply follow recipes on the internet!

So, whilst I believed they had enough knowledge on the challenges of migration, some of them, at the age of 17 still could not cook, wash their own clothes and so on. I hoped that if they did move abroad, they would cope. I still had my doubts about Sean. Some still hoped that they would find everything ready made for them, and, maybe, some of them would. Some of them believed that once they were there they would learn, but would there be too many new things to cope with, and, thus, one would be overwhelmed (2.10)?

Support

When asked who they looked to for support, Richard stated that it was his mother, since he is not so much at ease with his father. Kyle kept everything to himself. But, where football is concerned, and it's serious, he speaks to his father since he used to play too. Sean and Jeremy also suggested that they kept their issues to themselves, they try to solve their own problems, and they definitely would not tell their friends any serious problems. However, it has been said that players will be able to cope with specific demands depending

on the balance between the transition challenges they are facing and the resources and support they have available (Morris et al., 2015). If they had to be playing abroad, Kyle suggested that he would speak to me (practitioner-researcher), whilst only one or two would be comfortable speaking to the coach.

It was imperative to identify the specific roles of coaches and significant others, such as parents, and their influence on athletes' career development, as this could help athletes use their support system effectively to deal with challenges of transition, as suggested by Park and colleagues (2013). It was felt that we needed to educate the parents, since it was clear that players, aged 17-18, still depended a lot on them and, thus, parents could help players adapt to transitions. Players interviewed by Morris et al. (2015) felt that knowing that their parents and coaches were informed about the changes they would experience helped them to feel better about it and able to talk more.

In situations where they experienced difficulties, a number of athletes still relied very heavily on their parents which shows that, despite their age, the close knit environment in Malta was still very much in evidence. Others just preferred keeping it all to themselves and struggled with their doubts, rather than discuss them with someone. Even friends could not be trusted. If it was a football related issue, the coach could be an option for some of them. It was also good to see that, despite these players not seeing me so much anymore, they still saw me as a figure who they could turn to for advice and support, in particular if they did migrate overseas. Social support was vital for these young players to survive out there in the football world (2.10).

MFA Psycho-Social Education Sessions

The MFA had strategically focused on creating a proactive programme aligned to Stambulova's model, in the hope that there would be better transition outcomes for these players. This action research study, similar to that of Morris and colleagues (2015), promotes a proactive approach to supporting players through within career transitions. By targeting the demands, barriers and resources associated with the transitions they would face, it was

hoped that positive consequences, in terms of player development and MFA success, would take place. It was hoped that the programme employed would produce better and mentally tougher players who would in turn bring on more success for the national team. Richard, in fact believed that over the past four years the 1998 team gained a lot of experience and support from the MFA.

We started here aged U13.....at that age you don't travel much with the national team usually...we had a bigger advantage than the others because we went abroad a lot, we played against foreign players who were much better than us, and our career improved a lot. With a club you don't get to travel much ...with the national team everything is paid for, everything is good. We got both the chance and the experience.

Kyle agreed, stating that club training is very different from national team training and that he would prefer training with the national team so as to improve his skills. With the national team whatever you want you have. He believed that it should be like the sport school, players of the national team should train more often together, even in the morning. You also play with players of a certain level according to Richard. With the club, there are players not of the same ability, so when you try to do something you find yourself stalling.

If I had to have something else in the national team, it would be to have our own complex. I don't know if it can be done over here but, abroad, they have their own complex, where they spend a week living together. We could live together like a family for a week, for example. Even if it is just a friendly match...we could meet two days before at Ta' Qali and spend time together, lunching and living there (Richard).

However, the clubs insisted on players being at club training. The senior national team in train very little before international matches because the players train with the clubs. Regarding the psycho-social education sessions they used to attend, Jeremy believed that these definitely helped;

I remember that you had told us about skills like visualization; before you taught it to us, I didn't know about it and definitely it can help you.

Kyle believed that the weekly sessions were also helpful, especially for the young players. Through these sessions they also learnt from the role models they met and from other speakers who guided them regarding rules of the game and more. The players believed that they had gained a lot of knowledge and skills through the work conducted with them at the MFA and they were very grateful for this. The support provided to these players was ongoing throughout the years and this has been viewed as fundamental to help sustain reflective learning and develop a culture where reflection is seen as vital for development (Anderson et al., 2004).

As suggested by Park and colleagues (2013), this focus group was conducted to gain a better understanding of the challenges and experiences of the players over a specific period of time. Harwood and colleagues (2010) argued for the need for academies to explore ways to improve player development. Thus, the MFA hoped that through such evaluation from the players themselves, one could work on creating the right socio-cultural and environmental conditions for success in elite youth football.

It was great to see that the players felt that the work we had done at the MFA was useful to them and that they still remembered several areas we had tackled and still practiced the mental skills I had engaged in with them. They did feel that they were a fortunate bunch of players to have experienced so much and to have been provided with so much. These boys, I must admit, are very close to me, they were the first group of boys I worked with, when they were aged just 13 years or so, back in 2012 when I had started working part-time at the MFA and, also, when I had embarked on my PhD work. They were so much a part of it! A big part of my life! Keeping in mind, of course, ethical boundaries, I was fond of them; I couldn't not be, for I had worked so closely with them for four years or so now. I knew I had earned their respect and that of their parents. The parents still contacted me at times to ask for advice. I was very much interested to see how their lives were developing. And I hoped that they would make it (2.10).

Evaluation: U17s (2.2)

Sessions continued regularly for the U17's with a final reflection and review session being held with them in April 2016, after the U17s Easter tournament. The tournament involved the national teams of Malta, Liechtenstein, Azerbaijan and Belarus. The MFA's ambitions were to beat Liechtenstein and possibly Azerbaijan, so it was quite a surprise when our players went on to win the tournament. It was important to conduct an evaluation of the tournament and see how the players felt they had performed especially since it has been seen that helping young athletes develop an ability to discuss and reflect on the challenges they face has been seen to improve their self-awareness (Cropley et al., 2007).

The players reported to having played as a team; to going out hard and aggressive. They also felt that the preparation for the matches was good, that they were really focused because they had the same aim. They made an effort, on their own free will to have team meetings to discuss the upcoming games.

I was impressed; this group of 15/16 year olds had fully engaged in what we had been discussing for months; match preparation, having the right attitude, passion, aggression. I was happy with this. This was a group which I found to be very confident, at times too confident. It was also interesting to see how, approximately eight members of the team, attended the same private school and came from similar backgrounds, the upper levels of society. The school they attended was well known for the positive and open-minded approach it adopted in its teaching methods. I believed that, at least in theory, this did have something to do with their ability to play against better teams. They believed enough in themselves to challenge themselves to perform well. However, to their credit, they also took the time to prepare well for the matches. I hoped they would keep this up. I was not part of the team this time round but would have loved to pop over and have a chat with them. However, in exactly the same week of the tournament, I was organising, as part of the Malta School Sport Federation, of whom I am secretary, an international badminton schools' world championships. I hoped they would engage in the preparation I had asked them to commit to. A week before, I had a good session with them, in which I reminded them of all they needed to take note, and informed them that I could not be with them much, this time round. But, then again, I could not be with them at every tournament they were going to

play; so, they had to learn to do this by themselves. It seems they coped pretty well without me, and that was what I wanted- players who took responsibility and who could handle the situations they faced (2.10).

Tournament Performance

Players, felt that the sessions held at the MFA helped them greatly to improve their performance. They reported that they were focused and this definitely helped in decision-making. The weeks of psycho-social education which included mental skills training and match preparation had paid off. David reported that:

We felt a change... we realised that we couldn't keep accepting the idea that, as we were a small country, we couldn't help it..... That's what we discussed in our team talk.

The players felt that they played well although the last game could have been better and this was due to the fact that they did not prepare for this match as well as they had for the previous ones. Fatigue could have been a factor, taking it for granted could have also been another factor. A few weeks previously, the team had reported that they had been lacking chemistry on the pitch, the players did not have much self-belief that they could be successful in this tournament. However, we worked on this together through team-building exercises, communication and leadership skills and the team scored within the first twenty seconds of the first game, and that seemed to have set the tone of the tournament. Their confidence grew, and despite some setbacks such as the goalkeeper getting injured in the first five minutes, they kept on fighting hard showing that the sessions conducted had helped to build mental toughness.

I was present for that first match against Belarus. I was watching from the side-lines. And, if ever there was an eventful start to a match, it was during that game! We won the toss; our U17s attacked immediately and scored within 20 seconds from the start of the game. Everyone was ecstatic! No one was expecting that we would do much against Belarus, but here we were, we had already scored in the first few seconds! This was to be the turning point of the tournament I felt. This early goal was going to give the boys the confidence needed

to keep pushing to the top. However, just five minutes into the game, the goalkeeper needed to be substituted due to a dislocated finger. The second keeper was not ready to go in but he took the occasion to prove himself, once he had been given his chance to do so. They boys did not let this sudden change in goalkeeper affect them; they had faith in him and went on to continue dominating the match. I felt thrilled that they showed such mental toughness (2.10).

Further work on psycho-social and mental skills

Players felt that they could not afford to take the last match of a tournament for granted. This issue had actually been brought up in the team sessions beforehand however it seemed that despite this having been discussed, players still had difficulty handling this; they were too confident after the two previous successes. Players would learn through their experiences, both positive and negative. We would need to keep reminding them on what to be aware of and what mental skills to engage in if we wanted these to become a regular part of their match preparation as they grew in their game. The issue was both physical and mental they believed and they needed to be better prepared for this especially in terms of more intense training, specific exercises and building up of stamina. Players needed to also push harder in their league matches.

It was good to see that they had coped well with the pressures of a tournament. This was a confident group of players. It was also good to see that they were becoming more aware and critical of themselves and their performance. They knew where they needed to work harder and they were motivated to do so after a successful week. For me, in developing further their mental training programme, the first priority would be to understand the players' individual needs as well as the demands of football and try to integrate this information into a sound intervention package as suggested by Taylor (1995). Having seen them perform aided me greatly in doing a better job of this (2.10).

Team Dynamics

The captain felt that the team were like a family. He did feel some pressure in the first five minutes and even before the tournament, but the fact that we had been together the

night before the match, for a meeting, helped, he said. Behaviour was quite good and even the assistant coach was surprised with this. The players were now hopefully that they could perform during the qualifiers and the fact that they played like a ‘close-knit family’ on the pitch, in the sense that, if someone made a mistake they chipped in for him, helped a lot. The teamwork was evident and the fact that they hung around together outside football helped a lot. In fact, some eight of them attended the same school.

Our national teams, when compared to national teams of other countries are at an advantage. The players know each other very well from the clubs and schools they attend, private tuition, places they hang out at and proximity of homes. Malta is that small; so, it was imperative that they made the most of spending time together. It definitely helped that some eight of them had spent some eleven years at the same school together, even in the same class. That was bound to help the team dynamics; they were best friends, they were practically raised together, and they carried the rest of the group with them as a number of them were prominent leaders. The next couple of months would bring a lot of changes in their lives.... GCSE’s.....results..... going to a new school or finding a job.... playing in the qualifiers..... moving up to the U19 squad and the minors at the club..... starting to earn some money.... making new friends....girlfriends.... For four of them it was looking like a possibility that they would be moving abroad to play football.... There were exciting times ahead.... I felt they were prepared. Time would tell (2.10).

6.15 Summary and Conclusion: Strategy Two

In the summer of 2016 it was agreed with the Technical Director, that I would start sessions on a team basis with the U16s (2001), similar to what had been done with the previous group (2000s). It was felt that the aim of enhancing players and coaches’ knowledge and understanding of the challenges and cultural differences experienced when one migrates to play professional football, as well as the aim of developing **players’** psycho-social competencies to be able to handle transitional challenges, had been met through the actions carried out both at NSS and at MFA, as reported by players and coaches during the evaluations conducted with them. Improvements still need to be made, at both the NSS and

the MFA, so that more players get the most out of this action strategy. At NSS, tutorials at the school needed to be more focused on the needs of the students, while at the MFA a more organised and structured approach agreed upon with the stakeholders would help to enhance the delivery and understanding of this action strategy.

Sport psychology practitioners must keep reminding the young players on the mental skills to be engaged in prior to performance and during challenging moments. Practitioners need to also create awareness with players, when they fail to perform well or struggle through a transition. Such reflection may help a player to appreciate the need for engaging in mental preparation and may also help players realise that they cannot take things for granted, that preparation for transition, or a match is vital if they want to succeed in their footballing career. Players must also be encouraged to celebrate their achievements in football and in other areas of their life too, since this may help improve confidence. Sport psychologists must also seek opportunities to develop reflection with the management of an organisation and help to create awareness that more is not always better, quality rather than quantity must be emphasized. It was also felt that were the parents had been involved players seemed to have progressed more efficiently too and thus the third and final strategy would focus on parental education.

6.16 Action Change Strategy Three: Parental Support

As discussed earlier in the thesis, it has been argued that there is a need for an integrated approach to talent development that focuses on creating a strong link between all stakeholders (e.g., players, staff, and parents) (Mills et al., 2014). It is recognised that this, alongside social support, has been found to play a significant role in helping players cope during the (within) career transition process (Côté, 1999; Richardson et al. 2004; Richardson et al. 2012). Thus, **the aim of the parental support action change strategy was to enhance parents' knowledge and understanding of sport in several areas, such as social support, transitions, parental skills and mental skills training.** It was felt that this was important so that they would be better equipped to provide their child with the appropriate form of support prior and during potential migratory based transitions. The actions of this strategy were delivered through the following activities:

1. Delivery of monthly sessions at **NSS** on topics of interest to the parents
2. Delivery of a course and education sessions for parents of **MFA** U16 and U17 players, as well as an education session for parents of young players in **top nurseries.** (See Table 6.9 & 6.10 below)

Table 6.9: Strategy Three: Parental Support

Actions Delivery	Aims	Stakeholders of Delivery	Methods of Evaluation	Findings
1c. To hold monthly (during the scholastic year) sessions at NSS on topics of interest to the parents.	i. To enhance parents' knowledge and understanding of sport in several areas (such as social support, transitions, parental skills, mental skills training etc.) (3.1; 3.2; 3.3; 3.4; 3.5; 3.6; 3.7)	NSS Sport Psychologist NSS Management Staff Invited speakers	3.1 Parent: written feedback 3.2 NSS Coaches: interview 3.3. NSS Head: interview 3.4. Practitioner-researcher: reflections 3.5. Focus group (12) parents 3.6 Questionnaire (35) parents	Helped to enhance parents' knowledge/understanding.
2c. To hold a course and education sessions for parents of MFA U16 and U17 players. To also hold an education session for parents of players in top nurseries .		MFA Technical Director/ staff NSS Sport Psychologist Invited speakers	3.4. Practitioner-researcher: reflections 3.7. MFA Technical Director Interview 3.8. Written feedback by (3) parents 3.9. Written feedback by a coach	- Parent course did not meet expectations; parents who really needed to attend did not. - Club talks enhanced parents' knowledge/ understanding.

Table 6.10: Timeline: Strategy Three Pilot and Phase One NSS

PILOT PHASE							FIRST PHASE					
2014/2015	July 14	Aug 14	Sept 14	Oct 14	Nov 14	Dec 14	Jan 15	Feb 15	March 15	April 15	May 15	June 15
Action/ Evaluation Meetings	Informal Action Meeting NSS			*1	*1	*1	Action Meeting NSS					NSS coach evaluation parent sessions (3.2)
Action Change Strategy 3		*2	*2	1c. NSS Parent Talk Nutrition	1c. NSS Parent Talk Parental Aid	1c. NSS Parent Evening	1c. NSS Parent Talk on Transition Challenges	1c. NSS Parent Talk on Parental Skills	1c. NSS Parent Talk Podiatry/ Physiotherapy	1c. NSS Parent Talk with students on subject selection	1c. NSS Celebration Evening	*2

**1-Talks held over my move to the NSS full-time; also ACL surgery and rehabilitation; *2 – exams and/or school holidays*

6.17 Pilot (July-December 2014) and Phase One (January-June 2015) Strategy Three: Introduction Parent Support NSS

Previous work by Morris and colleagues (2015) suggested that attention should be placed on the education of parents. In their study of the youth-to-senior professional soccer transition, they spoke about a number of parents' nights that had been held at one of the clubs involved in their study. During these activities, coaches and support staff informed parents on the challenges their sons might face and were also educated in ways they could provide their sons with emotional assistance in football situations.

During the NSS action meeting, held in January 2015, here too, importance was placed on providing parental education sessions with the aim to enhance parents' knowledge and understanding of sport so that they would be in a better position to support their children through the demands and transitional challenges. Such activities had already been initiated in the pilot phase of the action research study; however, effort was then made to ensure a more organised set-up for these talks. At the NSS, the idea of conducting parental sessions was met well by the staff and the parents with sessions being organised monthly during the scholastic year. The head of school believed strongly that parents should be educated further so as to give the best support possible to their children, since social support, when given, made a difference between young players who successfully moved on to professional football and those who did not (Van Yperen, 2009). The timeline of the Pilot and First Phase of Strategy One at NSS can be found in Table 6.10. The timeline of the Second Phase can be found later on in this chapter.

6.17.1 Implementation and Monitoring

The sessions for parents were conducted at the school itself. Most were held in the morning, with one or two sessions being reserved for the evening. These lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. For most of the sessions, all parents were invited to attend. For a few of

them, such as subject selection or job exposure meetings, only parents of the particular age group concerned were invited. Talks were not compulsory, but parents were encouraged to attend. Attendance was very good and parents could ask questions at the end of the session. Selected speakers, specialists in their field, were invited to conduct these talks. Topics were selected with the perception that they were the most important topics to be conducted at that moment in time in relation to student and parent needs. In the table below one can see a list of all the talks held in the scholastic year 2014/2015 (pilot and first phase).

Table 6.11: Parent Talks: NSS Scholastic Year 2014/2015

Month	NSS Parent Talks: Scholastic Year 2014/2015
October	Weight Management conducted by the School Nutritionist
November	Parental Aid conducted by the School Guidance Teachers
December	Parents Evening conducted by All NSS Staff
January	Transition Challenges conducted by the School Sport Psychologist
February	Parental Skills conducted by the School Counsellor
March	Sports Podiatry/ Physiotherapy conducted by the School Podiatrist and Physiotherapist
April	Subject Selection conducted by the Subject Teachers/Guidance Teachers
May	Celebration Evening; Sports Day – All staff

6.17.2 Reflection and Review

Morris and colleagues (2015) have suggested that longitudinal research, which reviews the provision of specific types of athlete support, is needed. Whilst there are a number of studies which speak about the importance of helping players in transition, there

is a lack of research on the effectiveness of that assistance and studies are required to evaluate programme effectiveness (Alferman & Stambulova, 2007). Thus, reflection and review on the parents' talks, held in the scholastic year 2014/2015, (pilot and first phase) was conducted together with a parent (later on more parents were involved in the evaluation process), the football coaches at NSS, and with the Head of NSS. This was done between June and August 2015. Below, one can read their thoughts together with the Practitioner-Researcher's reflections in italics.

Evaluation: NSS Coaches (3.2)

The coaches sat down with me, the practitioner-researcher after the school exams, in June 2015, in order to evaluate a number of areas including parental talks. The coaches, as explained earlier on, had already been involved in the reconnaissance phase, in one of the focus groups and, thus, they knew what the action research project was all about. I questioned them about the talks conducted for parents and whether there were any topics they would like to see tackled in the future. Both coaches reported that the talks worked well in enhancing parents' knowledge and understanding of sport in several areas (such as social support, transitions, parental skills, mental skills training) they felt. I also informed the coaches that I was trying to go to football clubs more often to educate players and parents right there, as I knew this would interest them since they both worked in top clubs. By educating organizations, player, coaches and parents, a practitioner can prepare individuals for the challenges associated with transitions at all levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Coach Peter believed there was a great need for such awareness in clubs, as he felt that parents have little knowledge in sports matters related to their child's needs.

At present, parents just bring their children to the club for football and that's it. Over here, at the school, even though we (the football coaches) tried to keep them away, they still tried to interfere in some way. Still in their own way, they do try a lot.

Coach Stanley went on to say that when the coaches speak to the parents they need to put the message across that parents need to keep their distance, the children need to be left more on their own. This was difficult however, Peter stated, speaking from both a coach and parent's view; as a parent, you would be very worried about your child.

But there needs to be a limit ... I would speak to my child three times a day, if necessary, but not every half an hour; or else, if he doesn't answer their call, panic, other telephone calls and so on; the children have an order not to use phones at certain times (Stanley).

The issue of overprotection by parents was emphasised. The coaches' concern seemed to be, once again, as seen earlier in the reconnaissance phase, the fact that parents lacked knowledge and needed to be reminded over and over again to let their children grow up and become somewhat independent. Parents in Morris and colleagues' study (2015), too, reported that they wanted to support their son but because they did not receive advice or support from the club, they could not do this well. Coach Peter, who also had a son attending the school, could relate clearly to the parents' fears, whilst Coach Stanley found the parents' constant over-monitoring of their children rather exaggerated. However, the talks seemed to be giving them some much needed information and the parents seem to be hungry for this, they said.

I found myself, in my talks, regularly trying to help parents understand that children would learn from their mistakes, that overprotection would not help them mature but, rather, hinder them in adulthood. However, society was different when we were growing up (the parents being approximately the same age as me). Life was far less complex and stressful, we played in the street, sport activities were far less developed and thus less competitive, our socialising was more in youth clubs than in bars or rowdy nightspots and there was little talk of crime. Having no children myself, I needed to keep this in mind and try to put myself into the parents' shoes so as to be more open to reflect on their concerns and thus deliver my services better (Cropley et al., 2010). (3.4)

Evaluation: Parent (3.1)

A parent was asked to provide written feedback on the talks held during the scholastic year 2014/2015. According to him, parental talks are essential to enhance parents' knowledge and understanding on sports matters. By educating parents on various topics, they will be more likely to engage in appropriate behaviours (Holt & Knight, 2014). He believed that a higher turnout could be possible if these talks were to be organised in the afternoons. For him

the worst problem in sports, in Malta, is actually the parents themselves; children behave in a certain manner as a consequence of what the parents show and tell them at home.

Thus, it was the parents at times who needed to be educated, and not just the children, similar to what had been reflected upon in Strategy Two.

This seemed to be in line with what several people had already said regarding parents in Malta. The coaches, the Headmaster, the Technical Director of the MFA had all expressed their concerns regarding parental support and pressure, in Malta. I, too, struggled with parents at times and found that although some, would initially agree with you, would quickly forget all that would have been discussed and resort to their 'old' parenting ways as this was easier for them. I felt very frustrated about it. How could some parents not see that the kind of support they provided, such as pushing the children too much to achieve success by encouraging multiple training sessions, was damaging to their child? A conscious effort needed to be made by all for change to occur. (3.4)

With regard to the talks, this parent believed that the focus should remain on the same topics conducted in the scholastic year that had just gone by, namely, 'Helping your child become a professional athlete and obtaining academic achievements'. He said he would "just add some do's and don'ts and best practices for forming one's character via correct discipline."

With hindsight, once again I should have asked more parents for their formal feedback. However, a number of parents did report to the school development and planning management team (SDP) their satisfaction at all that was being organised by the school. The school did its best to involve the parents and keep good relations with them. At the same time, however, it was felt that the SDP team should not give parents too much freedom to express their views on what was right and wrong about the school. The school was still in its early growing stages with the physical building itself not even yet completed. A lot had been done already, however, it was difficult to have everything working perfectly right from the start. I was seeing this, too, in my work, in my action research cycle. My own tentative pilot phase, then, in the first phase of the action research cycle things started to settle down, and tentative monitoring was attempted. This led on to a much more defined and distinct second phase of the cycle with more attention being placed on reflection and review of the actions conducted. (3.4)

Evaluation: Head of NSS (3.3)

An attempt to conduct an evaluation exercise with the Headmaster of the NSS during the summer of 2015, prior to the start of the new scholastic year and Phase Two, was done. However, the Head once again, instead of reflecting on what had been done and how it could be improved went straight into telling me that there were three talks coming up and he would appreciate it if I could be there. “There are so many things here to consider, it’s so stressful... There are some issues I am concerned about”, he said. This was a typical statement he would regularly pass which showed his great dedication to the school, however, it showed too that there was no time for proper evaluation and reflection. He was concerned about early sport specialisation and what to do with students who got demotivated practicing their sport. However, what he felt was needed most, was educating the parents.

I felt that the Head identified himself only as the Head of the NSS. I felt he had forgotten how successful he had been as a sport journalist, as a football commentator. He was highly dedicated, worked really hard, but I felt had no life outside the school. I often told him to go for a walk with his wife in the country, to spend time doing other things, to travel and have a break, to switch off his mobile in the weekend, to reflect. He was often tense, stressed and at times on the verge of burn out. I feared what would happen to him if he was moved

from the school. I feared for his physical and mental health and I expressed this with him. What would he identify himself with then? However, he seemed to fail to reflect even on himself, not just on the work being done at the school. I was feeling helpless. I wanted to get the message across, other staff members had also tried but he didn't seem to be able to see it as clearly as we were or be able to do anything about it. And as the parents put on more and more demands, his level of stress would continue to go up.

The staff at NSS found that the parents were too demanding at times and, when parents are so overly involved, this increases the levels of stress and anxiety of the athlete and can be an issue to the club (Gould et al., 2002) and, in this case, to the sports school too. Some parents had actually moved their children from a private or church school to the NSS because they believed that this was the best option for their sport-loving child who wanted to follow a dual career pathway. Most of the parents of the footballers believed strongly that their son could be the one who would make it to a professional level in football and, thus, they did all they could to get the best services, schooling and coaching, for their child.

The Head believed that the talks needed to be organised once more, as they had been well received and parents had informally reported to him that their knowledge had been greatly enhanced. Thus, it was agreed that these would be held once a month and that different topics of interest to the parents would be discussed. Parents could also stay on and discuss further any issues of concern after the talk so as to enhance their understanding of sport matters even further. He went on to say that specialists were needed to cover areas which are of particular interest to the NSS and which would be useful to the parents. They could be academics or people in the sports setting who, could give a contribution to the success of these sessions with the parents.

If you can give me some suggestions for topics worth considering for the talks, and, maybe, speakers who come to mind We discussed nutrition, but we need to work more on it. We need to approach the sports doctor, the physiotherapist, the podiatrist. Then, for sure, this is your areas - the parents. We need to continue to hammer in certain basic rules, for these parents continue to be problematic. In fact, we'll start with the parents; I want to show them from the beginning that we mean business.

The Head and I had come to an agreement on the continuation of these talks as we both saw that the sessions were seen positively by the parents and had met the aim of enhancing their knowledge and understanding. It was encouraging that we could agree between ourselves on how these should be run. He was willing to listen to me and trusted me to do a good job of organising such sessions with his help. The Headmaster was able to delegate; however, he was always wary of who he delegated to in order get the job done properly. It felt good to be trusted to take on the responsibility in an area which was of prime importance to him as well as to me.

(3.4)

Table 6.12: Timeline: Strategy Three Phase Two NSS

<i>2015/2016</i>	<i>July 15</i>	<i>Aug 15</i>	<i>Sept 15</i>	<i>Oct 15</i>	<i>Nov 15</i>	<i>Dec 15</i>	<i>Jan 16</i>	<i>Feb 16</i>	<i>Mar 16</i>	<i>Apr 16</i>	<i>May 16</i>
<i>Action / Evaluation Meetings</i>	Evaluation NSS parent on talks (3.1)	Evaluation Meeting Head of NSS (3.3; 3.4)					Evaluation parents on talks (3.5)				Evaluation on parents on talks (3.6)
<i>Action Change Strategy 3</i>	*2	*2	*2	1c. NSS Parent Talk Supporting Student Athletes	1c. NSS Parent Talk Nutrition	1c. NSS Parent Talk Job Exposure	1c. NSS Parent Talk Sport Psychology+	1c. NSS Parent Talk Cyber Bullying; Healthy Cooking Workshop	1c. NSS Parent Talk - The true meaning of success; NSS open day/ Parents' Day	1c. NSS Parent Talk Anti-doping	1c. NSS Parent Talk Goal-Setting/ Time management; Celebration Eve

**2 – exams and/or school holidays*

6.18.0 Phase Two (July 2015-May 2016): Introduction NSS Parent Talks

Following the reflection and review phase, in which the conclusion was reached that the parent talks had helped to enhance parents' knowledge and understanding, it was decided that additional topics would be beneficial. It was agreed that these should focus on how parents could better support their child-athlete. The following section outlines the implementation, monitoring and reflection and review of this change strategy:

6.18.1 Implementation and Monitoring

This time round, I, the practitioner-researcher, took more responsibility for the organisation of the parent talks. With the support and feedback of the Headmaster, we developed a programme of talks which were based on what the school and parents felt were urgent needs of both students and parents. Below, one can see the list of talks held for parents in Phase Two.

Table 6.13: Parent Talks: Scholastic Year 2015/2016

Month	NSS Parent Talks Scholastic Year 2015/2016
October	Supporting the Student-Athlete conducted by a University Sports Lecturer
November	Nutrition conducted by the School Nutritionist
December	Job Exposure conducted by the School Guidance Teachers
January	Sport Psychology Techniques conducted by the School Sport Psychologist
February	Be Smart Online/Cyberbullying conducted by the Cyber Crime Unit; Career Options Talk for Form Two students' parents; Healthy Cooking workshop for parents
March	The True Meaning of Success in Sport conducted by the Safeguarding Officer MFA
April	Anti-doping and Health conducted by the Anti-doping Unit; Sports Day
May	Celebration Evening; Goal-Setting and Time management conducted by the School Sport Psychologist

6.18.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: NSS Parents (3.5)

An evaluation session was held on the 14th of January 2016 after one of the talks held at the school. Alferman and Stambulova (2007) speak about the need for more methodically rigorous evaluations of programme effectiveness not only through longitudinal research, but also through multi-method approaches and multiple indicators of programme outcome. Thus, this time round, ten parents stayed over to continue discussing, in a focus group format, the usefulness of the talks or otherwise.

Parent Attendance at Talks

The parents reported finding the talks very useful in enhancing their knowledge and understanding of sport matters related to their child's needs, however, especially for those who work, it may be difficult for them to attend especially if they need to take a whole day's leave. Brackenridge (2006) advocated that proactive parents look for opportunities to enhance their sport knowledge, however, in reality this can be difficult at times. Opportunities for learning may not be available and even when they are, attendance may be difficult due to other family commitments (Lafferty & Triggs, 2014). For some, holding the talks in the evening seemed a better option however,

It depends when. Last year, they had tried it but it didn't work well because everyone has training at that time. To find a day it's difficult. What I don't like ...some of us work, others don't, some have problems taking leave, others don't. I hope that the school does not take it against those who don't come. The message that comes across is that the parents who don't come don't really care but not all of us can make it for one reason or another.

For others who had children that had been at the school for nearly four years, it was not necessary to once again attend a talk which they had already attended previously, such as nutrition and sport injuries (talks which takes place every year). At times they felt they needed to make a choice as to which talks to attend, however, they were very wary of the SDP team confronting them if they did not turn up for the talks.

Personally, I felt that you could never please everyone and that it would be practically impossible for all parents to attend all talks. Since many parents worked they would need to leave work to attend the talks if these were held in the morning. However, if they were held in the evening parents were tied down with transporting their children to training sessions, private lessons and with doing the household chores. The Headmaster however, often showed his displeasure when parents did not turn up. I felt he was being unfair about this. Life was busy for everyone, parents who had a job, other children to look after and a house to clean may at times be overloaded and not in a position to attend one of the talks. He put all parents in the same basket at times, however, most parents truly did their best to attend any sessions organised by the school. Of course, you would always find those parents who never made an appearance then. I also felt that the Headmaster should provide a budget to pay the speakers with. The readers of this thesis will probably see it as unusual that speakers are not paid for conducting such sessions. Unfortunately, once again, in Malta, there is still too much the mentality that people will do things for you free of charge. Whilst this in a way seems positive, we are at an age where professionals do not have time on their hand to do work and not earn money. I believed in the motto 'you get what you pay for'. Whilst I myself had no issue conducting a talk for the school outside school hours I felt that I could not ask some of the speakers I believed were the best on the island since they would not come to deliver a session unless they were paid their fee. Rightly so. (3.4)

Parents were happy that these talks were held as they felt that they were never in a school where so many useful talks were organised. They expressed their doubt that there is another school who does this. Lafferty & Triggs (2014) speak about the need to empower parents so they could positively and proactively support their child.

These talks are great because they are great parental skills without having to apply to go to a course somewhere so definitely they are very good; also when I receive the power point and I can't come I find it very useful, so that is very good. When I can't come I like to send an email saying I can't come for whatever reason but I have the power point; who doesn't come it's them who is missing the opportunity; I don't work for personal reasons. Still, I cannot always come but I can understand that some others cannot come because of work reasons so you cannot judge the parents who didn't come (parent).

However, the Head was not keen to send out the power point presentations any longer as he believed that parents would not make an effort to attend if they knew that the school would

be sending out the presentations. However, he did agree to conduct a session in the evening in the coming months.

Personally, I did not agree with him as regards to not sending out the presentations. I believed that the parents who made the effort to attend would continue making the effort to attend, presentations being sent out or not. I thought that if one had to send out the presentations by email then the parents who did not attend might have a look at them and hopefully too, take an interest and make an effort to do so the next time round. For some parents, it was no fault of theirs that they could not attend I felt; some had work and couldn't get away, others had a big family or young children, some were single parents and so many other reasons. (3.4)

Topics of Interest for Parent's Talks

A number of sport psychology practitioners have put an emphasis on including parents in sport psychology work with athletes (Holt & Knight, 2014). Involving parents in sport psychology interventions may help improve young athlete's psychological well-being and performance more than if one was just to work with the children only (McCarthy & Jones, 2007). Parents of NSS students spoke of the topics that they wanted to know more about, parents were keen on more sport psychology topics with a focus on different areas such as visualization. Bullying was also high on the agenda for some, especially since some of the students were in the same class at school, but they would be competing against each other and they did not know how to handle this. I felt that this was more an issue between the clubs than between the students here, but I had also heard, over the years, that issues cropped up between parents. I expressed the need to show our children that this is the life they are going to be facing ahead of them.

The thoughts of parents I felt were issues that concerned more the competition between the parents rather than the competition between the children themselves. For sport psychologists who work within an elite youth sporting environment, one of the biggest challenges is working with parents and trying to keep their expectations of their child's sporting

success realistic (Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011). Some of the parents at the school were very demanding of their children. Parents must give support with no pressure (Gould et al., 2002), however, at times, they are unable to handle the emotional demands that they experience (Harwood & Knight, 2009). Parents of student-athletes at the NSS wanted their children to be top of the class in school and they wanted them to be the best athletes too. They were constantly on the lookout for what other students and other parents were doing. Parents of gifted footballers invest greatly psychologically, emotionally and socially throughout the early to later specialising phase (Côté, 1999). Thus, it is important for researchers, practitioners and sport organisations to understand the challenges parents face in order to assist them to enhance their role as a key agent who can support the child-athlete (Harwood et al., 2010). The parents also stated that these talks are good because

I studied and have qualifications but it's different when you are a parent of a secondary school child ... so they are things we need to know because they are practical things, because from where I stand I do not know the requirements and maybe not everyone is comfortable in asking. It's also good to know these skills like we did today (mental skills training) but how are you going to practice them with your child? Not everyone works in the same way. So it's important to tell us listen over the next two years we are going to be working on this, this and this and you as parents make sure that you collaborate with us in this.

With the numerous challenges parents face in youth sport, parents need to feel that they are being understood and supported (Holt & Knight, 2014). Thus, over the next months the NSS focused on talks on 'The true meaning of success in sports' as well as on specific topics in sport psychology such as goal-setting and time-management since this is what the parents had requested.

Some of the parents were constantly agonising whether their child was better than the neighbour's. They tried to make sure that they provided everything for their child. But some parents gave the wrong kind of support I felt. In one particular talk, one parent questioned friendships and whether parents should not allow their child with another child who did not work as hard as them. I believed that this was the reason why some children were segregated at school because society has become so competitive and parents had become so demanding that we fail to look at our values and whether we are being humane in our relationships with others. I am a

strong believer of the fact that if raised right, with good values then one will be strong enough to resist certain temptations that one will inevitably come across.... People who will try to distract you from your studies, others who may take you down the wrong path. I recall when I was in secondary and post-secondary school myself, whilst always being a hard worker; I had my moments of experimentation and getting into trouble, like most teenagers. I do strongly believe that such episodes have influenced me in such a way so as to have a positive effect in the way I deal with young athletes since I feel that I can understand that at times when we are young we fail to think about the repercussions of our actions. (3.4)

6.19 Introduction NSS Parent Talks (Phase Two continued)

The above evaluation session was held mid-way in Phase Two to help gain some feedback and guide the SDP team for any extra sessions that might be organised for the second part of the scholastic year (the programme had already been set for all that year) and for the next scholastic year. It was planned that a session or two would be held in the evening so as to accommodate parents who could not attend in the mornings because of work.

6.19.1 Implementation and Monitoring

The programme of parent talks (as seen in Fig. 6.13) continued smoothly with emphasis on topics the parents had requested and also on topics the school development team had deemed important. Since research is necessary in providing researchers, practitioners and sport staff with a better understanding of sport-parent behaviour, the challenges the sport parent faces, and possible educational needs for the best support of their child-athlete (Harwood & Knight, 2009), feedback from the parents of NSS students was gathered once again at the end of the scholastic year 2015/2016, which also happened to be the end of Phase Two.

6.19.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: NSS Parents (3.6)

Thirty-five parents (most replied as couples thus making the number nearly double) responded to a simple questionnaire handed out after the parents' talk on the 23rd of May 2016 aimed at gaining feedback on parent talks conducted at the NSS. All respondents answered that they find (1a) the talks conducted for parents at the NSS useful. The answers to question (1b) on which talks conducted they found most useful and informative included: all talks (x 13 parents/couples); psychological talks/talks held by the practitioner-researcher (x 8); time management (x 9); talk on parental support (x 4); talks that 'educate us as parents' (x 2); cybercrime and use of the internet; subject selection; health talks including sport injuries; nutrition (x 12); podology; doping (x 3); overtraining (x2); the football coaches' session. Other comments related to this question were: evening sessions were preferred to mornings (x 2); talks were very helpful; in my opinion all the talks are useful and informative so I can learn more as a parent how to deal with my son; thank you so much for your support, it is important for the future of my son; I attended all talks and found all of them interesting, handy, practical and useful; now am much wiser; all talks were related to both academics and sport; all good but unfortunately because of work I could not attend all meetings.

Question two asked: 'If you did not find the talks useful, why was this so?' No participant said that they did not find the talks useful. In terms of question three: 'Are there any other particular talks you would like the school to cover next scholastic year (for parents)?' The answers were: anti-doping; internet safety/cyberbullying (x3); bullying (x3); nutrition (x 2); athletes' experiences; talks on sexuality especially since the school is co-educational; challenges athletes face during sports and school; time management; a study programme (x4); option subjects (x3); parental tolerance and acceptance; team spirit; food preparation- especially to encourage children to look after themselves; methods of how we

can help young athletes in sports without overtraining them; peer pressure (x3); how to help my son with his mental thinking before a competition; personal hygiene; self-believe; getting out of your comfort zone; parental skills (x 2); dealing with teenagers/mood swings (x 4); it would be useful to have some talks with the parents and children together (x 4); the future of our students after Form 5 (x 2).

Parents were happy with the parent sessions so this was something the school needed to keep on delivering after the action research project had been completed. Of course, the more topics conducted, the harder it would be to find new topics of interest and new speakers. However, there would be a turnover of parents since the following scholastic year, 2016/2017 would be the last year for the first group of students at this school and also there would be a new group of Form One students (aged 11) who would enter this school. The programme now had to make sure to meet the requirements of these groups too. It is imperative that academies/sport schools are able to communicate with, and work alongside parents to create an optimal environment for development (Harwood et al., 2010). Thanks to the feedback gathered from the parents, the next programme of parent talks could be planned well beforehand and organised in such a way so as to accommodate more and more parents.

I was very pleased with how the parent sessions had worked out. Evaluation helped to show parents that the school cared about their thoughts and concerns and was seeking to involve them in decision-making and move ahead according to their needs. Of course, getting good feedback for something I was so much involved in was also a boost. This helped to keep me motivated to do even more. I, myself was at times wary of the parents. I felt I had to be so careful on what to say lest I be misinterpreted. Malta being so small, everyone seemed to be on each other's back. I was very attentive to this, was careful myself and tried to pass on a message to our young players and parents to be careful when it came to writing something on social media or passing comments to the media. I had seen so many athletes having issues which escalated because they or their parents failed to be extra attentive of what they said or wrote. (3.4)

Table 6.14: Timeline: Strategy Three Pilot and First Phase MFA

PILOT PHASE								FIRST PHASE					
2014/2015	July 14	Aug 14	Sept 14	Oct 14	Nov 14	Dec 14		Jan 15	Feb 15	March 15	April 15	May 15	June 15
Action/ Evaluation Meetings	Informal Action Meeting MFA			*1	*1	*1		Action Meeting MFA					MFA Evaluation Parent Sessions (3.4; 3.7)
Action Change Strategy 3					2c. MFA Parent Course 2c. Club Session Mosta FC	MFA Parent Course							

**1-Talks held over my move to the NSS full-time; also ACL surgery and rehabilitation*

6.20 Pilot (July-December 2014) and Phase One (January-June 2015) MFA Strategy

Three: Parent Education

Introduction MFA Parent Course

A number of sport organisations (such as the United States Tennis Association, 2013 and The Football Association, n.d.) have created educational programmes for parents and at times, have made them compulsory (Holt & Knight, 2014). At the MFA, an educational programme for parents was also held at the MFA headquarters in November and December 2014 to educate parents better on ways how to support their child, since educating parents may help athletes adapt better to transitions (Morris et al., 2015). This course was conducted over four sessions by different speakers, all specialists in their field.

6.20.1 Implementation and Monitoring

Academies must keep on looking for ways to improve player development (Harwood et al., 2010). Thus, the intention of the MFA is to broaden its football education to all stakeholders. As coaches and players are more educated about the game, the parent needs to be part of this strategy and be a positive partner in their son's / daughter's development. Parents have a very strong influence on their children and they need to sustain further development rather than stifle their own child's growth. The football parent may be enabled to nurture a range of competences which in turn allows the child to develop in a more stable environment.

In view of the above, the MFA Technical Centre Education Department held a four sessions' course titled 'The Football Parent'. Sessions were held on the 17th & 18th November and the 1st & 2nd December 2014 from 16.30hrs to 20.30hrs. This short course covered topics of long-term player development, nutrition, psychology, registration rules,

dealing with injuries and how to review winning in their child's development. The actual programme of the course can be seen in Table 24 on the next page.

Table 6.15: The Football Parent Course 2014

17/11	18/11	1/12	2/12
LTPD	Managing lifestyle	The learning process	Injuries & overtraining incl. Burnout
Transfers & Compensation fees	Safeguarding Children	Positive Parenting in a Football Club	Bullying: always a victim
Club Philosophy, programme & coaching	Sports Nutrition	5 C's	Winning vs development
Child Development	Preparing healthy meals, snacks & hydration	Dealing with scouts	Fr Hilary Closure
Conducted by: Stephen Grima Kenneth Constantino	Adele Muscat Luca Pagani	Fleur Bugeja Andrew Azzopardi	Ivan Calamatta Fr Hilary

6.20.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: MFA Technical Director (3.7)

The success, or otherwise, of the parent education course conducted at the MFA was evaluated in January 2015, and more extensively in June 2015 with the Technical Director of the MFA. Below one can see excerpts from the meeting held in January 2015.

The MFA Technical Director felt that the course was attended by those who are already good parents and thus he felt that the objective of the course was not reached. He felt that educating parents is a very big task:

I am not talking about transitions only; parents' education across the whole world is an issue. At one point I wanted to make a video, to promote it on television too, because parents are all the time passing comments during matches. They need to encourage their children, but

with the comments they tend to pass, they go over the limit. So, half of it is a lost battle with the parents.

He believed that it would be good to show parents video clips of parents behaving badly so as to create awareness of how negative they sounded at times and how damaging this may be to the child. He was constantly receiving reports from referees and nurseries stating particular incidents that would have happened in youth matches, and most of these incidents seemed to be instigated by parents.

I was one of the lecturers on the parent course and also had helped in organising it. I was surprised that so few parents had attended. Maybe people could not commit for so many hours and thus we would have to see how to get across to the parents in a more efficient manner. Not much marketing of the course had been done and possibly the notice of the course did not reach all the parents. I was frustrated about this. To me, the MFA should have made it compulsory for clubs to send a minimum amount of participants to attend. Possibly too, they could have pushed parents who they felt needed it most, to attend. Clubs, I felt, needed to be made accountable. Possibly parent education might work better in the small club settings where parents felt more of a sense of belonging than the MFA, where only the elite players would go. (3.4)

The conversation in the above meeting turned onto another topic and we were interrupted soon after. Thus, no conclusions were made on where to go to from here. I was hoping to remind the Technical Director about this in the weeks following this meeting, but due to him having personal issues of a serious nature this was not done. Thus, the parental education at the MFA stopped abruptly for a few months until the next evaluation meeting held in June 2015.

I expressed my thoughts on the need for me to go into clubs and conduct parent sessions there, since the parents' course at the MFA had only managed to attract a few parents. The Technical Director was in agreement on this, stating that we should target the larger regional clubs. He also felt that it would be best if the MFA conducted some sessions

at the MFA every couple of months for parents of players who already formed part of the MFA squads.

Make it compulsory ...because at the end of the day the support which parents can give (sentence paused). Today, if a child doesn't have the support of the parent to bring him over, guide him what to eat and so on; if they do not have some support from the parents the player won't get there (Technical Director).

I suggested that I would offer a session to those clubs whose head coach had formed part of the focus groups the previous summer, and also we would organise some talks for the parents of players at the MFA. The Technical Director agreed with this.

Clubs need to seek ways of educating, communicating and integrating parents of young promising players throughout the developmental pathway as this would help coaches and would also reduce mixed messages and disruption that can be caused by parents (Côté, 1999). Thus, it was concluded from this meeting that since the parents' course had not been as successful as we had hoped as not many parents had attended, we should go to the parents ourselves in clubs, in the hope that more will attend and that we would reach a higher target. Every couple of months we would also conduct a session for parents of players who formed part of the MFA academy at the MFA headquarters itself. Thus, over the period August 2015 till May 2016, the above agreed actions were conducted. The clubs/nurseries (clubs referring to both the nursery which houses all the junior teams up to U17 as well as the minors and senior teams) who had participated in Study Two, in the focus groups as part of the reconnaissance phase, were contacted and offered a session for parents. Some clubs/nurseries took this opportunity whilst others did not. In the meantime, positive feedback (as can be seen below) from the clubs/nurseries who took on the offer, reached other clubs/nurseries and there were even more clubs who came on board as they felt the need to educate the parents at their club and this was definitely very positive.

My idea of going into clubs had been met well and I was pleased about this. I thought that being closer to the parents in their own setting would help. I felt that there was still too much ignorance and a lack of knowledge amongst parents. I also enjoyed delivering to new people and going into the clubs meant that I, as a psychologist in the field, would get more in contact with the people who ran the clubs, something that would surely help my work by understanding better the culture in football clubs. I felt good working in the football world. I enjoyed it and felt very much respected. I had to make sure I did a good job of these sessions now.

(3.4)

Table 6.16: Timeline: Strategy Three Phase Two MFA

<i>2015/2016</i>	<i>July 15</i>	<i>Aug 15</i>	<i>Sept 15</i>	<i>Oct 15</i>	<i>Nov 15</i>	<i>Dec 15</i>	<i>Jan 16</i>	<i>Feb 16</i>	<i>Mar 16</i>	<i>Apr 16</i>	<i>May 16</i>
<i>Action/ Evaluation Meetings</i>						Evaluation Meeting MFA (3.7)	Evaluation parents (3.4; 3.8; 3.9)				Evaluation meeting MFA (3.4; 3.7)
<i>Action Change Strategy 3</i>		2c. Club Session Valletta FC			2c. MFA Parent Session U17 2c. Club sessions Valletta FC; Kirkop FC	2c. Clubs session President tournament	2c. Club Session Rabat FC			2c. Club session Hamrun FC	2c. MFA Parent/ player academy talk 2001 (U15)

6.21 Phase Two (July 2015-May 2016) MFA Parent Education

Introduction MFA Parents Meeting U16/17 (born 2000) and U15 (born 2001)

As part of the MFA action strategy for parents, the Technical Director had expressed his wish to conduct sessions for parents of players at the MFA to enhance their knowledge and understanding on how they could support their child better. These talks would be compulsory for the parents of the youth squads.

6.21.1 Implementation and Monitoring

As regards the talks for parents of players at the MFA, two were held during the second phase of the action research cycle. In terms of the U16/U17 talk held in November 2015, I only got to know that this talk was being organised on the same day and was rather angry about this. The Technical Director himself conducted the meeting where he discussed the work of the FA, the staff members roles, rules players and parents need to abide by and how parents can support their children better. Despite the fact that I was not informed about the meeting, I was mentioned together with the work that I do with the players a number of times. The Technical Director showed faith in the work I was doing with our young players in terms of helping them develop a positive attitude and fighting spirit, conducting regular sessions with them to help them cope through transitions as well as helping prepare them for migration. He also spoke about future plans at the FA in terms of the players training and sessions.

In terms of the second talk which was held in May 2016, this contained the same information as the talk mentioned above and was also conducted by the MFA Technical Director. We were to start working with a new group, the U15's (born 2001). This group included players who attended the NSS (the first and thus eldest group at the NSS), thus the work being done at NSS was reaping dividends.

6.21.2 Reflection and Review (3.4)

Evaluation: Practitioner-Researcher

I knew nothing about the changes in training and sessions. This would mean, to some of the staff and players, having to overturn our already made plans because the FA training schedule was going to change once again. This change would mean that parents would need to arrange private lessons for the players since this was GCSE year for them. It would also include looking for means of transport for the players from school straight to the FA as well as in some cases some players leaving school early to manage to come to the FA by 3.00 pm on Tuesdays for a late lunch, talks, sessions and so on. I would just have to wait patiently and see how things developed. This did not suit me; I like to know plans from well beforehand because of my busy schedule. This would mean I could have clashes with my university lectures, private practice and other duties. I didn't like the fact that plans changed so often at the FA, it made planning very hard. I so often had to change my plans around to accommodate the training, my sessions with the players and meetings. At least, however, it seemed that my work at the FA was being appreciated. It was also good to see the excitement these young players I had known for a while showed when they were called up to the national team academy. However, in terms of the usefulness in enhancing the parents' knowledge, I felt these talks were descriptive in nature rather than informative on how parents can support their child better or else on other sports related subjects. Thus these talks were not particularly useful in my opinion. I wished that he could speak for just half an hour or so himself on the technicalities of training and so on and then invite me to speak to the parents, however, he seemed adamant that he would do it all. When I informally asked some of the parents I knew whether they had found the meeting useful, they reported that it had been useful in the sense that they knew what to expect at the MFA however, it was not useful in enhancing their knowledge about the sport (3.4)

6.22 Introduction Parent Club Sessions

Morris and colleagues (2015) reported that parents in their study wanted to support their son but because they did not receive advice or support from the club, they could not do this well. Thus, after the reflection and review phase of the first cycle, as had been agreed with the Technical Director of the MFA, I contacted a number of clubs to set dates and times

to deliver psychosocial support sessions with parents of players playing in particular clubs/nurseries across the island.

6.22.1 Implementation and Monitoring

Some of the sessions were pushed forward by the practitioner-researcher to clubs/nurseries that had helped out in the reconnaissance phase, whilst other sessions were requested by other clubs. Sessions conducted for clubs took place at the club headquarters or at the local council hall of the village or town that club formed part of. The clubs that showed interest in having such a session for parents were from different parts of the island and not from just one specific area. There were six club sessions conducted between the period August 2015 and April 2016. Sessions lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and parents could ask questions after the session. These sessions were either for parents of one specific age group or targeting a number of age groups within that club. There was very good attendance in all the clubs with the majority of parents eligible to attend being present. Coaches were permitted to attend since it has been since by Larsen and colleagues (2014) that practitioners should also involve coaches and other staff. In some sessions, young players from that club were also allowed to attend. After an introduction from the club president or one of the coaches, I, the practitioner-researcher went on to give my talk which dealt with such topics as transitions, psychosocial support, mental skills training, identity, parental support and more.

6.22.2 Reflection and Review

Evaluation: Parents/Coaches (3.8; 3.9)

Due to the fact that I, the practitioner-researcher was conducting the sessions for parents myself and time was limited, evaluation of the sessions could not be conducted by me at the end of the session due to parents possibly not being comfortable speaking up in

front of me, in front of each other, in front of coaches and also because there were too many parents to conduct a written or verbal exercise, with some parents also not being confident in giving feedback. Thus, evaluation was conducted by asking the head coaches to give their feedback from the comments put to them and asking a head coach of a club which had a very good turnout to gather some feedback from coaches and parents on the parents' talk conducted at that particular nursery. This was done in January 2016. Feedback from the coaches was very positive. Below one can see some written comments of three parents and a coach.

Parent A

It was a very interesting and useful speech...especially when it was focused on the child's attitude. As a parent of a 12 year old boy, I have noticed a big change both physically and behaviourally in the past few months, I have to admit that every day is a big challenge to keep up with his moods or needs. I encourage him a lot regards school but he is quite passive at the moment and since football is the only extracurricular activity he practices, I focus and emphasize that at least he attends every training session. As a full time working mother, he has to be very independent, therefore, on many occasions he has to prepare all his needs for both school and football even if this results that in many occasions he forgets something but hopefully, we will get there by time. Ultimately, as a parent, I expect and appreciate that in institutions such as school and in my son's case, the football nursery, their tutors back up my struggle in teaching him discipline and mostly showing respect to those around him.

Parent B

Personally I found the talk delivered by Ms Adele Muscat to be very interesting and well organised to meet the needs of the different age groups. In my opinion this was confirmed

by the questions and the discussion that was raised by the end of the talk and also by the fact that several parents asked for the contact details of the speaker.

Parent C

I would like to inform the nursery about the educational meeting we had on the 23rd of January and would like to thank the nursery for providing us educational information that can help us in supporting our children's quest to become professional players in the future. Also for providing the coaches that were present with the information to guide both young players and parents to help our children in the best way possible into becoming better men, women and also better players. I must say that I found that there was some interesting things said that I had not thought of and have now prepared to change some things in the way my boys are treated; also I will have some educational activities happening with my boys regarding things said in this meeting. So I must say that the meeting was good but I also think that there should not be much of them because it takes time off training or else it should not be on a training date. So if a meeting like this happens in the future it is very important that it has good information as this one because of time and the young players' loss of interest. Other than that I again must thank the football nursery for all the work, information, dedication and care for our young players.

Coach

From the number of parents that attended for this meeting it showed that parents were interested to learn more about the upbringing of their children. I was very satisfied with the attendance. The flow of the talk and the experience that the speaker talked about on national team players kept the audience more aware of the situation and how such problems were dealt with. The positive verbal feedback received from the parents at the nursery and the desire for other such talks to enhance their knowledge were quite a lot.

As a coach from the respective nursery I know what the problems are, I would have put a bit more pressure on parents to support more their children. Parents not having time to share with their loved ones. But with this talk I'm sure that parents went home with a different perception of how to support their children. Their knowledge has been enhanced.

I love the work I do in clubs/nurseries. I love introducing young players, senior players, parents, coaches, administrators to psychosocial skills and support. I love public speaking. It gives me a thrill, I must admit. I am confident in the knowledge I possess and the way I put it through to different population groups. Of course it was not always like this. I still remember my first group session, aged 22, and just graduated, facing around 50 men who practiced Olympic shooting. 'Who is she? What does she know about our sport? She is a female'. Those were the murmurs going around the room. Being the first sport psychologist on the island was a struggle to convince people of the benefits of psychological support. Another hurdle was the first time I entered the changing room of a football club. Of course, as a female you are always going to get some comments, but with awareness and armed with a sense of humour I got on with the job. However, the good thing of living on a small island is the fact that everyone knows each other, word goes round and once you do your job well, then the opportunities for work come in and of course the experience grows. Of course, on the other hand, if the job is not done well then people around you get to know too. Thus, it is vital to always be prepared in the best way possible and visualize what one may face at the next session. However, I really wished I had more time on my hands, even a personal assistant to help me set up such meetings! I wished I could do so much more, but I was doing so much already I couldn't see how I could fit in more things in my life. Having a team to set up such meetings would have made things so much easier and more efficient. (3.4)

Evaluation: MFA Technical Director (3.7)

A final reflection meeting (rather than evaluation of club talks) was also conducted with the Technical Director of the MFA at the end of the action research cycle. This was conducted at the MFA Technical Centre in May 2016. I reminded the Technical Director that we had planned to have some sessions in clubs and that these had been done. He asked how many parents were present and how sessions had gone. I replied that they were very well met, feedback and attendance were both good. He then went on to say:

It would be good if you did that course that we had done before for parents....but maybe we do a shorter oneall we get is you, a nutritionist, a coach to speak to them and someone else....and we have four....

This would be done for parents from clubs, similar to what had been done in the parents' course. I expressed my concerns about getting more parents and the importance of sending circulars to clubs to encourage parents to attend. The Assistant Technical Director who also happened to be in the room at that time also expressed his thoughts:

Otherwise you do them by clubs ...you get parents of two clubs at one go ...like that there is more chance that they will turn up then if you open it up for all clubs ...example we say we get the club of Birkirkara and Sliema onlyso clubs encourage them so that they are not seen as if no one turned up from their club ...whilst if you do it from all of Malta they can hide. You start off by getting all the head coaches first and explaining the course to them.

He believed that the head coaches would be able to guide us as to which group of parents would be best to get, say the U15 parents. Last time few parents had attended, possibly too because the course was not individualized enough.

That is why you need to individualize clubsso that they cannot hide behind each otheryou start first with the big clubsthe ones who have the most children(Assistant Technical Director)

Another option would be to give them two dates on which the same talk would take place and this would be open for four clubs and be made compulsory for U15 parents.

So it seems that we have come round full circle and as feedback from the clubs was positive and parents at the clubs felt that their knowledge had been enhanced in several areas, the Technical Director at the MFA and his assistant believed that once again we should do the parents course for club parents but organise it in such a way that clubs feel more obliged to send parents from their nursery. It was also seen, this time round, that the MFA did not feel it was necessary or useful to conduct sessions for parents of players who are already playing with the MFA national teams. Thus, despite the fact that this action research project, for the sake of this thesis, will end here, it is hoped that once again a programme of talks for club parents will be conducted.

6.23 Summary and Conclusion: Strategy Three

The aim of this action change strategy was to enhance parents' knowledge and understanding of sport in several areas both at the NSS and also at the MFA, including clubs which fall under the jurisdiction of the MFA. The action change strategy implemented has been necessary in providing me as the practitioner-researcher, as well as the sport staff, with a better understanding of sport-parent behaviour, the challenges the sport parent faces, and possible educational needs for the best support of their child-athlete (Harwood & Knight, 2009). Sport psychologists must keep seeking ways to enhance their knowledge of the challenges sport parents face and must make themselves more available and approachable to parents so that they may seek support when needed.

At the NSS, we saw a programme of talks being conducted monthly during the scholastic year, a programme which was met very well by the parents concerned and which continued to improve thanks to the review and reflection conducted regularly with the people involved. It is felt that the aim of the change strategy was reached and such a programme will continue to take place at the school. At the MFA, the parents' course and the talks at the MFA were not seen as particularly successful, however the talks for parents in clubs were seen to be so, and parents reported that their knowledge and understanding had been improved, in line with the aim of this action strategy. However, it is felt that more needs to be done to continue educating parents of players at the MFA and in local domestic clubs within Malta. Sport psychology practitioners need to address parents in clubs or in 'their' setting so that they can be more at ease and willing to engage in parental education. This may also be done by creating opportunities for parents of players through a short course by individualizing clubs and their coaches and by possibly too, providing opportunities for parents to discuss their issues with the sport psychologist privately and individually.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusions, Practical Implications & Future Research

7.0 Conclusions

This chapter aims to discuss the most salient points that have emerged through the series of studies within the action research process. In particular, focus will be directed on the dominant findings and an attempt will be made to explain the significance and reach of the findings in relation to previous empirical inquiry. In addition, a discussion on the practical implications that the research findings have for a range of key stakeholders, including players, national football associations (particularly small-island nations), clubs, sports schools, parents and support staff will also be provided. Finally, I will attempt to explain how the findings inform future research inquiry in the area of psycho-social development and within career transitions in adolescent youth football. The chapter also aims to critically reflect on the action research procedure and discusses what I feel have been key moments that have shaped my development as a researcher-practitioner. The strengths and limitations of the research approach will also be addressed.

The purpose of the research was to understand the psycho-social challenges that young Maltese footballers experienced when they migrated to play professional football overseas (predominantly within a European context), and to explore ways of how they can be better prepared for possible future migratory based transitions. This is especially important since it has been reported that when players move from one country to another to play professional football, the transition may be extremely complex and challenging (Bourke, 2002; Richardson et al., 2012). The thesis also aimed to equip key significant stakeholders, in this case parents and coaches, with key contextually specific transitional knowledge and understanding to support and guide young players in a more informed manner. To achieve the aims of the thesis, a collaborative action research approach was adopted with the researcher assuming the positions of researcher and practitioner throughout the series of studies. Within the reconnaissance phase, the researcher interviewed 12 Maltese

players who had made the migration to professional leagues overseas and presented the findings in a series of focus groups to coaches and parents. Throughout the action planning phase, the researcher worked directly with senior management at both the NSS and MFA. Within the implementation and monitoring phase, as well as the review and reflection phase, the researcher worked directly with management, coaches, players and parents, both as a researcher and practitioner. During this phase, in particular, from January 2015 to May 2016, the researcher was working full time at the National Sports School and part-time at the MFA (two evenings a week).

A significant amount of previous empirical research has focused on the top football leagues in Europe, or on the top football nations (Darby, 2007a; De Vasconcellos Ribiero & Dimeo, 2009; Littlewood et al., 2011; Richardson et al., 2012). In that sense, it has neglected the experiences of players from smaller (or peripheral) nations such as Malta. Thus, this thesis has provided deep insight into the broader Maltese culture and the specific migratory based challenges faced by young players coming from a sheltered upbringing and a laid back mentality. Despite the availability of few Maltese players who have made the transition, and who were present to be interviewed, the data gathered from Study One was contextually rich and extends our knowledge and understanding with respect to what has been reported in similar research conducted with different populations around the world. Concerns regarding the sheltered upbringing of the Maltese are seen clearly once again in the focus groups with parents and coaches in Study Two. The attendance of at least one parent of most of the 1998 born national team players in the focus groups shows the level of involvement parents in Malta want to have in their children's life.

Findings of this thesis shows clearly that the work conducted is valid and transferable, important factors in action research studies as described in Section 2.8 and Table 2.1 in Chapter Two. The latter can be seen through the EU Project currently being

conducted with sport schools in Finland and Cyprus where students and staff there, together with those at the NSS are undergoing psychosocial skills sessions, parental education sessions as well as temporary migrations to the countries involved in the project so as to experience adaptation to different cultures. In terms of outcome validity, the actions conducted have helped to solve the issues that led to this study with students reporting through the evaluations conducted in Chapter Six, that actions have been found to be useful in creating awareness and readiness for transition. All participants involved in the action research project, parents, players, coaches, management personnel and the practitioner-researcher have worked (democratic validity) and reflected on the actions conducted so as to improve their learning (process validity) and if required reorient their view of reality as well as how they look at their role, what is known as catalytic validity. The research has also been peer reviewed by the supervisors in order for there to be dialogic validity as suggested by Herr and Anderson (2005).

The research of Grima (2016) (see Table 7.1 below) outlines the number of professional football players from small nations that are currently playing overseas.

Table 7.1: Statistics of players playing abroad in small nations as in July 2016 (Grima, 2016)

COUNTRY	PLAYERS ABROAD	POPULATION
ICELAND	100	330,000
LUXEMBOURG	51	580,000
LIECHTENSTEIN	40	38,000
CYPRUS	38	1,178,000
FAROE ISLANDS	37	48,000
ANDORRA	22	70,000
SAN MARINO	21	32,000
GIBRALTAR	9	32,000
MALTA	4	420,000

The numbers for Malta (N=4), the lowest from all countries, provide the quantitative data that reinforces the findings from the current research. Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) have previously stated that Maltese players show little desire to pursue their careers elsewhere, given the perceived “comfortable” and “easy life” that the culture within the country espouses.

There has been a lot of scrutiny in the past months regarding the success of Iceland and how they have managed to reach the final stages of the European Championships held in 2016, and subsequent success against more established Western European countries such as England. This is even more noteworthy given that Iceland, with a population smaller than Malta, has 100 players playing overseas. The work of Egilssons (2013) on the transitional experiences of Icelandic players shows that the pattern of success for players requires self-confidence and a strong mentality by young players who move to play professional football overseas. He also suggests that understanding and managing player expectations is a vital part of the preparatory phase within the migration process, the alignment of club and managers from a cultural perspective, and social support from family as key factors. Egilsson further emphasized the need for players to be better educated, knowledgeable about the demands that can emerge, have social skills and coping strategies. Social support was seen to be an important factor too. Although similar results have been reported within the current research, it has been documented that whilst Icelandic people are independent, ambitious, competitive, and have a strong work ethic (Ólafsson, 2003; Fannar, 2016), the Maltese are characterised by a Mediterranean and small island mentality that may impact current and future decisions (and preparedness) relating to the pursuit of footballing careers. The lack of Maltese players with experience of other cultures also means that the national Maltese team has not developed in the same way that Iceland and other small nations have (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2008). It is recognised that developing and changing the mentality

and broader culture on a small island nation will take many years, however this action research project has highlighted key psycho-social and cultural factors that are continuing to impede the development and progression of talent within the country. This research, and the specific methodological nature of inquiry, is the first of its kind in Malta, and it is hoped that this acts as a platform for strategic change within the respective organisations that can influence the sub-cultures of their practice.

Few Maltese players since the start of this project have had the opportunity to play abroad. Out of the four players listed in the table above, three of them have had psycho-social support. Since the start of the project, another three who had psycho-social support went to play abroad, however they reported feeling homesick, one was concerned about his schooling and came back to Malta. A Maltese national team coach, currently sitting for his Pro-License has decided to extend on my work and has interviewed two of the players who have moved to play overseas since Study One was conducted. Parts of these interviews can be found in appendix H. A number of areas discussed in these two interviews further emphasize the existing findings in Study One, however a few additional observations also emerged. From a personal perspective, it was good to see that the work I had conducted as a practitioner-researcher with these two players had been appreciated and was found to be useful in their migratory transition. Whilst one of these players still returned back to Malta after a couple of months playing abroad, we do have to note that he was still 15 at the time of migration and his parents admitted to having not even gone to be with him in the first week there. As the first player stated, Maltese players may adapt better when they leave Malta at an older age, such as 20. This was also emphasized by one of the nursery head coaches in the focus groups in Study Two and may be a key consideration when supporting families in the decision making phase of the migratory based transition. There are further cases of Maltese players that have also experienced migration to Italy in the latter stages of

the research. Whilst there are clearly a range of external factors that inform the transition process post migration (i.e., financial, contracts etc.), it has been recognised that the nature of the work within the research has enabled the player and family to be more culturally and contextually informed.

Since August 2016 more Maltese players have been taken up by foreign clubs. Two young players aged 13, and who attend the NSS have left Malta to play in Italy. One has now been taken up by a Spanish club. They are accompanied by their parents since at this age players cannot officially move for football reasons. An 11 year old NSS student-athlete has also migrated to play in Scotland in the last few weeks. Another four players, from the current national U19 team also moved abroad last August. Three are in Italy and one is in a football school in England. This transition to professional football took place at a time when these young players are still developing and learning to deal with many complex life issues including forming and managing relationships (Richardson et al., 2005). In fact, such a transition to high achievement and adult sport, and from amateur to professional status, has been viewed as one of the toughest periods of athletic development (Stambulova, 2000). Players are expected to cope with harder training, life being taken over by the sport, coping with sports and studies, taking the right career decisions (Nesti & Littlewood, 2010), and other factors such as trying to remain in touch with family and friends back home (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014).

All players (apart from the 11 year old) have now been overseas for at least seven months. One or two experienced some homesickness, distress more likely to be present when athletes are young and within the early stages of transition (Thurber & Sigman, 1998). However, access to psychological services with the practitioner-researcher, as suggested by Smith et al. (2015), in the form of regular on-line 'catch-up' sessions, and at times, phone calls with their parents has helped to handle these challenges along the way. With respect to

Schlossberg's (1981) model on the human adaptation to transition, the players adapted well to the transition demands as they had the necessary coping resources available. All players had attended the psycho-social skills programme discussed in the action change strategies, as well as receiving individual support from the practitioner-researcher. Stambulova's Athletic Career Transition Model (2003) defined transition as a coping process with possibly positive or negative outcomes. The players who have migrated over the past few months have been able to deal with a number of specific demands. One was concerned about his schooling in Italy, another struggled with relationship issues with his girlfriend who was back in Malta. Their desire to come back was in strong conflict with what they wanted to achieve in their footballing career. According to Stambulova (2003), such challenges need to be overcome in order to have a successful transition. It was felt that the players were able to cope with the challenges they experienced due to the support provided to them by their parents and the practitioner-researcher. However, the knowledge, skills and preparation for transitions that they had received in their development programme (as suggested by Richardson et al., 2005 and Littlewood, 2005), whilst still in Malta is also a key consideration. In that sense, one could argue that the various action change strategies that players and parents experienced may have some ecological efficacy. If the players had not received pre-migration support, or the interventions conducted were not effective, there may have been further negative outcomes, such as dropout from the sport, injuries, psychosomatic illnesses or other issues (Morris et al., 2015).

However, neither Stambulova's (2003) nor Schlossberg's (1981) models could be adopted on their own. One must also refer back to Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) development model of athlete transition, which explains the number of transitions that athletes experience during their careers at different levels. This model guided the work within the action change strategies, specifically my role as a practitioner-researcher working

with the players. The ability to take a holistic approach to important transitions the players experienced in their life (new school system, new friends etc.), and not just their sport helped me to achieve a higher level of understanding and guide my practice. This was critical, especially at a time when they were experiencing more than one transition that could have had an adverse effect on their athletic development. Also, having a good understanding of the culture in Italy (thanks to its proximity to Malta; my regular visits there, as well as often having to work with Italian coaches) and the United Kingdom (having migrated to study in Manchester for a year), the countries Maltese players migrated to recently, as well as having experienced migration myself, helped greatly my awareness of cultural diversity and the players experiences in different cultures. This has helped facilitate career assistance interventions with the players (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013; 2014). The recently developed Cultural Transition Model (Ryba et al., 2016) has been very useful in providing me, the practitioner-researcher with a framework which can help improve the support provided to athletic migrant workers. As can be seen in this thesis, a considerable amount of work has been done in the pre-transition phase to create awareness and prepare the players for the challenges they will face if they do migrate to play professionally overseas. Psychosocial support provided during and after the migration has taken place with the players who have migrated over the past year, has shown that this has helped the players to adapt and adjust to the new culture. Thus, this model has filled the gap in the transition literature, in terms of cultural transitions.

In terms of the discussions held with the MFA Technical Director on issues concerning clubs, the MFA have now embarked on promoting the academy system discussed earlier in Chapter Five. Academies must keep on looking for ways to improve player development (Harwood et al., 2010) and thus, the MFA have also pushed hard to engage more coaches in getting their coaching licenses and further education. Despite, earlier in

2016, Bosman himself was brought to Malta by the Malta Football Player's Association, players are still finding it challenging to leave the island once their contract is finished since clubs are imposing parameters on them.

7.1 Reflection upon the Action Research Process

Creating meaningful change through Action Research

The journey as a practitioner-researcher was an exciting, and at times, overwhelming experience. The awareness and critical thinking developed over the years during the various phases of the action research cycle was highly personal, and at times painful and challenging to manage. The ability to achieve an action research project as free from bias as possible, ethically sound, fulfilling a dual role, and maintaining the right analytical distance was not an easy task. Similar to the comments of Knowles, Katz and Gilbourne (2012), despite being an experienced practitioner, the reflective process was still seen as very valuable.

Far from the potential “complacency of being an experienced practitioner”, the experience of completing this diary has resulted in me appreciating that the “real-time” reflective practice provided me with increasingly deeper levels of understanding of personal, professional and interpersonal relationships individually and how they interact. (p.9).

The following reflective vignettes outline a number of deeply personal and meaningful critical moments throughout the action research process that I feel evidence my evolving development as a researcher. These are just a number of challenges that I have reflected on throughout the journey that have assisted in my continued personal and professional growth as a practitioner-researcher.

At some point as I was reading through articles on action research, in particular 'Action Research in 'Qualitative Research Practice' (Ladkin, 2004) it suddenly dawned on me that my action research project was having a profound effect on mean effect I wasn't sure I was comfortable with. It was the same feeling I had

experienced when I was 16 and chose philosophy as one of my subjects for 'A' level. My work/my reading was making me more reflective about life in general. Whilst I always thought I was pretty self-aware, I guess most often I never really have the time to sit down and reflect properly. And my action research work was doing just that to me. I became more conscious of one or two personal issues affecting me in my life at that moment in time. Different inner voices had been trying to grab my attention over the past weeks, talking about the painful experiences I'd had in relation to others, for example experiences of feeling not recognised enough and not being properly valued both in some of my work settings (MFA, previously MOC) as well as in my personal relationships with others (giving so much and not receiving as much as I give).

Although this was uncomfortable, I took a deep sigh, I was understanding a little bit more from where certain frustrations were coming at this moment in time. I knew I had to sit back, take a good look at myself and inquire what was really happening here. Reflective practice may be a difficult process (Cropley et al., 2007), and I shared the feelings I was experiencing with my supervisor at home, whom I saw every month (CPD requirement). Apart from being empathetic with me, she also shared her related experiences with me (Cropley et al., 2016) and this helped me make sense of my own development, similar to what was reported in Eubank's (2013) study on 'Professional training experiences on the Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology: A Supervisor and Candidate perspective.'

These reflective vignettes resonate sharply with the work of Ladkin (2004). He suggest that

this kind of research process can seem to have its own volition, its own unfolding story to tell. When things are not going 'right', when the Practitioner-Researcher is feeling frustrated or not understanding, this is perhaps the point where the Practitioner-Researcher's pre-determined idea of where an inquiry should go, and where it actually wants to go, have diverged. Recognizing this divergence and paying attention to what it might be saying calls for a particular kind of sensitivity on the part of the Practitioner-Researcher (Ladkin, 2004, Pg. 22).

My frustrations lay with having to push things so much myself to take place. Whilst the interest was there from the organisations, everything seemed so slow moving. But this to me went deeper than just this. As I spent my

Sunday indoors working on my PhD, trying to reflect on what was happening in my research and in my life, I realised there was a link. If there is one thing I do not like in life, it is depending on others. If I can do something myself I will always do it myself. Whilst I believe I am a team player, teams at times cause me stress because I believe myself to be organised, efficient, driven and have good time management, while I find that few others I know or work with are like that, once again possibly due to the laid back mentality on the island. I don't like asking people for something, whether it's their time, or energy and then I am let down. I realised that I expect people to say 'no' or get out of helping before I have even asked them. Reflection was making me question my habitual practices (Cropley et al., 2007). Such reflection was making me feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. However, if I was going to be committed to improving my practice, challenging thoughts and emotions should help me learn from my experiences and understand the framework of my practice (Anderson et al., 2004). I expected that the FA in particular, wanted to improve the situation for our players and would do everything to make this happen. But I questioned the authenticity of their commitment? Or were they comfortable in their everyday tasks, not wanting to budge and change the system? I was expecting people to not do anything about things because this was my preconceived thought. And I realised I wasn't asking them enough. I was afraid to ask them, because I was afraid they would find excuses, say no. My friend had brought this to my attention, just the day before on a personal matter. I was afraid to ask for something because I was already predicting a 'rejection', a 'no' answer. I was wondering how much I needed to persevere. And how many 'no's' I could take this could make me or break me but I realised I needed to work on changing my line of thinking I was determined to try and change my line of thinking ...to believe that if I persisted things would happen. So equipped with this knowledge I was determined to persist even though it felt like to me that I was being a nuisance asking I realised I was too self-conscious My frustration could be explained by trying to make an emergent process fit my expectation.

The previous vignette reflects Ladkin's comment about reflective freedom. He suggested that "I had to free myself of what I was looking for, in order that I could see what was emerging, rather than what I'd decided would emerge" (Ladkin, 2004; p24). However, in order to be sensitive to the development of an action research project, one's own emotional reaction is important to note, yet this is perhaps more challenging in inquiry that connects the researcher deeply to the object and subject of those being researched. Shifting from a

detached stance as a researcher, to an involved and integral part of the research process enables one to develop greater self-awareness.

Being sensitive to developing processes requires an openness that can be difficult to sustain if the Practitioner-Researcher is determined to 'improve' a situation. The Practitioner-Researcher must therefore be sensitive to not try and predict the answers. The emotional reaction a Practitioner-Researcher is experiencing may provide important data about deeper issues that lie below the surface of rational engagement. Yet, this emergence may take time and one must respect not knowing when working with developing processes (Ladkin, 2004). I feel that the qualities that I have developed throughout this process will be critical in my ongoing professional practice and highlight the importance of reflective practice in the training and development pathway for neophyte and experienced applied practitioners.

Action research theory suggests that it takes place in an ideal world where everyone who should be present is there, action cycles become more and more clear, the researcher knows how much responsibility to take on to be collaborative in the best way possible. However, reality may be very different. Action research may get messy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) as the different stages overlap, and having experienced 'the mess', I appreciate that this is possibly more reflective of real-life situations in the workplace. Action research cannot be perfect since human beings and organisations can be unpredictable. It needs to be measured by the researcher's willingness to engage in a chaotic process which is impossible to get perfectly right (Ladkin, 2004).

When, after the 2012 Olympic Games in London, I decided to move on from Olympic sports to football, the main reason was that I had felt stuck in a rut, in a job where I had reached my threshold. I was the sport psychologist for the Maltese contingent at several games, I had been working with Maltese top athletes for over 13 years with some of them. I had helped our top athlete achieve medals in Games of Small States,

Mediterranean Games, and Commonwealth Games. The first Olympic medal eluded us and as I write this, our top athlete will today by once again vying for a first Olympic medal for the country. It hurt that I wasn't there. What could I have done more? In a recent newspaper interview he reported never taking much notice of developing the mental side of his sport. So, all those hours I had spent at his training venue with him had all been in vain? It was tough to see the name of a 'mentor', not a qualified sport psychologist in any way, but simply a motivator who had worked with him for the past couple of months being mentioned. Once again I questioned my work. What could I have done more? Could I have done something more or was I beating myself about it? Had I worked too much on mental skills training with him, rather than looking at the deeper life issues he was facing? Was it me? Or was it him who did not take things seriously enough as he had reported in the papers? I also questioned the lack of professionalism, ethics, and lack of appreciation which seems to be an inherent part of the Maltese culture. I prided myself for being a hard-worker and a perfectionist in my work. There would always be the question 'Have I done enough? Could I have done more?' As I wrote this section I got a phone call from a parent of one of our U17 players, fighting for his place at the U17 qualifiers later on this year. He was once again struggling with decision-making. Questioned earlier this week, after a 'tip-off' by the coaches that he was not performing, he admitted to forgetting to practice his mental skills, and failing to prepare his mind well prior to top matches. How long would we have to spoon feed in this country? You would expect that if they really wanted to achieve top status in sport, they would do everything they could to do so, just like I had decided to pursue a PhD following the rut I was feeling I was in in 2012.

But, as stated above, action research success needs to be measured by the researcher's willingness to engage in a chaotic process which is impossible to get perfectly right. So this was something I had to live with and not beat myself too much about. Not everyone will do what they should be doing, human beings and organisations can be unpredictable, and to cope I would need to develop further a range of coping skills and not problem-focused strategies only (Cropley et al., 2016). I was going to have to learn further how to handle any emotions regarding this, I would need to see how much responsibility to take on to be collaborative in the best way possible. Action research cannot be perfect.

I have surely grown so much on a personal level and in my work over the course of this PhD. The development has been tremendous. I had felt it after just a few months researching into the challenges of migration and transitional areas. Just as Maltese players will benefit when moving abroad to play professional football, I realised even more so, that living in Malta had its disadvantages in terms of career development. It

was up to me to continue conducting research, doing action research, attending conferences abroad and keeping in touch with colleagues in sport in other countries. I hoped that my profession would grow in Malta, I had to help others get involved in my work so that we could be a team, and as a sports professional now pretty well recognised on the island, I had to be a good role model for young athletes and also young researchers and upcoming sport psychologists. I had to remind myself I could not continue trying to change the 'world', in this case 'little Malta' on my own.

Just like Burgess (2006), I reflected on my feelings of anxiousness, confusion and discomfort, especially in the last few weeks of my writing up, and in doing so, came to understand and appreciate that it was the learning process that made for transformation. Feelings of discomfort had to be acknowledged, understood and accepted, as opposed to being kept back or avoided in order to further my development and knowledge (Grant, 2007).

7.2 Strengths and Limitations

As recommended by several authors (see Alferman and Stambulova, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2015), longitudinal research is required, especially in terms of evaluation of programmes conducted for athletes. This action research project had, like most other action research projects, some areas that appeared more conventional and straightforward, whilst also possessing some more complex parts of the process. Conducting action research on a small island like Malta may look somewhat easier than other nations because of the smallness of the island, the contained environment, the overlapping of areas, and even personnel (such as NSS students forming part of the MFA academy, coaches who work both at the MFA and NSS and so on). However, the insularity of such an island may also cause inherent limitations. The red tape at times may be an issue of concern, the lack of speed to get things done may make such projects take longer than is necessary, or rather may make such projects unpolished around the edges. Living in a nation with very few

professionals in sport makes the task harder and puts the professional, in this case the practitioner-researcher, in a position trying to manage a range of competing agendas.

A recognised limitation of the research is the significant lack of literature on Maltese football, and broader writing on the country's culture. To date, the work of Armstrong and Mitchell (2008) on Maltese football, politics and culture was the only writing that helped to shed some light on an era I knew little about, especially from an academic perspective. To balance out this limitation, I feel that a strength of the action research project was the collection of data that produced an abundance of contextually and culturally rich, qualitative data. This relied heavily on the quality of the interpersonal relationships between the researcher and the participants (Lee, 1993). The practitioner-researcher having worked in the area of sport for a number of years and being recognised as a professional in the field certainly facilitated the data collection process and subsequent trustworthiness criteria (Biddle et al., 2001). The reconnaissance phase (Study One and Two) helped to develop relationships with players, parents and coaches that has helped me to develop my applied practice outside of the PhD process with these stakeholders. It may have been at times difficult for them to open up and grant me access to their private social world and disclose information which they might have regretted later on (Kvale, 1996). Still, it is also recognised that the action research process can also enhance the personal growth and self-awareness of the social actors, in this case the many players, coaches and parents that have been central to the research process (Ladkin, 2004).

At times, it has been difficult to manage my role and its subsequent identity during the action research process. I have occupied a multitude of roles to a variety of stakeholders. I have been known as the sports psychologist, researcher, colleague, even to university lecturer for some of the personnel interviewed. The challenge of maintaining ethical boundaries on a small island where everyone knows each other, was at times far more

difficult than might be the norm elsewhere in other research projects and cultures. Protecting the identity of those involved in the research was also challenging, on an island where everyone knows each other. However, I feel very strongly that my experience as a sports psychologist was definitely an advantage in the research, especially in relation to the efficiency of the process.

The action research project was mine, rather than ours (NSS and MFA) I felt, especially with the MFA. Ownership was at times present with the organisations, at other times it was not, it was up to me to run the project. Again, the duality of my existence and multiplicity of roles, the overload of work from different areas, made it at times a real challenge to focus on issues that were significant and current during the different phases of the action research cycles. Whilst I had colleagues fully focused full time on their PhD's, I had multiple roles to fulfil.

The action research cycles may at times not have been as structured as one wished. However, it was impossible to record every single meeting that took place using a Dictaphone, since this made it feel unauthentic, and at times awkward, especially with the MFA and NSS management. The pilot phase was initially a bit rough around the edges. Meetings did not always take place when and how one desired. Some were rushed due to the busy schedule of the individuals concerned, especially in particular, with MFA and NSS management.

7.3 Recommendations for future research

The desire to continue developing this line of research is great. The findings that have emerged throughout the action research project have helped to develop novel and unique psycho-social and cultural knowledge on issues concerning migratory based transitions within a small island nation from a variety of stakeholders (players, parents and coaches).

This research sheds further light on the working practices of applied sports psychologists, especially those practicing in sport schools and football settings. Consequently, it is felt that further research needs to be conducted on other small nations, such as Cyprus, Luxembourg, San Marino and others, to identify whether these small nations face similar psycho-social and cultural challenges in the development and progression of talent. From an individual perspective, there is a deep interest by the practitioner-researcher to understand whether foreign players who come to play in Malta, become organisationally socialised, in other words, become 'Maltese' in their mentality after some time living and acculturating on the island. A preliminary investigation has already been conducted in this area with African players who have come to play on the island. It is hoped that further research over the coming years will examine this from a larger population and interview players from South America, and possibly other continents.

Other beneficial investigations relate to Maltese athletes in other sports who have migrated overseas for sports reasons. In that sense, do athletes in other sports also experience and perceive challenges similar to the football population? Or are athletes in individual sports more skilled in managing the challenges associated with migrating? Are Maltese female footballers who migrate coping better than male players? Such areas of research are, at this point in time, all being considered as part of a future research strategy.

A more diverse evaluation procedure is also worthy to consider. Although several of the evaluation procedures conducted in this action research project have been conducted anonymously with the students, players, coaches and parents, it may be imperative to have others, outside the project evaluating what has taken place. As has been seen earlier in the project, interviews have been conducted with players who have over the past four years, since inception of the programme, experienced a migration. This has been done by a colleague who is currently sitting for his Pro-license and who I, the practitioner-researcher

work with on a regular basis at the MFA, and who has been a critical and trusted friend in this project. Independent feedback from other researchers on the project is vital and in that sense independent evaluation on the project conducted is also taking place to further understand the merits, or otherwise, of the work conducted.

The research has also evidenced that external collaboration is vital in this line of inquiry, since there are a variety of stakeholders that will benefit from a more structured, contextually developed and rigorous migratory transition programme. The EU project that was applied for, and granted, aims to explore further challenges of migration in Cyprus and Finland. This will continue developing a collaborative research approach with other nations that will help to strengthen the work already conducted. The aspiration has to be to develop career enhancement and psycho-social skills training programmes for upcoming footballers and athletes in others sport.

7.4 Practical recommendations for Sport Psychologists

Individual Perspective

It has been clearly seen in this thesis that sport psychologists are vital in the success of a player's career. Sport psychologists have been seen to be crucial in educating and supporting a player in his transitions in sport and other areas. Thus, a sport psychologist working with young players needs to work towards developing a number of psycho-social skills which may be vital for him or her to be accepted within the football world especially since some players might find it difficult to open up. It may however be challenging for a sport psychologist working with a number of players to cope with the various demands that these players may have. Thus, it is essential that practitioners understand fully players, coaches and support staffs' needs to be able to provide a better service. Sport psychologists must also seek support from other practitioners so that they may handle the demands they face better.

In this thesis we have seen the importance of reflection on the enhancement of practice, both for the sport psychologist as well as for the athlete, the coach and the organisation. This work has shown that more emphasis needs to be put on such reflection so that practice can be improved. Practitioners need to make a conscious effort to find time to reflect on their work and must not be scared to seek evaluation of the programmes being conducted. Such reflection is an essential part of being an applied sport psychologist as it clearly allows consideration of how effective service delivery can be developed by challenging the existing attitudes and beliefs one has (Cropley et al., 2010). Players and other stakeholders must also be reminded to engage in such reflection and be open to seeking out new opportunities to enhance their work.

Organisational Perspective

Organisations such as clubs, football associations and sport schools have a responsibility to prepare young athletes for transitions they will face in sport and in other areas of their life (Wylemann and Lavalley, 2004) whether these are normative transitions and expected to happen and also non-normative transitions such as handling injuries and the possible premature termination of a footballing career. Transitions which are known to be more challenging, such as the transition from youth to senior team or from amateur to professional (Stambulova, 2000) as well as migratory transitions (Richardson et al., 2012) need to be given particular attention so that players can cope with the challenges they will face. Special attention also needs to be placed on the environment the players are in (Henriksen, 2010).

This thesis clearly shows that a programme of psycho-social skills needs to be implemented with players within sport organisations due to the high demands that may be experienced in their footballing career. Organisations however need to go beyond simply providing sessions in psycho-social and mental skills; they need to provide situations where players are put in a challenging situation and would need to use the skills they have learnt.

Sport psychologists may be vital here, in the role of a ‘cultural architect’ who can help create a specific performance culture which is aimed at achieving excellence (Eubank, Nesti & Cruickshank, 2014). Exchanges with other sport organisations overseas, for example, may be one of the best opportunities for young players to understand better the coping skills they may need to employ at different stages of their career. Sport psychologists within organisations need to also make sure to educate coaches involved with young players so that they too may help players especially if they themselves passed through similar transitions.

Organisations also have an obligation towards helping new players who join their club/association to settle in. A sport psychologist or other support personnel must be on hand to support the new player and see that they are handling the transition as well as is possible. Parents must also be educated and supported to better support their child. The sport psychologist together with other academy staff must make sure that parents understand and reinforce the work that the organisation is doing (Eubank et al., 2017).

Cultural Perspective

Sport psychologists working with players who are looking at migrating must spend time preparing the player for migration, discussing situations they may need to cope with and possibly too, putting players in touch with other players who have already migrated, especially if both players are playing in the same country. Practitioners must however immerse themselves deeply into the culture of the country and/or club (Eubank et al., 2017).

Players who are looking to migrate need to develop mental skills for performance and for dealing with stress; they need to develop lifestyle skills such as cooking, cleaning and financial management especially if they have never needed to do this previously due to having been brought up in a sheltered environment. Moving country, club, being away from family and friends is already tough; thus, players need to make sure that they do not end up

in a situation which is tougher than they initially thought. Sport psychologists must also create awareness with players regarding psycho-social skills which may be crucial especially in their first weeks abroad. Such skills may include communication skills, decision-making skills and the ability to take initiative. Parents too need to be informed of the challenges their son will face, and the challenges they will face as parents and how they can cope.

During the migration itself, and post migration, the sport psychologist needs to be available to support the player as they may find that there is no one to turn to when abroad and may be feeling lonely and confused. Players may need to be helped to seek a new social setting, people they can turn to for support when they feel lonely and possibly too, activities they may want to engage in when they have some free time. In the case of younger players, it is suggested that they continue some form of education so that they have something else to fall back on if their career in football does not work out. Players who have been overseas for a long time and are looking at post-retirement plans need to be given career related advice to help them on the next part of their journey and to make this transition as smooth as possible. The sport psychologist in their home country may also seek to establish contact with the sport psychologist at the club (or other support staff if these are at all available) in order for there to be collaboration for the psychological well-being of the athlete.

Sport psychologists working within small nations need to be more aware of how closed the environment they are in may be. Just as players seek to migrate to enhance their career, sport psychologists and other personnel may find it beneficial to seek opportunities to learn more about how they can better support the athlete through themselves engaging in experiences overseas, through observing other sport psychologists or academy staff in action, by attending international conferences and by continuing with their own research too. Learning through experiencing what is done in other cultures will surely help not only players but practitioners too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

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Appendices

**Appendix A1: Maltese players who played in foreign leagues (Pg 358-360, Sacco, 2002;
<http://www.transfermarkt.com>)**

Players	Foreign Club	Country	Period
Alfred Falzon	Melita Eagles S.C.	Australia	1959
Joe Zammit	Melita Eagles S.C.	Australia	Season 1963-1964
Joe Cilia	Melita Eagles S.C. Southerland F.C. Corinthians F.C.	Australia Australia Australia	Year 1964-1972
Joe Cini	Leyton Orient FC. Queen's Park Rangers F.C.	England England	Season 1956-1957 Season 1958-1959
Alfred Debono	Pittsburgh Phantoms S.C.	U.S.A.	Season 1967-1968
Charlie Williams	Pittsburgh Phantoms S.C.	U.S.A.	Season 1967-1968
Ronnie Cocks	Pittsburgh Phantoms S.C.	U.S.A.	Season 1967-1968
Edward Aquilina	Pittsburgh Phantoms S.C.	U.S.A.	Season 1967-1968
Willie Vassallo	Melita Eagles S.C.	Australia	1977
Joe Farrugia	Melita Eagles S.C.	Australia	1978
Raymond Xuereb	Newcastle U.F.C.	England	1977-1978
Carlo Seychell	Wolves F.C. (Reserves)	England	October 1978
John Bonello	Hereford U.F.C.	Germany	1980-1981
Ray 'Zazu' Farrugia	Melita Eagles S.C.	Australia	1978-1990
Carmel Busuttil	Verbania Calcio KRC Genk	Italy Belgium	1987-1988 1988-1994
John Buttigieg	Brentford F.C.	England	1988-1991
Justin Haber	Dobruzha Dobrich (loan) US Quevilly RE Virton Chaidari Sheffield United Ferencváros AO Kerkyra	Bulgaria France Belgium Greece England Hungary Greece	1998 2005-2006 2006 2007-2008 2008-2010 2010-2011 2011-2012
Gilbert Agius	Pisa S.C.	Italy	2001-2002
Stefan Giglio	PFC CSKA Sofia PFC Lokomotiv Sofia	Bulgaria Bulgaria	2001-2002 2002-2003
Chucks Nwoko	PFC CSKA Sofia	Bulgaria	2001
Michael Mifsud	1.FC Kaiserslautern Lillestrøm Coventry City - Barnsley (loan) Melbourne Heart	Germany Norway England England Australia	2001-2004 2004-2007 2007-2009 2009 2013-2014

Luke Dimech	Lincoln City F.C. Shamrock Rovers F.C. Mansfield Town Chester City Macclesfield Town AEK Larnaca	England Ireland Rep. England England England Cyprus	2001 2002-2003 2003-2005 2005-2006 2007-2008 2010-2012
Daniel Bogdanovic	Vasas FC PFC Chernomorec Cisco Roma Lokomotiv Sofia Barnsley Sheffield United Blackpool - Rochdale (loan) - Nott County (loan)	Hungary Bulgaria Italy Bulgaria England England England England England	2002 2003 2007-2008 2008-2009 2009-2010 2010-2011 2011-2012 2012 2012
Simon Vella	Ex-Sten Iousenuir F.C. Airdrieonians F.C.	Scotland Scotland	2001-2002 2002-2003
Andrei Agius	FK Zemun Atletico Catania Messina - Martina (loan) Igea Virtus Nuova Cassino Melfi Latina Calcio Torres - Aprilia (loan)	Serbia Italy Italy Italy Italy Italy Italy Italy Italy Italy	2004 2004-2005 2005-2007 2006-2007 2007-2009 2009-2010 2010-2011 2011-2013 2013-2014 2014
Andrew Hogg	Bari Enosis Neon Paralimni Kalloni	Italy Cyprus Greece	2004 2012-2013 2013-2016
Andre Schembri	Eintracht Braunschweig (loan) - Carl Zeiss Jena (loan) Austria Kärnten Ferencváros Olympiakos Volou Panionios AC Omonia FSV Frankfurt AC Omonia Boavista FC	Germany Germany Austria Hungary Greece Greece Cyprus Germany Cyprus Portugal	2007-2008 2008-2009 2009-2010 2010-2011 2011 2011-2012 2012-2014 2014 2015-2016 2016 –
Etienne Barbara	SC Verl Carolina RailHawks Vancouver Whitecaps FC Minnesota United Tampa Bay Rowdies	Germany USA USA USA USA	2008-2009 2010-2011 2012 2013 2013-2014
Bjorn Kristenson	Hessel Gods Football School Silkeborg IF	Denmark Denmark	2008- 2009 2009-2010
James Paris	Manchester City U18	England	2008 – 2010
Conor Borg	Chievo Verona Roma U19 - On loan with Floriana FC	Italy Italy Malta	2014 2015
Juan Corbolan	Virtus Lanciano	Italy	2015 (Jan-June)

Matthew Guillaumier	Empoli	Italy	2014
Rowen Muscat	Dunaújváros Pavia	Hungary Italy	2014 – 2015 2016
Myles Beerman	Manchester City U18 Glasgow Rangers	England Scotland	2016 – 2017 2017
Zach Muscat	Akragas Arezzo	Italy Italy	2016 2016 -
Luke Busuttil	IFK Maryland	USA	2016 -

Appendix A2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORMS



School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(for stakeholders and players who have played abroad)



Title: Examining the psychological development of young Maltese national team football players in preparation for within-career transitions.

Researcher(s): Adele Muscat

Supervisors: Dr Martin Littlewood; Dr. Mark Nesti; Dr. Dave Richardson, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take time to read the following information. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide if you are willing to participate.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

You are being invited to participate in the study as we are interested in exploring better the training set-ups of the Maltese Football Association (MFA) and how we can prepare better our young players for the transition from the youth to the professional environment.

2. Why have I been asked to take part?

You have been asked because you are a stakeholder, form part of the youth academy at the MFA or have had experience playing abroad. We would like to give the current academy players the best training possible to prepare them for a successful transition. We see this project as a team effort and as such your input is vital for us to potentially help the success of the academy.

3. Do I have to take part?

No you do not need to take part in the study. So, we will leave this decision up to you. If you say no, it is important to say that this will not affect your rights, future treatment, or service. If you say yes, it is also important to let you know that you can leave the study at anytime – just let the researcher know.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

For this study you will be asked to take part in a one to one interview which will last 45 minutes to an hour.

5. Are there any risks or benefits involved?

There are no risks involved, however you do stand to benefit from this research since the aim is to see players' perceptions of their development at the MFA and how this can be enhanced even further.

6. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your confidentiality will be maintained in the study.

Contact details of Researcher

Ms Adele Muscat

Sport Psychologist Maltese Football Association

Technical Centre, Ta' Qali, Malta

Contact details of supervisors

Dr. Martin Littlewood, Dr. Mark Nesti, Dr. Dave Richardson

Football Exchange, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Faculty of Science

Liverpool John Moores University, Tom Reilly Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool, L3 3AF.



**School of Sport and Exercise Sciences
LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title: Examining the psychological development of young Maltese national team football players in preparation for within-career transitions.

Researcher(s): Adele Muscat

Supervisors: Dr Martin Littlewood; Dr. Mark Nesti; Dr. Dave Richardson, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided on the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have answered these satisfactory. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights. ☐
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymous and remain confidential. ☐
4. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐
5. I understand that the interview/focus group will be audio / video recorded and I am happy to proceed ☐
6. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymous. ☐

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent

Date

Signature

(if different from researcher)

Note; When completed 1 copy for participant and 1 copy for researcher



School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN / OTHER DEPENDENTS

(to be completed by the child and their parent/guardian)

Title: Examining the psychological development of young Maltese national team football players in preparation for within-career transitions.

Researcher(s): Adele Muscat

Supervisors: Dr Martin Littlewood; Dr. Mark Nesti; Dr. Dave Richardson, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences.

Child (or if unable, parent/guardian on their behalf) / young person to circle all they agree with

Have you read (or had read to you) information about this project? Yes/No

Has somebody else explained this project to you? Yes/No

Do you understand what this project is about? Yes/No

Have you asked all the questions you want? Yes/No

Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand? Yes/No

Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time? Yes/No

Are you happy to take part? Yes/No

If any answers are 'no' or you **don't** want to take part, don't sign your name!



School of Sport and Exercise Sciences

If you **do** want to take part, you can write your name below

Your name _____

Date _____

Your parent or guardian must write their name here if they are happy for you to do the project.

Print Name _____

Sign _____

Date _____

The researcher who explained this project to you needs to sign too.

Print Name _____

Sign _____

Date _____



School of Sport and Exercise Sciences



Adele Muscat

Faculty of Science

Liverpool John Moores University

Byrom Street

Liverpool, L3 3AF

Email: A.Muscat@2012.ljmu.ac.uk

Tel: (00356) 99403166

Dear Mr Robert Gatt

Re: Research at the Malta Football Association (MFA)

As we had discussed at an earlier stage I would like to conduct research at the Malta Football Association on career-transitions in football. As you are aware I have been the sport psychologist for the MFA for the youth academy for the past year and for us to see where we are at in terms of the players' psychological development I would like to interview the players, coaches, academy staff and other stake holders as well as parents of the boys. I would also like to interview players who have already played abroad in order to see what their experience was all about. For your information, I have attached a participant information sheet that outlines the information needed for all participants to decide if they would like to volunteer for the study. If you require more information please do let me know.

Yours faithfully,

Adele Muscat

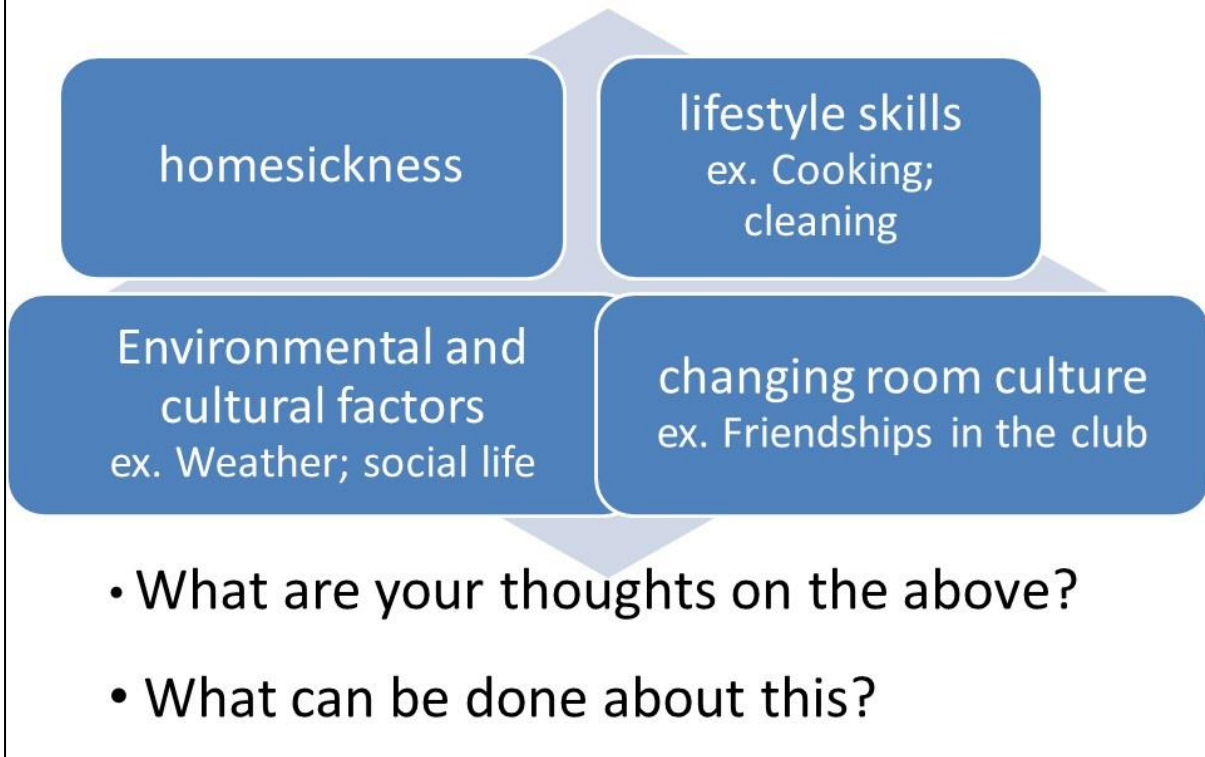
The Migration of Maltese Football Players

- Introduction – My role as a researcher
- Aims: To understand better the challenges Maltese players face when they migrate to play abroad and to come up with ways of helping them prepare for this transition
- Structure and Guidelines of Focus Group
- Consent Forms and Confidentiality

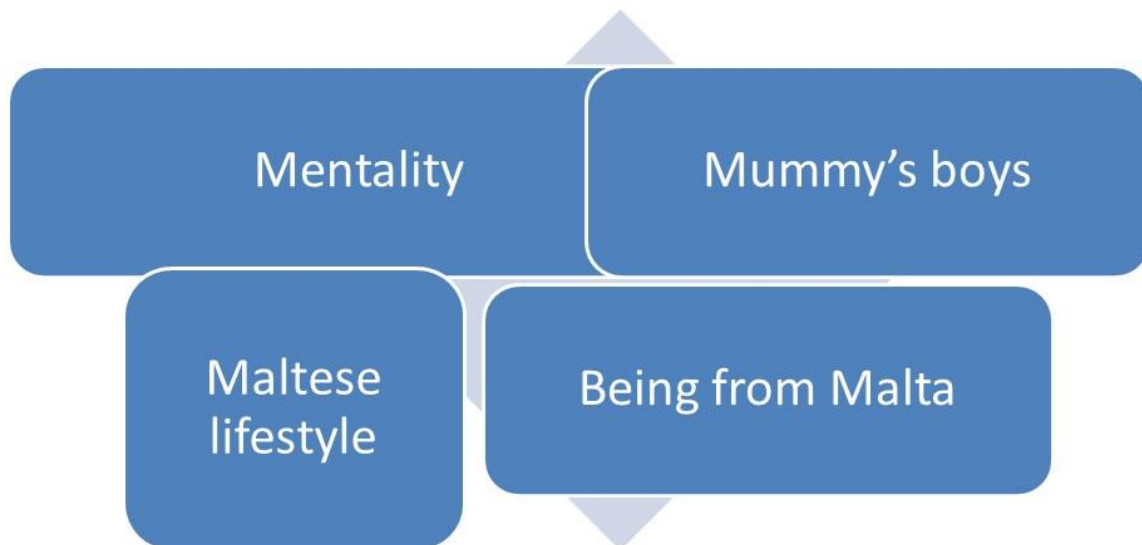
The Migration of Maltese Football Players

- Study 1 explored how Maltese players who currently play or who have previously played abroad feel about their migratory based transition to foreign clubs.
- The study sought to understand whether the players feel they had been prepared enough for this migratory transition and whether the MFA could have done anything to assist within this process.
- 12 Maltese players aged 11-38 interviewed in depth.

Challenges of Migration

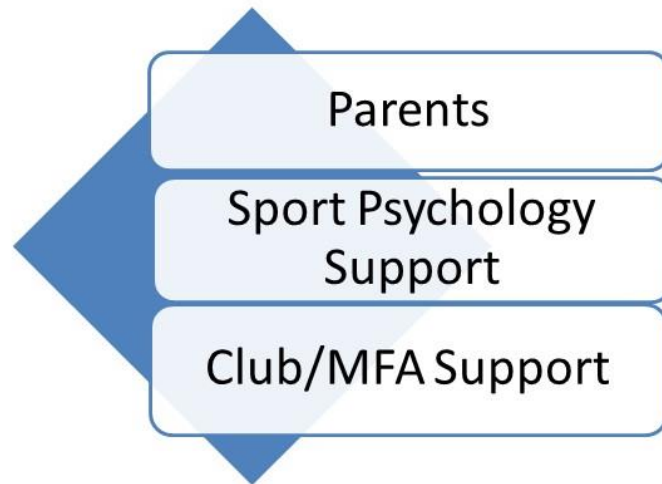


Maltese Culture



- What are your thoughts on the above?
- What can be done about this?


Support



- What are your thoughts on the above?
- What can be done about this?


APPENDIX C: STUDENT PRESENTATIONS HOLLAND TRIP

Presentation Group 1





AJAX ARENA


Made by :Gianluca
Matthias
Emerson




Ajax arena is a stadium in Amsterdam, Netherlands. It is the largest stadium in the country and it was built from 1993 to 1996 at a cost of €140 million, and was officially opened on 14 August 1996. It has been used for association football, American football, concerts, and other events.



An interesting fact is that the arena has a roof. This is the first stadium to have a roof. It takes fifteen minutes to open and close.




It has a capacity of 53,346 seats during football matches and 68,000 seats during concerts.



On 15 May 2013, the Amsterdam Arena hosted the 2013 UEFA Europa League Final between S.L. Benfica and Chelsea F.C., in which the match was won by

- This was one of the best experience. We had a lot of fun and hope to have more of these experience.



Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 2

Our Trip To The Netherlands

28th March – 3rd April

Our Football Matches



By
Ryan, Calvin & Larson

Starting 11 NSS vs Sparta Rotterdam



NSS vs Sparta Rotterdam



- It was a great performance from each and every one of us
- Two goals were scored from Mattia
- One goal and one assist from Ryan
- The score was 3-0 for NSS

Starting 11 NSS VS Spartaan 20



NSS vs Spartaan 20

- Mattia scored two goals. 2-3
- After a while Leo scored from just outside the penalty box. 2-4
- Spartaan 20 scored by a mistake from one of our passes. 3-4
- Mattia scored a penalty into the bottom left corner of the net. 3-5
- At the end Jake scored the final goal. 3-6
- The score was 6-3 for NSS

- Another great performance from all of us
- We started a bit shaky for the first half.
- Ryan from a long range distance hit the goalpost.
- Just before the half time, Jake scored by skipping the keeper. 2-1
- The beginning of the second half we got all we needed.

Starting 11 NSS vs Feyenoord



NSS vs Feyenoord

- It was quite a difficult match for us and it was a great experience to play with this type of team

VS



The result was 6-0 for Feyenoord

- We played with a false striker
- They were very fast, they knew where to go after each pass and also were very discipline to there position on the field

Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 3



By James, Andrea and Nathan

OUR TRIP TO THE NETHERLANDS



AGAINST SPARTA ROTTERDAM



VS



BEFORE THE MATCH

We started preparing from the hostel. When the private came for us we were very focused on the game. When we arrived at Sparta Rotterdam's pitches we were very amazed and nervous. In the dressing room Coach Stefan told us the starting 11, and then we got out of the dressing room and started our warm-up.

TEAM PHOTO



THE MATCH

We started off the match very excited, but the coaches told us to focus on the game and keep compact. After 10 minutes Kurt scored the first goal. After another 5 minutes, a great pass from James came to Andrea but unfortunately he hits the crossbar. After 20 minutes the referee blew for half-time. The second half began and after 10 minutes Jed scored the second goal for us and then scores the third goal after 5 minutes. The game ended and we won the match 3-0.

AFTER THE MATCH

After the match we celebrated in the dressing room and had a shower. Then the private came for us and we continued celebrating and shouting with our victory.

AGAINST FEYENOORD



VS



BEFORE THE MATCH

3 hours before the match we wore our kits at the hostel and rested for 1 hour. Then the private came for us and we had a long trip to the Feyenoord pitches. After Coach Stefan told us the formation and the tactics. Then we went out for the warm up and were prepared for the game.

AGAINST SPARTAAN 20'



VS



BEFORE THE MATCH

The coach told us to rest for our last match against Spartaan 20'. After Coach Stefan gave us our kits and we were ready. The private came for us and we had a 15 to 20 minute trip to Spartaan 20' pitches.

THE MATCH

We started off with a good start because after 10 minutes we had a free-kick and Andrea scored it. Before the half time Nathan took a shot and hit the post but James was there to take the rebound and scored. When the other half started a brilliant pass from Nathan came to Andrea and scored. Before the game ended Spartaan 20' scored 2 goals and the game ended 3-2.

AFTER THE MATCH

After the match we celebrated in the ground and went to have a shower. Then we went to eat in a restaurant and kept on celebrating with our victory in the hostel.

THANK
YOU! 😊

Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 4

Our trip to the Netherlands



On our trip to Amsterdam

It was a long trip to Amsterdam. It took one hour and a half to arrive



The surprise

We were in the middle of Amsterdam. The headmaster told us that we were going to the match Holland vs Spain. We were all excited to the match.



STARTING 11

SPAIN



HOLLAND



THE GAME

1ST HALF

- The game started. There were a lot of people in the ground. The game started at 8.45. Holland scored a fabulous goal by de Frij. Three minutes later Klaassen fired a super shot which ended in the back of the net.



THE GAME

2nd half

The second half was in an intense tiempo but nobody scored and the score stayed the same. When the match finished the players came and clapped near us.



After the match

- It was a wonderful experience. For some of us it was the first experience. We all had fun and a big thanks to the headmaster and Mrs. Gatt and for those who took care of us.

THE END



Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 5

OUR TRIP TO THE NETHERLANDS



BY JED, KALLEY, MIGUEL AND VERONIQUE

DE KUIP/ STADION FEIJENOORD

- ATTENDANCE 45,500
- Founded July 19, 1908; 106 years ago
- Ground De Kuip
- Capacity 51,177
- Chairman Dick van Well
- Manager Fred Rutten
- League Eredivisie
- 2013-14 Eredivisie, 2nd



PICTURES OF DE KUIP



SC FEIJENOORD

Feyenoord is a team that is known for its good morale and team-building, which makes them sometimes win over better skilled teams. Feyenoord won the European Cup and World Club Cup in 1970, and the UEFA Cup in 1974 and 2002.

(Former) famous players include Willem van Hanegem, Mario Been, Ruud Gullit, Ove Kindvall, Coen Moulijn and John de Wolf.

KITS

This is the new Feyenoord away shirt 2015/16, Dutch club Feyenoord Rotterdam's away kit for the new 15/16 Eredivisie season. Made by Adidas and sponsored by Opel, the new blue and orange shirt was officially unveiled on April 20, 2015 by Jordy Clasie and Karim El-Ahmadi on social media. The blue away shirt is allegedly inspired by the colour of the seats at the De Kuip Stadium, Feyenoord's iconic home ground. Feyenoord are currently third in Eredivisie behind PSV and Ajax. A Champions League spot seems beyond their reach with three rounds to go, but they will definitely be competing in the Europa League next season.



HISTORY OF FEYENOORD

European Cup Winners: 1970
Cup-Winners Cup Winners:
UEFA Cup Winners: 1974, 2002
Dutch Champions: 1924, 1928, 1936, 1938, 1940, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1969, 1971, 1974, 1984, 1993, 1999

2000 - 3rd	2008 6th
2001 - 2nd	2009 - 7th
2002 - 3rd	2010 - 4th
2003 - 3rd	2011 - 10th
2004 - 3rd	2012 - 2nd
2005 - 4th	2013 - 3rd
2006 - 3rd	2014 - 2nd
2007 - 7th	



Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 6

OUR TRIP TO THE NETHERLANDS





NETHERLAND LINE-UP

Janmaat	Vermeer	De Vrij	Martins Indi	Willems
Klaassen	Blind	Sneijder		
Narsingh	Huntelaar	Depay		



SPAIN LINE-UP

Canal	Pique	De Gea	Albiol	Bernat
Pedro	Fabregas	Suarez	Cazorla	Isco
	Juanmi			

ARRIVING AT THE AMSTERDAM ARENA

It was one of the biggest surprises ever
When we were told that we were going
To watch the friendly match between
Spain and the Netherlands.....

All of us were truly excited in the coach
On our way to that thrilling stadium...
The Amsterdam arena



GETTING READY FOR THE MATCH

There were loads of Dutch supporters
Out the stadium very exited for the
Match.

The athmosphere was amazing and
Us students just couldn't wait for the
Match to begin.



THE MATCH

- It was a very exiting match
with the score of 2-0 for the
Netherlands.
- The scorers were De Vrij
and Klaassen
- The man of the match was
the netherlands player
Memphis depay.





Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 7

OUR TRIP TO THE NETHERLANDS

BY NATHAN, KURT & LEON



OUR TRIP TO THE ZOO

- WHEN WE WOKE UP WE WERE EXCITED FOR OUR TRIP TO THE ZOO.
- WHEN WE WENT OUT FROM THE HOSTEL THE WEATHER WAS BEAUTIFUL BUT THE AIR WAS STILL COLD



THE AQUARIUM

- WHEN WE ARRIVED AT THE ZOO WE HAD PLENTY OF CHOICES WHERE WE CAN START BUT WE STARTED FROM THE AQUARIUM. IT HAD LOTS OF TUNNELS THAT OVER YOU THE ANIMALS WERE SWIMMING.
- THERE WERE A LOT OF TYPES OF ANIMALS LIKE: SEALS, PENGUINS, SHARKS AND MUCH MUCH MORE.



DESERT ANIMALS

- THEN AFTER THE AQUARIUM WE STOPPED TO EAT SOMETHING AFTER THAT WE WENT TO THE ANIMALS THAT LIVE IN THE DESERT SOME ANIMALS WERE POISONOUS AND SOME WERE HARMFUL LIKE
- CAMELS
- MEERKATS
- DESERT TORTOISE



WILD ANIMALS

- WE SAW LOTS OF WILD ANIMALS LIKE TIGERS, ELEPHANTS BUT ONE OF THE ANIMALS THAT WE NEVER SAW WAS A GIRAFFE HIS NECK WAS SO LONG THAT HE ALMOST REACHED US ALL.



SOME PICTURES OF THE ZOO



ARCTIC ANIMALS

- AT THE END WE WENT TO SEE THE POLAR BEARS. THE MOTHER HAD 2 BABIES THEY WERE SO QUIET AND CUDDLY THEY WERE ONLY 2 MONTHS OLD.



THE END

Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 8

Our trip to the Netherlands

29/03/15 – 03/04/15



By Alejandro, Glen & Matthew

De Kuip Stadion

- The De Kuip Stadion is home of the Dutch team Feyenoord.
- It is found in Rotterdam.
- The stadium's capacity is around 51,000.
- It was built in 1935 and was opened in 1937.



Feyenoord Logo

Our visit to the De Kuip

We visited the De Kuip on the 2nd of March right after our match against Feyenoord. When we arrived to the stadium we found our tour leader waiting for us. The tour leader was very welcoming and friendly. First we went up to the stands where he told us basic things about the stadium, the capacity, when it was built and more. The stadium was amazing !! After that we went down to the museum. All the trophies won by Feyenoord were in the museum. Robin Van Persie, Bruno Martins Indi, Gorginio Wijnaldum & Stefan De Vrij are all famous players that played for Feyenoord. When we took a look around and the tour leader finished talking we went down near the pitch. The grass was perfectly cut. We walked around the pitch and walked out through the players tunnel. The tour was finished and we started heading to our hostel for dinner. This was a well spent day !!!



THE END



Student Presentations Holland Trip

Presentation Group 9

Our Trip To The Netherlands



By Zack, Zachary and Russell

Amsterdam Arena

- Amsterdam Arena officially stylised as Amsterdam Arena is a stadium in Amsterdam, Netherlands. It is the largest stadium in the country.



History of Ajax

- The club was founded in Amsterdam on March 18, 1900 by Floris Stempel, Carel Reeser and Han Dade. It was the second incarnation, after a short-lived previous attempt in 1894.



Titles Won

- Eredivisie: 33
- 1917-18, 1918-19, 1930-31, 1931-32, 1933-34, 1936-37, 1938-39, 1946-47, 1966-67, 1969-70, 1971-72, 1972-73, 1976-77, 1978-79, 1979-80, 1981-82, 1982-83, 1984-85, 1989-90, 1993-94, 1994-95, 1995-96, 1997-98, 2001-02, 2003-04, 2010-11, 2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14
- KNVB Cup: 18
- 1916-17, 1942-43, 1960-61, 1966-67, 1968-69, 1970-71, 1971-72, 1978-79, 1982-83, 1985-86, 1986-87, 1992-93, 1997-98, 1998-99, 2001-02, 2005-06, 2006-07, 2009-10
- Johan Cruyff Shield: 8
- 1993, 1994, 1995, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2013
- International
- Several of Ajax' international trophies
- European Cup / Champions League: 4
- 1970-71, 1971-72, 1972-73, 1994-95[111]
- European Cup Winners' Cup: 1
- 1986-87[111]
- UEFA Cup: 1
- 1991-92[111]
- UEFA Super Cup: 2
- 1974, 1995



APPENDIX D: SCHEDULE FOR TUTORIAL SESSIONS - FORM 1 **2015/2016**

Date	Session - Form 1 Yellow	Speaker	Session - Form 1 Green	Speaker
Sep/28	School Orientation	Guidance	School Orientation	Guidance
Oct/05	Fitness Tests	PE teachers	Fitness Tests	PE teachers
Oct/12	Fitness Tests	PE teachers	Fitness Tests	PE teachers
Oct/19	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sport psychology	Adele Muscat
Oct/26	Science teen Cafe	Speakers	Science teen Cafe	Speakers
Nov/09	Nutrition	Ms Scerri	BSO	Mr Micallef
Nov/16	ICT	Ms A Meagher	ICT	Ms A Meagher
Nov/23	Sports Injuries	Dr D Spiteri	Sports Injuries	Dr D Spiteri
Nov/30	Girl/boy relationship	Elina Zalkalne	Anti-bullying	Katinka Zahra
Dec/07	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat
Dec/14	Anti-bullying	Katinka Zahra	Girl/boy relationship	Elina Zalkalne
Dec/21	Leadership Skills	Guidance Team	Leadership Skills	Guidance Team
Jan/11	History	Ms Micallef	History	Ms Micallef
Jan/18	Personal and Social Responsibility	Guidance Team	Personal and Social Responsibility	Guidance Team
Jan/25	Preparation for Competition	Adele Muscat	Preparation for Competition	Adele Muscat
Feb/01	Maths	Maths teachers	Maths	Maths teachers
Feb/29	Sports and Well Being	Andrea Dibben	Sports and Well Being	Andrea Dibben
Mar/07	Table Tennis	Joe Borg Cardona	Table Tennis	Joe Borg Cardona
Mar/14	MCA	Deborah Vassallo	MCA	Deborah Vassallo
Mar/21	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods
Apr/04	Media	Mr G Micallef	Media	Mr G Micallef
Apr/11	Read me Session	Mr L Zerafa	Read me Session	Mr L Zerafa
Apr/18	History	Ms Micallef	History	Ms Micallef
Apr/25	Media Talk	Ms Gauci	Media Talk	Ms Gauci
May/02	Maths	Maths teachers	Maths	Maths teachers
May/09	Sports tournaments	interschool's	sports tournaments	interschool's
May/16	Waste Management		Waste Management	
May/23	Revision		Revision	

SCHEDULE FOR TUTORIAL SESSIONS - FORM 2 2015/2016

Date	Session - Form 2 Yellow	Speaker	Session - Form 2 Green	Speaker
Oct/01	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat
Oct/08	Fitness tests	PE teachers	Fitness tests	PE teachers
Oct/15	Fitness tests	PE teachers	Fitness tests	PE teachers
Oct/22	BSO	Mr Micallef	Nutrition	Ms Marika
Oct/29	Nutrition	Mr Micallef	BSO	Mr Micallef
Nov/05	ICT	Ms A Meagher	ICT	Ms A Meagher
Nov/12	Leadership Skills	Adele Muscat	Leadership Skills	Adele Muscat
Nov/19	Sports Injuries	Dr K Micallef Stafrace	Sports Injuries	Dr K Micallef Stafrace
Nov/26	Anti-bullying	Katinka Zahra	Girl/Boy relationship	Elina Zalkalne
Dec/03	MCA	Mr Mark Spiteri	MCA	Mr Mark Spiteri
Dec/10	Camp talk	Mr Mark Camilleri	Camp talk	Mr Mark Camilleri
Dec/17	Girl/Boy relationship	Elina Zalkalne	Anti-bullying	Katinka Zahra
Jan/07	History	Ms Micallef	History	Ms Micallef
Jan/14	Personal/ Social Responsibility	Guidance Team	Personal/ Social Responsibility	Guidance Team
Jan/21	Drugs in Sport	Anti-doping unit	Drugs in Sport	Anti-doping unit
Jan/28	Corruption in Sport	MFA Integrity officer	Corruption in Sport	MFA Integrity officer
Feb/04	Maths	Maths teachers	Revision	Maths teachers
Feb/25	Option Talk	Teachers	Option Talk	Teachers
Mar/03	Well Being And Sport	President Foundation	Well Being and Sport	President Foundation
Mar/10	Table Tennis	Mr Borg Cardona	Table Tennis	Mr Borg Cardona
Mar/17	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods
Apr/07	Media Talk	Mr Micallef	Media	Mr Micallef
Apr/14	Read me Session	Ms R Debono	Read me Session	Ms R Debono
Apr/21	Poetry and Art	Mr D Sweeney & Mr C Gerada	Poetry and Art	Mr D Sweeney & Mr C Gerada
Apr/28	Media Talk	Ms Gauci	Media Talk	Ms Gauci
May/05	Refereeing	Mr B Vassallo	Refereeing	Mr B Vassallo
May/12	Sports tournaments	interschool's	sports tournaments	interschool's
May/19	Waste management		Waste management	

SCHEDULE FOR TUTORIAL SESSIONS - FORM 3 2015/2016

Date	Session - Form 3 Yellow	Speaker	Session - Form 3 Green	Speaker
Oct/01	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat
Oct/08	Fitness tests	PE teachers	Fitness tests	PE teachers
Oct/15	Fitness tests	PE teachers	Fitness tests	PE teachers
Oct/22	Nutrition	Ms Marika	Nutrition	Ms Marika
Oct/29	BSO	Mr Micallef	BSO	Mr Micallef
Nov/05	ICT	Ms A Meagher	ICT	Ms A Meagher
Nov/12	Health and safety	Mr R Mangion	Health and safety	Mr R Mangion
Nov/19	Sports Injuries	Dr K Micallef Stafrace	Sports Injuries	Dr K Micallef Stafrace
Nov/26	Anti-bullying	Katinka Zahra	Geography/Art and Craft	Ms Debrincat/Ms Bartolo
Dec/03	Internet safety	Mr Mark Spiteri	Internet Safety	Mr Mark Spiteri
Dec/10	Art and craft	Ms Debrincat	Girl/Boy Relationship	Elina Zalkalne
Dec/17	Girl/Boy Relationship	Elina Zalkalne	Anti-bullying	Katinka Zahra
Jan/07	Communication Skills	Adele Muscat	Communication Skills	Adele Muscat
Jan/14	Religion	Mr Sultana	Religion	Mr Sultana
Jan/21	Leadership Skills	Adele Muscat	Leadership Skills	Adele Muscat
Jan/28	Anti-Doping	Dr Sciberras	Anti-Doping	Dr Sciberras
Feb/04	PE/Chemistry/Accounts	Teachers	PE/Chemistry/Accounts	Teachers
Feb/25	Option Talk	Teachers	Fitness tests	PE teachers
Mar/03	Well Being and Sport	Andrea Dibben	Well Being and Sport	Andrea Dibben
Mar/10	Fitness tests	PE teachers	Fitness tests	PE teachers
Mar/17	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods
Apr/07	Kellimni.com (Helpline)	Ms M Roessert	Kellimni.com	Ms M Roessert
Apr/14	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat
Apr/21	Officials in Sport	Mr Alan Camilleri	Officials in Sport	Mr Alan Camilleri
May/05	Anti-doping	Ms J Camilleri / Ms C Attard	Anti-doping	Ms J Camilleri / Ms C Attard
May/12	Sports tournaments	interschool's	sports tournaments	interschool's
May/19	Waste Management		waste management	

SCHEDULE FOR TUTORIAL SESSIONS - FORM 4 2015/2016

Date	Session - Form 4 Yellow	Speaker	Session - Form 4 Green	Speaker
Sep/28	School Orientation	Guidance	School Orientation	Guidance
Oct/05	Fitness Tests	PE teachers	Fitness Tests	PE teachers
Oct/12	Fitness Tests	PE teachers	Fitness Tests	PE teachers
Oct/19	BSO	Mr Micallef	BSO	Mr Micallef
Oct/26	Art and Craft	Mr Clive Gerada	Art and Craft	Mr Clive Gerada
Nov/09	First Aid		First Aid Course	
Nov/16	ICT	Ms A Meagher	ICT	Ms A Meagher
Nov/23	Sports Injuries	Dr D Spiteri	Sports Injuries	Dr D Spiteri
Nov/30	Girl/Boy Relationship	Elina Zalkalne	Anti-bullying	Katinka Zahra
Dec/07	Job exposure	Guidance	Job exposure	Guidance
Dec/14	Anti-bullying/Biology	Katinka Zahra	Girl/Boy Relationship/Biology	Elina Zalkalne
Dec/21	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sport Psychology	Adele Muscat
Jan/11	Leadership Skills	Guidance Team	Leadership Skills	Guidance Team
Jan/18	Personal and Social Responsibility	PSD teachers	Personal and Social Responsibility	PSD teachers
Jan/25	Drugs in Sport	Anti-doping Unit	Drugs in Sport	Anti-doping Unit
Feb/01	Maths	Maths Teachers	Maths	Maths Teachers
Feb/29	Well Being and Sport	Andrea Dibben	Well Being and Sport	Andrea Dibben
Mar/07	Fitness Tests	PE teachers	Fitness Tests	PE teachers
Mar/14	MCA	Deborah Vassallo	MCA	Deborah Vassallo
Mar/21	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods	Creative Thinking in Sport	Mr Woods
Apr/04	Kellimni.com (helpline)	Ms M Roessert	kellimni.com	Ms M Roessert
Apr/11	Unit Ghozza (support service)	Outing	Unit Ghozza (support service)	Outing
Apr/18	Corruption in Sport	MFA Integrity officer	Corruption in Sport	MFA Integrity officer
Apr/25	Foot Screening	Mr I Farrugia	Foot Screening	Mr I Farrugia
May/02	Maths	Maths teachers	Maths	Maths Teachers
May/09	Sports tournaments	interschool's	sports tournaments	interschool's
May/16	waste management		waste management	

SCHEDULE FOR TUTORIAL SESSIONS - FORM 1 2014/2015

Date	Session - Form 1 Yellow	Speaker	Session - Form 1 Green	Speaker
28-Sep	Settling-in	Tutorial Teachers	Settling-in	Tutorial Teachers
05-Oct	Meet the Sports Psychologist	Adele Muscat	Meet the Sports Psychologist	Adele Muscat
12-Oct	Art Workshop	Clive Gerada	Art Workshop	Clive Gerada
19-Oct	Maths & English	Teachers	Maltese & English	Teachers
26-Oct	Sports Nutrition	Marika Micallef	Sports Nutrition	Marika Micallef
09-Nov	Politics in Sports	A.M.Gatt	Politics in Sports	A.M.Gatt
16-Nov	English & Maltese	Teachers	Maths & Maltese	Teachers
23-Nov	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt
30-Nov	The Correct Use of Social Media	Marisa Bugeja	The Correct Use of Social Media	Marisa Bugeja
07-Dec	Fundamentals	A.M.Gatt	Fundamentals	A.M.Gatt
14-Dec	Meeting the Role Model	Gymnast	Meeting the Role Model	Gymnast
21-Dec	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Samantha Mercieca	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Samantha Mercieca
11-Jan	Maths & English	Teachers	Maltese & English	Teachers
18-Jan	Languages	Teachers	Languages	Teaches
25-Jan	Exams	N/A	Exams	N/A
22-Feb	Carnival Holiday	N/A	Carnival Holiday	N/A
29-Feb	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Anna Maria Gatt	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Anna Maria Gatt
07-Mar	Auditions	Teachers	Auditions	Teachers
14-Mar	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt	Sports Photography	Stephen Gatt
21-Mar	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja
04-Apr	Girl - Boy Relationship	Rita Galea	Girl - Boy Relationship	Rita Galea
11-Apr	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja
18-Apr	Music Appreciation	Ms C Schranz	Music Appreciation	Ms C Schranz
25-Apr	Sports Photography	Mr S Gatt	Sports Photography	Mr S Gatt
09-May	How to study/prepare for Annual Exams	Tutorial Teachers	How to study/prepare for Annual Exams	Tutorial Teachers
16-May	Maltese & Maths	Teachers	English & Maths	Teachers

SCHEDULE FOR TUTORIAL SESSIONS - FORM 2 2014/2015

Date	Session - Form 2 Orange	Speaker	Session - Form 2 White	Speaker
01-Oct	Settling-in	Tutorial Teachers	Settling-in	Tutorial Teachers
08-Oct	Meet the Sports Psychologist	Adele Muscat	Meet the Sports Psychologist	Adele Muscat
15-Oct	Maths & English	Teachers	Maltese & English	Teachers
22-Oct	Sports Psychology 1	Adele Muscat	Sports Psychology 1	Adele Muscat
29-Oct	Sports Nutrition	Marika Micallef	Sports Nutrition	Marika Micallef
05-Nov	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Anna Maria Gatt	Preparing a Healthy Snack	Anna Maria Gatt
12-Nov	Nutrition	Marika Micallef	Nutrition	Marika Micallef
19-Nov	English & Maltese	Teachers	Maths & Maltese	Teachers
26-Nov	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt
03-Dec	Art Workshop	Clive Gerada	Art Workshop	Clive Gerada
10-Dec	Role Models	Gymnasts	Role Models	Gymnasts
17-Dec	Meeting the Role Model	Gymnasts	Meeting the Role Model	Gymnasts
07-Jan	Sports Nutrition	Marika Micallef	Sports Nutrition	Marika Micallef
14-Jan	Maths & English	Teachers	Maltese & English	Teachers
21-Jan	Maltese	Maltese Teachers	Maltese	Maltese Teachers
25-Feb	Carnival Holiday	N/A	Carnival Holiday	N/A
03-Mar	Sports Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sports Psychology	Adele Muscat
10-Mar	Auditions/Sports Psychology	Adele Muscat	Auditions/Sports Psychology	Adele Muscat
17-Mar	Use of Fronter	Marisa Bugeja	Use of Fronter	Marisa Bugeja
07-Apr	Girl Boy Relationship	Rita Galea	Girl Boy Relationship	Rita Galea
14-Apr	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja
21-Apr	Music Appreciation	Ms C Shranz	Music Appreciation	Ms C Shranz
28-Apr	Meet the Sports Official	Bernard Vassallo	Meet the Sports Official	Bernard Vassallo
05-May	Rehearsals - Prize Day	Teachers	Rehearsals - Prize Day	Teachers
12-May	English & Maltese	Teachers	Maths & Maltese	Teachers
19-May	Rehearsals - Prize Day	Teachers	Rehearsals - Prize Day	Teachers
26-May	Meet the Sports Official	Bernard Vassallo	Meet the Sports Official	Bernard Vassallo

SCHEDULE FOR TUTORIAL SESSIONS - FORM 3 2014/2015

Date	Session - Form 3 Yellow	Speaker	Session - Form 3 Green	Speaker
01-Oct	Meet the Sports Psychologist	Adele Muscat	Meet the Sports Psychologist	Adele Muscat
08-Oct	Tutorial Teachers	Tutorial Teachers	Tutorial Teachers	Tutorial Teachers
15-Oct	Introduce Sports Project	Tutorial Teachers	Art Workshop	Tutorial Teachers
22-Oct	Maths & English	Teachers	Maltese & English	Teachers
29-Oct	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt
05-Nov	Fitness Tests	Paul Zammit	Fitness Tests	Paul Zammit
12-Nov	Fitness Tests	Paul Zammit	Fitness Tests	Paul Zammit
19-Nov	Malta Olympic Committee	Mr J. Cassar	Malta Olympic Committee	Mr J. Cassar
26-Nov	Girl - Boy Relationship 1	Ms R.Galea	Girl - Boy Relationship 1	Ms R.Galea
03-Dec	Art Workshop	Clive Gerada	Art Workshop	Clive Gerada
17-Dec	Maths Lesson	C.B.Grech	Music Appreciation	HOD Music
07-Jan	Meet the Role Model	Andre Schembri	Meet the Role Model	Andre Schembri
14-Jan	Maths	Teachers	Maths	Teachers
28-Jan	Religion	Teachers	Religion	Teachers
03-Mar	Sports Psychology	Adele Muscat	Sports Psychology	Adele Muscat
10-Mar	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt	Photography Workshop	Stephen Gatt
17-Mar	Auditions/Use of Fronter	Tutorial Teachers	Auditions/Use of Fronter	Tutorial Teachers
07-Apr	Badminton	Coach	Badminton	Coach
21-Apr	Parents Day		Parents' Day	
28-Apr	TIMSS/Art	E. Borg/C. Gerada	TIMSS/Art	E. Borg/C. Gerada
05-May	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja	Fronter	Marisa Bugeja
12-May	Roti	Mr Galea	Roti	Mr Galea
19-May	Sports Day		Sports Day	
26-May	Rehearsals - Prize Day	Teachers	Rehearsals - Prize Day	Teachers
14-May	Introducing EkoSkola	Emma Borg	Introducing EkoSkola	Emma Borg
21-May	English & Maltese	Teachers	Maths & Maltese	Teachers
28-May	How to study for Annual Exams	Tutorial Teachers	How to study for Annual Exams	Tutorial Teachers

APPENDIX E: ERASMUS+ KA2 FORMS AND REPORTS

Preparing Young Student-Athletes for Transitions

Timeline of activities

Start/end of activities	Activity	Description of activities	Who's in charge?	For whom?
10/2016	presentations of the project plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lessons at school - parents' evenings with the stakeholders 	coordinators of each participating school with local coordinating teams	pupils, parents, staff and all the stakeholders in each participating organization
11/2016	project work at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pupils draw up their CVs - pupils apply to the group of exchange 	coordinators of each country with the staff from the school	pupils and staff in each participating organization
11/2016	Transnational Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project planning between all partners - in-service training in ICT i.e.: <i>"How to use the platform that will be chosen for the project"</i> - discussion on activities to be conducted for first exchange of students 	Project leaders ICT for learning and teaching –centre in Turku Mr. Jouni Paakkinen and his staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project leaders - the delegations from Cyprus and Malta
12/2016	election of the students to short- term exchange in Finland	coordinating team in each school elects the students basing it on the applications	coordinating team of each organization	
1/2017	project work at schools	getting to know each other through the platform in internet (CVs)	coordinating team of each organization	the exchange groups activating all the pupils
2-3/2017	preparations for the short-	the host organization prepares all the practical arrangements for the exchange	the coordinating team of Vasaramäki School	information to the coordinating teams of

	term exchange in Finland			participating organizations in Cyprus and Malta
2-3/2017	project work at participating schools in smaller groups of pupils	research and surveys over the topic <i>"How to be a healthy athlete."</i>	coordinating team of each organization and the groups for the short-term exchange in April	all the pupils; work will be managed by the pupils chosen to the exchange groups in April
4/2017	Short-term exchange for groups of pupils (in Finland) + conference	Working over the topic <i>"Grow how to be a healthy athlete."</i> - Producing material for the platform	The coordinating team of Vasaramäki School	The groups of pupils from the participating organizations General public
5/2017	evaluation of the first year		project coordinator	all the participants
6-9/2017	summer holidays			
10/2017	presentations of the project to the newcomers among the pupils and their parents, staff and the other stakeholders	getting familiar with the platform and studying the information on it	coordinating team of each organization	students, parents, staff and all the stakeholders in each participating organization
11/2017	project work at schools	- pupils update and refresh CVs - pupils apply to the group of exchange in Malta	coordinators of each country with the teachers from the school	pupils and staff in each participating organization

11/2017	Transnational Meeting (in Malta)	- trainings with the topic: <i>"How to best support the young athlete?"</i>	Maltese coordinating team with the representatives and experts from the Maltese stakeholders	- the delegations from Finland and Cyprus
12/2017	election of students to the short-term exchange in Malta	coordinating team in each school elects the students basing it on the applications	coordinating team of each organization	
1/2018	project work at schools	getting to know each other through the platform in internet (CVs)	coordinating team of each organization	the exchange groups activating all the pupils
2-3/2018	preparations for the exchange in Malta	the host organization prepares all the practical arrangements for the exchange	the coordinating team of National Sport School Malta	information to the coordinating teams of participating organizations in Cyprus and Finland
2-3/2018	project work at participating schools in smaller groups of pupils	- research and surveys over the topic <i>"How to make the right choices as a young athlete with support from significant others."</i>	coordinating team of participating organizations and groups for the exchange in April	All the students managed by the exchange groups
4/2018	short-term exchange for groups of pupils + conference	- working on the topic <i>"How to make the right choices as a young athlete"</i> - producing material into the platform in internet	the coordinating team of National Sport School Malta	the groups of pupils from the participating organizations General public
5/2018	evaluation of the second year		project coordinator	all the participants
6-9/2018	summer holidays			

10/2018	presentations of the project to the newcomers among the pupils and their parents, staff and the other stakeholders	Getting familiar with the platform and studying the information on it	Coordinating team of each organization	students, parents, staff and all the stakeholders in each participating organization
11/2018	Project work at schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - students update and refresh CVs - pupils apply to the group of exchange in Cyprus 	Cypriot coordinating team with the representatives and experts from the Cypriot stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the delegations from Finland and Malta - students, staff and representatives of all the stakeholders of Pascal Greek School
11/2018	Transnational meeting in Cyprus	- training with the topic <i>“Evaluation and feedback with young athletes”</i>	Cypriot coordinating team with the representatives and experts from the Cypriot stakeholders	- the delegations from Finland and Malta
12/2018	election of the students to the short-term exchange in Cyprus	- coordinating team in each school elects the students basing it on the applications	coordinating team of each organization	
1/2019	Project work at schools	- Getting to know each other through the platform in internet (CVs)	coordinating team of each organization	the exchange groups activating all the pupils
2-3/2019	preparations for the	- the host organization prepares all the practical arrangements for the exchange	the coordinating team of Pascal Greek School	information to the coordinating teams of

	exchange in Cyprus			participating organizations in Finland and Malta
2-3/2019	project work at participating schools in smaller groups of pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - research and surveys over the topics. <i>"How should we communicate in different surroundings?"</i> 	Coordinating team of the schools	All the students managed by the exchange groups
4/2019	Short-term exchange of pupils in Cyprus + conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - research and surveys over the topic <i>"How should we communicate in different surroundings?"</i> - Producing material into the platform in internet 	the coordinating team of Pascal Greek School	the groups of pupils from the participating organizations General public
5-6/2019	evaluation of the whole project	The final report	project coordinator	all the participants

Mr George Micallef
Head of School
National Sport School
Falaise Road,
Pembroke PBK 1800



17th July 2015

Dear Mr Micallef,

Subject: National Selection Process – Project Rejection
Erasmus+ Programme
General Call for Proposal 31/03/2015 deadline

Action	:	Key Action 2
Sector	:	Strategic Partnerships for School Education
Institution	:	National Sport School
E+ link Ref. No.	:	2015-1-MT01-KA219-003719

With reference to the subject please note that the project proposal submitted to the National Agency under the Erasmus+ framework is not approved for the following reason:

The proposal concretely identifies which skills, experiences, expertise and management support each of the participating organisations will make available to implement aspects of the proposed partnership. The project intends to impact on a particular education; namely sports education, training of academic staff / students and organise exchange visits which are operating within the mentioned fields of the project. The joint of co-operation of the three entities, aims to enhance the existing academic added value to the project because of the introduction of specific skills, experiences or expertise that these organisations bring to the project and that prove to be essential for the achievement of the project's objectives and also aimed to achieve a higher quality of the project outputs. The project is a good and relevant idea, formulated around the results of research, and based on a partnership of schools facing similar challenges that have come together to face these challenges through international cooperation, and on sharing methodologies on an national and European level, in view of understanding better other cultures and communicating effectively. The proposal however needs to be developed further and presented in more detail. The budget asked for is large and therefore it is expected that the proposal is more tight, significantly more detailed and structured. Details regarding its innovative aspects, its Action Research aspect, indicators to be used, sustainability and methodologies are either missing or not convincing, while the descriptions of the intellectual outputs, the multiplier events and the learning/teaching/training activities are vague. It is better to get into more detail with partners already at proposal stage, to present a project that can capitalise better on the strengths and resources of the partnership. Furthermore the preparation, impact and dissemination section have to be revised to include more concise details. The outcome of the project results need to be explained better.

Whilst thanking you for submitting a proposal under the 2015 General Call for Proposals of the ERASMUS+ programme, the National Agency provides you all the necessary support so that you resubmit a new proposal under coming deadlines. Please do not hesitate to contact the Communications team within the National Agency on communications.eupa@gov.mt who can assist you to improve your project proposal.

Sincerely



Ms Nathalie Muscat
Programme Manager

Cc: Ms Adele Muscat



Mr. George Micallef
Head of School
National Sport School Malta
Falaise Road
Pembroke

2nd August 2016

Dear Mr. Micallef,

Subject: Results of National Selection Process
Erasmus+ Programme
General Call for Proposal 31/03/2016 deadline

Action	:	Key Action 2
Sector	:	Schools
Institution	:	National Sports School Malta
E+ link Ref. No.	:	2016-1-MT01-KA219-015199
ECHE¹ No.	:	
(if applicable)	:	N/A

With reference to the subject in caption, kindly note that your proposal has been selected for funding.

Please quote the above mentioned **E+ link Ref. No.** in all future communications with the EUPA.

¹ Erasmus Charter for Higher Education



Grant Allocation Details

After the selection procedure the grant ear-marked for this proposal is as follows:

Total amount: Eur 38,255.00
Eligibility period: 01/09/2016 – 31/08/2019

Breakdown of the total earmarked amount and forecasted mobilities:

Breakdown of the total earmarked amount:

Strategic Partnerships	
	Amount
Project management and implementation	€ 18,000
Transnational project meetings	€ 4,005
Intellectual outputs	
Multiplier events	
Exceptional costs	
Special needs support	
Learning, Teaching, Training Activities	€ 16,250

1. General

The amount detailed above must be considered as the absolute maximum amount that can be requested.

2. Contractualisation

Any project activities undertaken by the applicant are to be covered at own expense and responsibility, until the NA-Beneficiary grant agreement is signed. Activities and costs shall be regarded as eligible retroactively by the NA, provided that the contractual and financial rules specified in the grant agreement template are fully respected.



Should the beneficiary need to start the activities before the agreement with the NA is signed, the said activities need to be within the parameters of the total budget approved; as specified in Section 1 of this notification letter.

Arrangements for Making Grant Payments

Payments to grant holders will only be made in **Euro (€)**.

3. General Remarks

Kindly be informed that this letter is only a notification on the results of the selection process and commitment of funds shall be formalised once the grant agreement is signed. Funds shall be formally committed once funds for your activity have been made available by the CION.

You shall be contacted by National Agency staff at a later date in order to initiate the contractualisation procedure.

Sincerely,

Ms. Nathalie Muscat

Programme Manager



Assessment Conclusion

Erasmus+ Call for Proposals 2016
KA 219-- Schools

Title of Proposal	Preparing Student-Athletes for Transitions
Reference No	2016-1-MT01-KA219-015199
Legal Representative	Mr. Micallef

Below are the comments pertaining to the project application assessment for your consideration. This feedback contributes directly to the improvement of the quality of this project initiative. In this respect you are kindly requested to thoroughly review.

Relevance of the project

The proposal is evidence based and is also contextualised within the priorities as expressed in the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes. The most relevant topics identified are a) Health and wellbeing; b) Quality Improvement Institutions and/or methods (incl. school development); and c) International cooperation, international relations, development cooperation. This project is also highly relevant since in Malta we have just started in opening Sports schools where students are provided with an academic education, that is required for the purpose of enabling them to pursue their studies at post-secondary and tertiary level, alongside their career in sports. The rationale of this proposal is to prepare athletes better for a migratory transition since research has found that athletes face difficulties when they go through transitions, particularly migratory ones. The project seeks to address a gap in research and as claimed is "no research on the subject has revealed any programmes which have been conducted with the collaboration of a number of similar sports/educational institutions from different countries together". Furthermore as stated "closer cooperation, promoted by the EU and European sport organisations, including among and between high-performance training centres and selected or accredited educational institutes could enhance and facilitate the mobility of talented and elite athletes (EU Guidelines on the Dual Careers of Athletes, 2011)." The strategy of this proposal consists of a reconnaissance phase, an action planning phase and an implementation and monitoring phase.

Quality of the project design and implementation

The project aims to "prepare athletes better for a migratory transition since research has found that athletes face difficulties when they go through transitions, particularly migratory ones" and forms part of an Action Research Project. The project is described in detail and provides the necessary information and contains evidence of adequate preparation and dialogues among the partners. The project claims to "make good use of cross-border cooperation to form a sound support base for student-athletes by also equipping educators/trainers using innovative methods encouraging best

practice". This is reflected in the provided timeline and information given in the learning/teaching/training activities section.

Furthermore the project claims to "extend and develop educators' competences by increase opportunities for professional development and by equipping educators/trainers with a better understanding of practices, policies and systems in education, training and youth across countries". This again is reflected adequately in the learning/teaching/training activities described.

Clear information on the selection of participants ought to have been given. While the project claims the research action to have "a reconnaissance phase, an action planning phase and an implementation and monitoring phase!" this is not explicit in the timeline provided. The project understands the importance of regular monitoring and evaluation and aims to include both formative and summative evaluations.

Overall the project design and the work programme are clear and include appropriate phases for preparation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and dissemination. The project is cost effective and activities appropriate to project's aims. As a validation of the learning outcomes of the participants will receive a certificate and the applicant will not be using European instruments like Europass or ECVET certificates.

Impact and Dissemination

The impact being envisaged by this proposal is to that young student-athletes will develop more independence and responsibility skills whilst the educational sector and parents will have a positive attitude towards transitional experiences and be better equipped to support students and athletes in achieving successes beyond their national borders. The impact and dissemination are described in adequate detail, yet more information ought to have been given on the impact on the various curricula. As a result of this project it is expected "that young athletes will be better equipped with skills and knowledge to aid them in the transitions they will go through throughout their life and athletic career".

Furthermore the partners identify the public at large both in the national and international spheres to be indirect beneficiaries though this clearly depends on the extent of the success of the dissemination plan. More reflection on the long term impact on the various curricula ought to be made and such detail put forward where applicable.

Overall Comments to the Applicant

The project shows evidence of adequate preparation and has been presented in sufficient detail. The need has been back by research and the project is designed in a way to adequately respond to the identified need. The project indicates that the management structures are in place to ensure a successful project and that the partners resources are being put to good use. More detail on the selection of participants and the impact on the curriculum could have been more helpful. Nevertheless the project is overall well planned with a clear timeline, a partnership that can add value to the work of the individual partners, and an overall interesting research action that can provide evidence for any transformation at the partners level as well as national and beyond. Please provide



the necessary tools to be used for the action research as these become available. It might be beneficial for the action research cycles of planning, acting, observing and evaluating to be made more explicit over the timeline. Consider using European recognition certificates for participants.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Maltese National Agency should you require any clarification.

Good luck with your project!

The NA Team

Appendix F

James's Transitional Challenges – Meeting with the Parents

On Friday the 4th of December I met with James's parents to discuss how he was getting along in his life transitions. James would like to play professionally abroad and seems to have given up on his academic subjects. Although he achieves 60 % on average, in his exams he seems to be protecting himself from future failures. He is also focused on making money and trying to find the easy way out. Whilst his dad tries his best to remind him, at home, that life abroad is not easy, and that if he doesn't do his chores at home he will never adapt abroad, James's brisk reply is one of 'It's OK I will get a butler!'. James's parents are very much involved with the school with two of their four children having been accepted at the school since they are promising players. They are parents who attend every activity and talk the school organises and they have tried to prepare their children as best as possible for a possible migration to play professionally abroad, through the advise I, together with the school, have given to all parents. During our chat, however, I realised that the parents were comparing James to his older brother and younger sister who are more responsible than he is. They are also nagging him for everything he does since, currently, his behaviour has been questionable and he is going through a rebellious period. We agreed that, maybe, James needs to be approached in a different manner and that we need to see where his concerns lie. We also discussed how we could help James develop more responsibility since he tends to always follow others rather than take on responsibilities himself. We concluded that it was time James had his own key to the house, despite leaving it in the door lock twice in the past and, also, that he would be allowed to travel abroad in the summer with a group of young people together with their leader. His mother agreed to try to involve him in different chores around the house and to stick notices to his bedroom door to act as reminders for him to do them. I was to follow up James so as to support him over the next few months.

In this session I realised how difficult sometimes it is for parents to find more constructive ways of communicating with their children. It is a fact that young people find it hard to accept criticism and we need to show them that we appreciate the good things they do and not just blame them for their faults. Possibly, we need to include a group session with the parents about ways of communicating better with their children since they are the people closest to them. I could feel the parents' frustration about not knowing what to do and not being able to get through to their son. As an outsider, it may be easy to see things more clearly and look at ways they can be fixed up but a parent in such a situation, may find it difficult not to let his or her emotions get the better of them. The parents needed to unload and I promised I would follow up their son who, whenever he felt the need to, always came over for a chat (2.10).

Session with Joseph's Parents – who are looking to migrating to Italy

On the 17th of June 2016 Joseph's parents came over to the school for a meeting with me. Previously, Joseph had often had sessions with me, the latest having taken place that same month prior to his leaving for an important tournament and training camp in Italy where he had been asked to play with an Italian team. This was to serve as another trial for Joseph.

Joseph performed exceptionally well in this tournament and was also cited as the best player of the tournament. Joseph was informed by an Italian agent that there were several clubs looking at taking him on. However, the fact that he lived in Malta was being seen as a hindrance. Why should these clubs choose him over an Italian boy who was just as good as him and who lived only 50kms away or so? Thus, Joseph's parents were looking to moving to Italy so that he would have a better chance.

However, things were not so plain sailing. The Italian club that wanted him were asking for money. The parents and I didn't like the sound of this. Other clubs, who also wanted Joseph, were all situated in Sicily. The level of football there was higher than in Malta but not as high as in mainland Italy. The level of education in Sicily was poorer than in Malta, however, and for most Maltese parents schooling was very important. Joseph's mother didn't seem too keen on the move however Joseph's dad wanted it at all costs. He

believed that Joseph should move right away, even if it was just to Sicily. Joseph, too, was very keen on moving to fulfil his football career dreams. I felt I needed to address this family issue since the whole family would need to make a sacrifice here. They would need to leave their daughter in Malta, as she was studying at the University. The father would need to travel up and down regularly because of work. But it was the mother who was going to be affected the most, having to change her way of life for her son who was still too young to go off on his own. Coming from a well to do family, with her own social life in Malta, moving to Sicily which is looked down upon by the Maltese would be tough for her. But the football would be better for Joseph.

It is so difficult, at times, not to influence people into making certain decisions. I agreed with the father that they should move now, but I could also understand the difficulties the mother was facing, I could see it written all over her face. And I saw her face light up when I brought up this issue and I told her husband that he had to understand that she was going to be the one 'stuck' there; she would be the one who would be giving up her life here, rather than him who would be going up and down regularly to Malta. Besides, I did not trust the Italian agents. I had met some, worked with others, and I knew that for most of them, all they really cared about was how much money they were going to make out of this young Maltese player. The agents knew that there were so many Maltese players who were really keen on a football career in Italy; they knew that some people would pay if it meant they could be playing in an Italian club. I was very aware of the players and parents' vulnerabilities and, thus, felt the need to check up with some Italian sources I had, to see about this payment option. Of course, as I had presumed, this option was immediately shot down by my contacts. It was clear that the Italian agents were manipulating this boy and his parents, like a puppet on a string and I had to let the parents know about it. (2.10).

Appendix G

Job exposure: Reflective Journal (presented in student's own words)

Ruben – Job exposure at the Malta Football Association (MFA)

Day 1

Major Preoccupation – To be there as soon as possible and to be smart

Tasks – separating coaching courses into courses A, B, C. Attended coaching lecture UEFA C.

Personal Feelings/reactions on the above – felt excited for courses and happy to meet coaches and new people.

Experience today – learned a lot of new things about jobs at the MFA especially about the grassroots campaign. Saw what happens in coaching courses and learnt about long term player development (LTPD) and different coaching skills.

Day 2 – Public Holiday

Day 3

Tasks – filing coaches profile of UEFA Band C in ascending order and inputting schools and their players who took part in interschools.

Feelings – felt dedicated to make the best out of it. Felt happy I was doing good and making a good job.

Positive experience – we inputted data into excel it helped me more in computing skills and I learned more about the work of choosing coaches for their courses.

Day 4

Tasks – continueing to input data and making content on word for one of the coaches about player development and mentality.

Feelings – felt very excited for a new day at the job

Positive experience – met new coaches and talked to them, learned a bit more about grassroots.

Day 5

Tasks- assisted coaches during practical work for courses, attended lectures and learnt gym work.

Feelings – felt excited for coaching course and assisting coaches during practical with ball.

Positive experience – helped national coaches in their work during practical sessions and physical training and learned new things from other coaches.

Personal Reflection

Career exposure has been positive because I learnt more about this job and had fun. I saw what persons in this sector do and made contact with key persons in the field. I will choose this sector to work in because it is interesting.

Feedback from Employer

The Technical Director MFA

Ryan was exceptionally good at work and we are very glad he had such an experience at our Technical Centre.

Jeremy

Administration at Malta Society of Arts

Student's Reflective Diary

Day 1

Tasks – took part in preparation for exhibition ex. Prepared a note book were people can sign in

Feelings – had fun doing them and learnt a lot

Experience today was not that good because all I did is stare and do photocopies and pick up the phone

Day 2

Tasks – answering phone calls

Feelings – it isn't related to art and design

Positive experience – (left blank)

Less positive experience – I didn't do nothing for a whole day. I just stood in the reception and just picked up the phone.

(Other days' reflective diary was left empty)

Student's Personal Reflection

1. Has career exposure experience been a positive one?

Of course NOT! I chose to do an ART & DESIGN work experience – THIS WAS NOTHING LIKE!!!

2. I learnt a lot of things about the role/s I was exposed to

NO. All I did was answering the phone/photocopies/licking stamps for envelopes! Staring at the office!!

3. I learnt a lot of new things about careers in the sector

No??? What could I learn?!!

4. I learnt about courses related to careers in the sector

No. No one in a whole week came to tell me anything about any job or career!

5. I became more determined to pursue a career in the sector

No ???!

6. I think the whole experience was a waste of time

Yes. OF COURSE!!!

Parent's reflection - Obviously it was not the right choice or place that my son wished to have as a career/job experience week!! He only waited a whole week to pass only because of me and his mother's advice!! He spent all week answering the phone/photocopies/folding letters and envelopes and staring alone in an office!! And no one of the school went to check about him except the ItaLiam teacher.

Employer's comments – Jeremy proved to be an excellent student during this week experience at the MSA, a truly remarkable and educated person.

Above, one can see both a positive and a negative report of the job experience. Whilst Ruben, who now also forms part of the national team academy had a really good opportunity and working experience at the MFA, an environment he was very keen to form part of, Jeremy, on the other hand was bored and felt ignored.

Appendix H

INTERVIEW WITH A SENIOR NATIONAL TEAM PLAYER WHO IS CURRENTLY PLAYING ABROAD (Did not follow programme with MFA however he sought individual advice from the practitioner-researcher)

How much do you feel that your club prepared you for this reality of playing for a foreign team? And how?

The clubs I was at as a child did not prepare me for this because I was too young, then when I moved to another club, nearly every year scouts used to come to the nursery to take two players for trials. Once I went for few days with Empoli, but it was more for the experience. When I moved to the Premier league things started getting more professional playing in Europa ecc. I started having some contacts from clubs and then when an Italian coach came the dream became more realistic because when we went for a training camp in Italy we were training more as professionals and there, opportunities were getting better for me for playing abroad. I was already independent in some things, I can't say that I was given any sort of preparation for this reality of playing abroad.

If you were going to start your career as a young player what aspect would you want your coaches to develop in you?

The attitude outside the pitch, focused, like when playing on the pitch. The way that you train during the week not only a day before the game, the way you prepare your self mentally – the way you eat and the rest you take to be focused. I would have liked to work more on tactical discipline because when I went to Italy I found that I wasn't prepared enough.

What type of preparation were you given? (football wise – social – mental)
Mentally I found help from Adele because about two years ago I had pressure regarding my studies and exams. I asked at the MFA who can help me and Adele gave me some hints on time management and other things but otherwise I never really had any preparation for social live.

Did you find help from your parents – club – MFA – others?

Unfortunately for my I didn't have much help. All the help came from my parents, in fact last September I had the chance to sign for a club in Italy and the Maltese club made it very difficult for me to leave and negotiations fell. But all the help came from my parents both in football and helping me to continue with the studies, they were fundamental for me to make the move, their support was great.

How much do you consider the following to be important? (A) Lifestyle – (B) emotional intelligence – (C) growing in professional set up

Let's start with lifestyle because your **lifestyle (culture)** is completely different then abroad where as your life is very comfortable, everything close, your friends, going out on Saturday or Sunday even sometimes Wednesday, we have everything here, but I was always focused on my dream of playing abroad and ready to make the necessary sacrifices, like eating well as much as possible, finding a balance going out because I was still young and also had my private life, I don't drink or smoke so I tried to do things the best I could. When I went there, for the players, it was something normal that after a game they had to go by plane to go home for one day and then return and for us here, having to take a bus for 40min or drive for 20min to go for training was something big and sometimes we tell the coach that we can't, so players have to be ready for sacrifices to achieve their dreams. **Emotional Intelligence** -I thing that helped me a lot since I continued school and you open your mind to receive more information - knowledge and by that you understand much better what the coach wants from you and also when it comes to reading the game. It helps you to control your emotions and attitude on the pitch also. **A professional set up** is a very important issue because once you arrive to play in your top league which is the highest you can reach in Malta you can't improve anymore because the level of players is what it is, let's say you arrive to a flat lining (no more room for improvement), and then you go on to play to a higher level abroad and in a professional set up where what you do is only football and you have everything around you like administrator - staff coaches – doctor -physiotherapist – masseur - training pitches, team manager and so on which I found when I went for the trails and at the Italian club. Some of these things are missing in Maltese football and these are some of the main reasons that Maltese clubs lack which is effecting Maltese players' improvement.

How did you adapt to the situation in a foreign country?

At first was it wasn't easy at all because I went in mid-season and the club was second from last and the team was coming from seven straight defeats and after two weeks that I was there all the technical staff changed so I had to start all over again, language I used to understand but wasn't so fluent but in the pitch you have one language that is of football so I didn't find problems there, but the fact that the team was composed of young players and they didn't have much experience helped me in a way. Since I was already playing at international level with Malta and I had just played against Italy with most of the Italian national team players are their idols, it helped me to gain respect from the players and obviously by playing well game after game I gained more respect.

Do you think that you need a certain level of maturity to make it abroad? And can you identify an ideal age for you?

To be mature is vital, we have heard that a lot of Maltese youngsters go abroad with various clubs and after few days or weeks they come back either because they are missing the family, either because they didn't like the conditions they were given or they did not feel prepared enough. But maturity is very important, to be independent is also very important and to start realising that the career of a top footballer demands a lot of sacrifices, ok it's great when playing the game but we need to do a lot of sacrifices in training and in our private live.

Sometimes when you are abroad alone it becomes a bit lonely but then after the sacrifices you do, it pays off and if you are determined to reach your objective you will succeed. In my opinion to go very young it's not ideal, I think that the best age to go is around 20 years old because you are more mature. There is still another two to three years to improve and instead of getting them in Malta you will be playing in a better league with better players and more intensity. The trails that I went to when I was younger were the stepping stone for me and I still cherish the experiences I received. Apart from that, at that age I had finished nearly all my academic studies and exams and I arrived at a very high level of education, a Bachelor degree from the university so then my focus was more on football.

Where you missing something while abroad? (if yes what?) e.g. Maltese life style – friends – family etc.

I missed the family to be honest, because we were brought up with certain values. Going out not so much. I am not the type of person who likes to go to party a lot. I like to go out but always with limitations, I never used to drink or smoke for example, and at the same time I never let these things put me off my focus from the target I want to reach, that is, playing at top level.

If you hadn't made it abroad (pro level), do you feel that you would have failed?

In my opinion yes I would have failed because I had made a plan that by this summer If I hadn't been chosen to play for a foreign team I would have decreased the dedication and time I had for football and focused more on my studies as an architect, because this year was for me a gap year where I chose to focus more on football then studies but still I did my masters by research. I did six months training like a professional, sometimes even twice a day but luckily for me I made it in December.

What are the things that the foreign environment has given you that is absent or non-existing in our local game?

For sure it's the attitude that you show during the week in training, preparing for the next game. We see a lot of clips from the last game to learn from mistakes and continue on the good things we did, also, we see clips on the next opposition so we will be better prepared against who we are playing both as a team and individually, every game we go to a hotel, sometimes we have to travel also, with us we have everything. The only person we don't have is match analyst, the coach does them himself.

Why do you think that you were chosen?

I believe it was because I was determined to achieve my goal and with the good contacts I had. I always pushed to go to play abroad. You have to be good and always in top form so if a scout is seeing that match you are playing in you must make sure that you are noted. You have to be always prepared and give 100% and be talented, you have to be able to transfer what you do in training to the game.

How did your ambition, enthusiasm, dedication contribute to you being chosen?

100 % I agree, that you must have all these qualities to achieve in your career. Without ambition, enthusiasm, dedication and passion you arrive nowhere.

If you have to return to Malta, do you consider it as downgrade? What competences will you bring with you to the local game?

For me, if I come now, yes it will be a downgrade because I play in serie 'C' not in serie 'A' but still the set up they have, we should copy and I think that all Maltese Premier Clubs should have something similar. A good professional set up where the player can reach his aim to make the grade.

INTERVIEW WITH U19 PLAYER WHO MADE THE MIGRATION BUT CAME BACK TO MALTA

How much do you feel that your club prepared you for the reality of playing for a foreign team? And how?

I think my club helped me a lot but in particular the MFA, when we started that program at around age 13-14. I have been there four years now. That really helped I think, they taught me tactical aspects that at the club I wasn't being taught and also emotional values. At MFA they helped us a lot because we had very interesting things like talks on different subjects and as well especially with Adele (sport psychologist/practitioner-researcher). She taught us a lot and I think that these professional concepts helped me because when I went abroad or when I was in a professional set up it wasn't all new to me, I really experienced the concept before.

If you were going to start your career as a young player what would you want your coaches to develop in you?

First of all I think that you have to be very positive and responsible and that you respect your team mates, because when you go abroad you are an ideal player and your team mates have to get used to you. You have to be social- sociable, otherwise you are not going to make friends and you will find it hard. If you are not the best player you will not have friends and you are going to feel miserable there, so I think that certain values and characteristics as a human really help not only football wise. If you are a good footballer I guess in any club you will fit in but if you are not very sociable you won't fit anywhere.

Did you find help from your parents – club – MFA – others?

The MFA had pushed a lot for sure, they really want that Maltese players go abroad and they, through Adele they really helped me because Adele gave me some tips and some advice on what I should do regarding while I am abroad. My parents supported me all the time, not only football wise, they just want the best out of me and if they know that I am going to be miserable they advise me from before to avoid anything that might go wrong. My club always wanted me to make it. I mean they always pushed me and were very helpful in negotiations. In whatever I needed they were very reasonable so they weren't being selfish.

How much do you consider the following to be important?

(A) Lifestyle – (B) emotional intelligence – (C) growing in a professional set up

Life style is very important because in Malta you realise how the life style really affects your overall performance and I became more aware. **Emotional Intelligence** - I think it

effects a lot especially when you go to play abroad your emotions tend to take over, because you start to miss home and people and family. Certain people just miss the country “exactly the way we live” so that really effects. **Growing in a professional setup** makes a very big difference to you because if you are not used to certain expects of a professional setup, not just going to training half an hour before or cleaning your shoes all the time, it affects you and it feels like different once you go in a professional setup. Playing a lot of international friendlies/ tournaments with the MFA U17 team helped a lot. I played around 30 games, and in every game you learn something and even you play against a different level of players each time. Even the type of pitches and facilities you visit, like I remember the one in Wales was exceptional, the pitch was amazing so the individual things (effects) and you grow as a player.

How did you adapt to the situation in a foreign country?

At first it was the opposite that I thought it was going to be. Very difficult in the beginning and then it becomes easier, but at first I found it ok, **the first two months I was fine completely fine, but then I think the hardest bit is the bit that crumbled it all** you can say, it was when I came to Malta and I came down for a long time and I got used to it, **I mean I got used to our life style again, and when I had to leave I was feeling miserable. I just didn’t want to go** and I wasn’t playing as such because I was still young to register so basically I was just training but still it was a good experience and I learned quite a lot.

How long did you stay abroad? Why did you return?

I stayed four months there and came because I felt home sick and I was doing my O ’levels and I gave up fifth form to go abroad and I was finding it difficult to study there. I was doing nothing and I had my O levels coming up and at least I wanted my O levels because I was still very young.

Do you think that you need a certain level of maturity to make it abroad? And can you identify an ideal age for you?

For sure you need a certain level of maturity I think I was to young when I went up. I think that the ideal age for Maltese players would be 18 because by that time anyone who has decided to pursue a career in education can focus on doing that because I want to have a backup plan, just in case something goes wrong with football. At least in Malta, by 18 you can finish A levels so if you have your A levels done you can go to university any time you like.

Where you missing something while abroad? e.g. Maltese life style – friends – family ecc.

Not because of going out as such. I just like having a lot of things, I don’t like to stay at home, I like to go to school in the morning and after go to training and work in the evening I used to be on the go and when I went abroad I was just not doing anything and then I go to train, I used to have a lot of spare time and I didn’t used to have friends there at that time, it was very hard. Having everything close by in Malta is very different **‘comfort zone sort off’**. In Malta every where ever you look you know someone so even ‘socially’ you feel good about yourself as you say I know that one and that one. When you go abroad you know no one and since it’s much bigger as well you don’t see someone you know as often.

If you hadn’t made it abroad (pro level), do you feel that you would have failed?

I don't think so, if there was interest by a foreign club I would think I hadn't failed. If there was no one interested I would have considered that I would have failed because when a foreign club takes you for a trial I think it gives you enough satisfaction. For me, I made it kind of to a certain extent but then it's not just making it, to be able to stay there gives you another level of satisfaction. It's still my dream but when a foreign club comes and approaches you, you still say at least I made it till here, you don't say I failed because I didn't go, you see it as an experience, a learning experience because I think you can still make it, to a certain extent in Malta but it's nothing compared to when you play in a foreign league.

What are the things that the foreign environment has given you that is absent or non-existing in our local game?

I believe that certain attitudes in Malta are different to foreign players and the way they think abroad, like training twice a day or sometimes some players tend to crumble and even if you are not chosen in the first 11 or the first 18, some Maltese players tend to crumble and blame things instead of working harder and prove to the coach that he is wrong.

If you have to return to Malta, do you consider it as downgrade? What competences will/did you bring with you to the local game?

To a certain extent I would consider it as a downgrade because you are not playing abroad and the level in Malta is not as high, it's improving but not as high; it depends where you are as well because Maltese people have the mentality that anywhere abroad is better than Malta, when in actual fact it's not true. For example, if you had to go to Serie D in any other country I think it's not really worth it because nobody cares about those leagues so I don't always consider it as a downgrade, depends from where you come. Coming down to Malta you can help younger players, you teach them, you tell them this is what they do abroad and start helping them so if someday they had to go abroad and they get chosen they already know certain things about the country and about how they do stuff so you can help others and for yourself, obviously you know what they do abroad so if there is anything that you can do individually to keep up with their level and improve you to do it.