

EDITORIAL

Home Economics as a vehicle for sustainability, food literacy, wellbeing, social transformation, and community engagement in Mediterranean societies.

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Introduction

Home Economics (HE) has a noble vision. It is concerned with the quality of life of individuals, families and communities through sustainable living and the responsible use of resources (IFHE, 2008). As a discipline, it equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values required to make informed decisions about food, health, consumption, family life and sustainability in an increasingly complex world (Erjavšek 2021). In its 100th Anniversary Position Statement, the International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE, 2008) defines HE as a field encompassing education, research and professional practice that seeks to support optimal and harmonious living for individuals, families and communities based on personal holistic health, mutual respect and stewardship of the natural environment.

As societies grapple with new and complex challenges related to health, sustainability, consumption and wellbeing, HE continues to offer practical and transformative responses. Over time, the field has evolved to align with broader developments in education and behaviour change spheres, whereby a key focus is on promoting literacies among individuals of all ages for societal wellbeing (UNESCO, 2019). Being literate involves possessing the relevant knowledge, understanding and skills needed to access and evaluate

information, make informed decisions, communicate effectively, seek support when necessary, and manage everyday challenges successfully. UNESCO's definition of literacy extends beyond reading, writing and numeracy to encompass digital competencies, media literacy, education for sustainable development, global citizenship and job-specific skills, all operating in a mutually reinforcing manner. With its multi-disciplinary nature, contemporary HE is also seen as nurturing multiple literacies; namely, health, food, consumer, environmental, financial, technological and social literacy (Pendergast, 2023; Piscopo, 2016).

HE also serves as a vehicle for lifelong learning, fostering knowledge, skills and dispositions that contribute to individual, family, and community wellbeing along the lifespan. This role is especially significant in Mediterranean societies, including Malta, where food cultures, family traditions, sustainability concerns and community values continue to shape everyday life and influence educational priorities (Mugliett & Piscopo, 2019; Piscopo et al., 2019; Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012). Consequently, Mediterranean contexts offer a particularly rich setting within which to explore the evolving role of HE in addressing contemporary educational, social, economic, health and environmental challenges.

Against this backdrop, this special issue of the *Malta Review of Educational Research* brings together a collection of studies that highlight the contemporary role of HE and of allied research across Mediterranean contexts. The articles jointly demonstrate the importance of preserving cultural heritage and values, while responding to prevailing familial and societal challenges, as well as emerging needs. The issue includes empirical investigations, a programme review and curricular history, as well as other research studies which are strongly aligned with different literacies within the vision of HE. Drawing on evidence from Morocco, Egypt, Slovenia and Malta, the contributions offer a rich tapestry of cultural, social and educational perspectives which are grounded in current lifestyles and influence different sectors of education. Collectively, they portray a discipline that has evolved from its traditional domestic roots into a transformative field concerned with sustainable production and consumption, food and nutrition security, holistic wellbeing, equity and inclusivity, community engagement and active citizenship. In doing so, they offer a distinctly Mediterranean perspective on the contribution of HE to contemporary society.

Several interconnected themes emerge across the contributions in this special issue. While the studies address diverse contexts and educational settings, they collectively highlight the role of HE in promoting food literacy and sustainable Mediterranean diets, supporting informed consumption and efficient everyday living, preparing future educators and advancing the ongoing transformation of the discipline through curricular innovation, programme development and community interventions for behaviour change. Together, these themes demonstrate the breadth and continuing relevance of HE in addressing contemporary Mediterranean challenges.

Food literacy, nutrition education and sustainable diets

A prominent theme emerging from this special issue concerns the role of HE in fostering food literacy, sustainable dietary behaviours and lifelong healthy eating practices. Collectively, the contributions highlight the potential of educational interventions, experiential learning and early engagement with food-related activities to shape food choices and promote more positive and sustainable relationships with food across different stages of life.

Three studies from Morocco focus on the Mediterranean diet as both a health-promoting and sustainability-oriented model of eating. Together, they demonstrate how nutrition education can extend beyond the transmission of dietary knowledge to encourage critical awareness of the interrelationships between food, health, environmental sustainability and responsible consumption. They also show how HE researchers in Mediterranean contexts are addressing pressing concerns related to dietary transitions, sustainability and food waste among young people while drawing upon the Mediterranean diet as both a cultural and educational resource. The findings provide evidence that educational interventions can strengthen adolescents' adherence to the Mediterranean diet, improve dietary behaviours and significantly reduce food waste, even within socio-economically disadvantaged contexts. The studies underscore the potential of locally relevant nutrition education programmes to support healthier and more sustainable lifestyles among young people in secondary schools and tertiary settings.

A study from Malta offers a different perspective, looking at the role of HE educators outside the formal education setting. Targeting a specific adult population group, this study involved designing, implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of an original nutrition and culinary education programme. The course allowed for integration of multiple HE principles,

from choosing ingredients and planning meals to cater for nutritional needs (nutrition literacy), to food shopping within one's budget (consumer and financial literacy), to recognising sustainable ingredients and also growing herbs (sustainability literacy). The programme was therefore rich in the transfer of multiple HE literacies, doing this in a highly experiential approach. Such adult education interventions showcase the benefit of HE for lifelong learning which can be adapted to provide meaningful, practical and enjoyable experiences promoting positive behaviour change.

Taken together, these four studies reaffirm the centrality of food literacy within contemporary HE and demonstrate how educational interventions can support healthier lifestyles while simultaneously advancing broader sustainability goals. They further illustrate the potential of meaningful, context-sensitive educational programmes to encourage lasting changes in dietary behaviours among young people.

Household resource management and everyday living

A second theme emerging from this special issue concerns the role of HE in understanding and strengthening the everyday practices through which individuals and families manage food, resources and wellbeing. While contemporary discussions often focus on public health and sustainability outcomes, HE has long recognised that these outcomes are shaped by the routines, decisions and interactions that occur within households and communities (Nickols, 2008). The studies in this section highlight the importance of everyday experiences and resource management practices in fostering informed decision-making and supporting quality of life.

The Maltese study examining adolescents' childhood involvement in meal planning and preparation underscores the short- and long-term educational value of participation in everyday food-related activities. The findings suggest that early engagement in meal planning and food preparation contributes to healthier dietary habits, greater food appreciation, enhanced confidence and increased awareness of food and health issues during adolescence. By highlighting the long-term influence of practical food experiences within the family, the study reinforces the importance of experiential learning as a means of developing knowledge, skills and dispositions that support lifelong wellbeing.

Complementing this perspective, the article from Egypt explores household food consumption expenditure and the socio-economic and behavioural factors associated with spending patterns among families in Alexandria. While confirming that monthly income is the biggest determinant on food expenditure, the study also draws attention to the importance of consumer behaviours, purchasing motives and resource management practices. The findings suggest that households may benefit from greater support in developing skills related to rational consumption and financial management, thereby reaffirming the continuing relevance of consumer and financial literacy within contemporary HE.

Viewed together, these contributions illustrate how HE continues to engage with the realities of everyday life. Whether through participation in meal preparation and planning, or through informed management of household resources, both studies demonstrate the importance of developing capabilities that enable individuals and families to make informed decisions, optimise available resources and enhance their overall wellbeing. They further illustrate how HE scholarship within the Mediterranean region continues to engage with the everyday realities of family life, resource management and consumer decision-making, recognising these as essential dimensions of individual and community wellbeing. The articles reaffirm a longstanding concern of HE: the relationship between everyday household practices and the quality of life of individuals, families, and communities.

Teacher education, curriculum relevance and sustainability

The Slovenian study highlights the pivotal role of teacher education in advancing sustainability within HE. By examining the environmental awareness, attitudes and behaviours of pre-service teachers, the study draws attention to the importance of preparing future educators who are not only knowledgeable about sustainability, but who also embody the values and practices they seek to promote. The findings reinforce the view that sustainability education is most effective when it is integrated into professional identity formation and supported through teacher preparation programmes.

A similar recent exploratory consultation, this time among HE practitioners in Malta, suggests a remarkable degree of consensus regarding the current status and future trajectory of the discipline. This article describes how participants overwhelmingly conceptualised Home Economics as an education for contemporary living and human flourishing, underpinned by food literacy,

financial capability, sustainability, family wellbeing and responsible citizenship. At the same time, respondents perceived a persistent tension between the recognised societal relevance of Home Economics and its relatively low status within schools and society. They advocated for a more future-oriented, practical and inquiry-driven curriculum, stronger policy support and enhanced public visibility to ensure that HE continues to respond to evolving social, environmental and technological challenges. Such perspectives resonate strongly with the themes emerging from the papers in this special issue and reinforce the need for Home Economics education to remain adaptive, interdisciplinary and firmly connected to the realities of everyday life.

Together, these studies suggest that the continuing relevance of HE depends upon a dynamic relationship between curriculum and educator. While curricula provide the framework through which contemporary issues such as sustainability, health and responsible consumption are addressed, teachers play a crucial role in translating these aims into meaningful learning experiences. These studies highlight the important role played by HE educators and researchers in preparing future generations to respond to sustainability challenges while ensuring that curricula and HE teacher education remain relevant to contemporary Mediterranean societies.

The evolving identity of Home Economics

A final theme emerging from this special issue concerns the evolving identity of HE and its continuing relevance within contemporary society. While historically associated with domestic life and shaped by prevailing gender norms, HE has unfailingly been concerned with problem solution through responsible resource management. As a discipline it has undergone significant transformation in response to changing social, economic and educational contexts, increasingly being re-positioned as a field concerned with sustainability, wellbeing, inclusion, citizenship and community engagement.

The Maltese study examining gender and HE offers an important reflection on the historical development of the subject within a traditionally patriarchal and Catholic Mediterranean society. By exploring the ways in which gendered assumptions influenced curriculum content, participation and perceptions of the discipline, the study highlights the persistence of some traditional stereotypes despite considerable progress towards greater inclusivity. The findings encourage continued reflection on how HE can be positioned as a

discipline that is accessible, relevant and meaningful to all learners regardless of gender.

Complementing this historical perspective, the review of the Malta-based HE Seminar Centre demonstrates how the discipline continues to evolve through innovation, collaboration and engagement with wider societal priorities. The Centre exemplifies how HE can support transdisciplinary learning, connect educational practice with policy goals, and foster partnerships that promote wellbeing, sustainability, financial literacy and lifelong learning.

Viewed together, these two articles portray a discipline that is both reflective and forward-looking; one that remains grounded in its concern for human wellbeing while continually adapting to meet contemporary societal, economic and environmental challenges. Importantly, both studies demonstrate how HE professionals within the Mediterranean region continue to critically examine the discipline's history while simultaneously shaping its current contributions and future direction through embracing new technology, engaging with diverse stakeholders and demonstrating social responsibility.

Conclusion

Collectively, the contributions in this special issue portray HE as a dynamic and evolving field that remains deeply connected to the realities of everyday life while responding to contemporary social, economic, environmental and technological challenges. They also underscore the necessity of collaborating with nutrition educators and other stakeholders to jointly promote the same health promoting and holistic wellbeing behaviours.

Across the Mediterranean region, Home Economics educators and researchers appear to share a vision of the discipline as an education for lifelong wellbeing and human flourishing, underpinned by food literacy, financial capability, sustainability, family wellness, informed citizenship and responsible consumption. At the same time, the articles highlight the importance of continued curriculum renewal, innovative pedagogies, stronger advocacy and enhanced visibility to address persistent misconceptions and strengthen the status of HE within education systems and society. They also demonstrate how HE researchers, educators and practitioners comprehensively and logically address some of the most pressing challenges facing Mediterranean societies while remaining grounded in the cultural traditions and values that characterise the region.

As communities live through increasingly complex local and global challenges, HE is uniquely positioned to empower individuals and families to make informed, ethical and sustainable decisions that contribute not only to personal and family wellbeing, but also to the flourishing of communities and the planet.

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