

The Home Economics Seminar Centre as a Catalyst for Transdisciplinary Learning and Community Engagement in Malta

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Abstract: This review explores the Home Economics Seminar Centre (HESC) as a long-standing component of the Maltese education system, focusing on its contribution to transdisciplinary learning that connects educational, social and policy contexts, as well as its contribution to community engagement. Drawing on its historical development and current practices, the review examines the evolution of the HESC from its establishment to its present role within the Directorate for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) Programmes. It shows how the HESC has aligned experiential and inquiry-based pedagogies with national priorities related to health, sustainability, financial capability, inclusion and lifelong learning. The discussion highlights how Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM)-informed approaches, cooperative learning, and multiple literacies are embedded in authentic learning contexts. It also examines the HESC's engagement with stakeholders, illustrating how learning is strengthened when classroom practice is linked to wider societal and policy frameworks. Overall, the review positions the HESC as an example of how Home Economics can support wellbeing, equity, and responsible citizenship. It offers a contextually grounded account of real-world-oriented education, with implications for curriculum implementation and policy-practice alignment.

Keywords: Home Economics; transdisciplinary learning; inclusive education; learner-centred approach

Introduction

The Home Economics Seminar Centre (HESC) has long played a significant role in Maltese education, providing learners with knowledge, hands-on experiences, and practical skills that bridge everyday life with broader personal and social challenges. Rooted in the core principles of Home Economics, including wellbeing, resource management and informed decision-making, the HESC has consistently focused on the development of informed, competent individuals able to navigate daily living with confidence, responsibility and critical awareness.

Over time, the HESC has evolved in response to changing societal, technological, and educational contexts. Its remit has expanded beyond traditional food and household education to encompass nutrition and health promotion, financial capability, entrepreneurship, citizenship, community engagement and sustainable living. Operating within the Directorate for STEM and VET Programmes (DSVP), the HESC adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates scientific knowledge, practical application and reflective decision-making.

Despite this established role, there is limited analysis of how the HESC functions as a catalyst for transdisciplinary learning and how its practices align with broader educational and social priorities. This paper addresses this gap by examining the evolution, pedagogical approaches and stakeholder engagement of the HESC within the Maltese context.

Objectives and research questions

The paper is guided by three main objectives:

- (i) To explore the historical and strategic evolution of the HESC;
- (ii) To investigate how HESC programmes operationalise transdisciplinary and inquiry-based learning;
- (iii) To assess HESC's role in fostering community engagement and strengthening policy-practice alignment.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- (i) How has HESC evolved in response to changing educational and societal demands?
- (ii) To what extent do its programmes operationalise transdisciplinary and inquiry-based pedagogies in practice?

- (iii) What strengths and limitations characterise its role in linking policy and practice within the Maltese education system?

The discussion is structured thematically, focusing on key areas such as sustainability, food education, financial literacy, inclusion, stakeholder engagement and professional development. These domains reflect the core dimensions of the HESC's practice and provide a framework for examining its role as an agent of educational and social change.

While the paper primarily offers an exploratory overview of the HESC's initiatives and strategic alignment, it also acknowledges the value of further investigating the longer-term educational and community impact. Adopting context-sensitive and sustainable evaluation approaches may help enhance understanding of programme outcomes while remaining consistent with the HESC's existing operational capacities.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, policy-informed case study approach to examine the HESC as a site of transdisciplinary learning within the Maltese education system. The analysis is based on a purposive selection of sources, including national policy documents, curriculum frameworks, programme materials and relevant academic literature related to Home Economics education and the HESC.

Sources were selected based on their relevance to the study's objectives, particularly their capacity to inform understanding of the HESC's historical development, pedagogical approaches, and stakeholder engagement. Priority was given to materials that reflect both policy-level intentions and practice-based implementation within the Maltese educational context.

A qualitative thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and key domains within the HESC's work. The analysis followed an iterative process of familiarisation with the data, initial coding and the development of thematic categories. These themes were further refined through collaborative discussion among the authors to enhance analytical rigour and consistency.

The analytical framework was informed by theoretical perspectives on transdisciplinary learning, inquiry-based pedagogy and inclusive education. In addition, a structured analytical lens was applied to examine strengths,

limitations, opportunities and contextual challenges shaping the HESC's development.

While not intended as a systematic review, this approach provides a conceptually grounded and context-sensitive examination of the HESC as a policy-practice interface within the Maltese education system. It enables an in-depth exploration of how educational initiatives are shaped by, and respond to, broader societal and policy priorities within a small-state context.

Descriptive and critical analysis

Historical foundations and evolving role

The HESC has long served as a dedicated space for experiential learning in Malta, focusing on the practical application of life skills, wellbeing and responsible citizenship (Mugliett & Piscopo, 2019). Since its establishment in the early 1990s, the HESC has evolved in response to national educational priorities, societal change, and emerging challenges related to health, sustainability and consumer awareness (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2014; Portelli, 2016).

The HESC was formally inaugurated on 11 February 1992, originally operating from Pinto Stores in Valletta. At its inception, it was known as the Personal and Social Education Centre, envisioned as an innovative educational space where learners could engage with life skills that extended beyond traditional classroom boundaries (Portelli, 2016). The early emphasis on experiential and interdisciplinary learning anticipated later curriculum developments and aligns with contemporary understandings of transdisciplinary education (Custodio-Ferrando & Cabero-Fayos, 2025). Early programmes, in the 1990s, focused on nutrition, money management and environmental awareness, areas that directly mirrored Malta's emerging public health priorities and the increasing attention to protection of the natural environment and consumer responsibility. The learning activities involved a problem-solving and hands-on approach. These initiatives highlight an early alignment between experiential educational provision and the analysis of societal needs, a characteristic that continues to define the HESC's activities.

As the HESC's relevance grew, it strengthened its role in bridging knowledge and the practicalities of daily living. By the late 1990s, the HESC had firmly established itself within the national education system, welcoming large

cohorts of learners annually and aligning its identity with the specialised, science-based discipline of Home Economics. This development occurred alongside a broader shift in Maltese Home Economics, one that embraced holistic, practical and multiple-literacy models to support real-life learning and informed decision-making (Piscopo, Mugliett, & Portelli, 2019).

Administrative formalisation and strategic development

In 1999, the redevelopment of the Pinto Wharf area necessitated a transition to the Birkirkara Primary School Complex. The move provided the HESC with a more centrally located and operationally stable base, facilitating easier access for schools from across the islands and allowing for closer integration with the national education infrastructure (Portelli, 2016).

Beyond its physical move, the HESC's administrative identity evolved as it became a recognised entity within the Ministry for Education. This formalisation strengthened its capacity to align programme delivery with national policy objectives and contributed to its positioning as a facilitative structure between policy and practice (MEDE, 2014).

Over the decades, the HESC's remit has expanded beyond learner-focused seminars to encompass broader ecological models of education, including professional development for educators, parent-targeted initiatives and community outreach programmes (Mugliett & Piscopo, 2019). The expansion reflects a shift from a programme delivery model to a more integrated educational ecosystem, in which learning extends beyond the classroom and engages multiple stakeholders.

Within the Maltese context, the HESC is recognised as a central resource for guidance and support in Home Economics, contributing to the promotion of sustainable resource management and informed lifestyle choices (National Audit Office, 2011). However, while its strategic positioning is well established and supported by ongoing evaluation efforts, there is strong potential to further enhance the clarity and depth of understanding of its role and impact across different domains. The HESC's role reflects a synergy between Maltese educational priorities and European frameworks on life skills education (Council of Europe, 2009). This evolution mirrors the transition of Home Economics from a domestic craft to a critical literacy necessary for navigating the social, economic and environmental complexities of contemporary Mediterranean life.

Today, the HESC operates through a mission-driven framework aimed at enhancing quality of life by promoting informed decision-making and responsible resource management (Piscopo, 2020). This is supported by a multiple-literacy pedagogical approach, which integrates disciplinary knowledge with practical application (Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012), and which is currently anchored in six core disciplinary domains (Department for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability, 2018):

1. Food, Nutrition and Health: Focuses on the biochemical and physiological impact of dietary choices.
2. Practical Interventions: Applies technical skills to everyday living tasks.
3. Home and Family Wellbeing: Explores the psychosocial dynamics of the household.
4. Safety and Risk Assessment: Promotes a culture of prevention and hazard identification.
5. Financial Literacy and Consumer Awareness: Guides navigating complex economic systems.
6. Sustainable Resource Management: Aligns household habits with global environmental goals.

The HESC's contribution to the Maltese educational landscape is multifaceted, ranging from the delivery of primary school (Kinder 2 to Year 6) and secondary school programmes, to supporting schools in meeting national food and beverage standards. Established under the Healthy Lifestyle Promotion and Care of Non-Communicable Diseases Act and the Procurement of Food for Schools Regulations (Legal Notice 266 of 2018), the standards prescribe mandatory nutritional criteria for food and beverages provided or sold in schools. (Government of Malta, 2016; Government of Malta, 2018). They promote balanced dietary choices and restrict foods high in saturated fat, salt and added sugars, thereby contributing to healthier school food environments that support children's health, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

By facilitating personal practical competencies, the HESC seeks to support learners to develop agency in navigating a consumer-driven society. Within the Maltese curriculum and Home Economics context, these competencies are recognised as part of a broader set of essential life skills that enable individuals to make informed decisions about food, health and household resource management, aligning with the subject's focus on consumer education and sustainable living (Curriculum Management Directorate, 2024; Euroguidance

Malta, 2021). Research in Malta has similarly identified food literacy, including understanding nutrition labels, planning meals and preparing healthy food, as a valuable 21st-century competence that supports improved engagement with food systems and positive health outcomes (Piscopo & Mugliett, 2022).

The HESC is currently entering a significant new phase of development with a planned relocation to new premises. This transition represents more than an infrastructural change; it reflects a commitment to modernising facilities while enhancing accessibility and innovation. It is intended to ensure that the HESC remains equipped to deliver a STEAM curriculum within a technologically advanced and inclusive environment. In Malta's lifelong learning landscape, such investments in learning spaces and resources are linked with improved learner outcomes and broader participation, particularly in hands-on and practical disciplines like Home Economics, which bridges school learning, everyday life and societal wellbeing (Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Employability, 2023).

Sustainability and global citizenship through Home Economics

Sustainability within Home Economics focuses on responsible decision-making that supports environmental integrity, social equity and the wellbeing of future generations (Turkki, 2012; Turkki, 2015). Such a perspective is often framed within the broader concept of responsible living, where individuals are encouraged to recognise the impact of personal and household choices on local and global systems (International Federation for Home Economics, 2019). Within this context, the HESC plays a key role in translating these abstract sustainability principles into applied learning experiences, thereby reinforcing its function as a bridge between policy, pedagogy and everyday practice.

Through engagement with themes such as food selection, meal planning, mindful consumption, food waste reduction, the consumption of locally sourced and seasonal foods and energy efficiency in the home, learners acquire both practical competencies and ethical values that underpin sustainable living. These themes are operationalised within the HESC programmes through experiential and inquiry-based approaches, enabling learners to critically reflect on their own behaviours and decision-making processes to enhance personal wellbeing and social responsibility (Didham & Ofei-Manu, 2015). This sustainability focused approach aligns closely with the Malta Vision 2050 framework and the broader Sustainable Development Goals (Ministry for the Economy, Enterprise and Strategic Projects, 2025). Research into

contemporary Home Economics pedagogy emphasises a growing shift towards transformational teaching approaches that actively engage learners in sustainability-oriented thinking and critical reflection on long-term consumption habits (Hekmat et al., 2025; Kuusisaari et al., 2025).

Sustainability is embedded across HESC programmes through a holistic emphasis on environmental responsibility and ethical decision-making that extends beyond individual lifestyle choices. Drawing on foundational disciplinary perspectives concerned with everyday life (Turkki, 2015), HESC programmes encourage learners to consider the environmental, social and economic impacts of their decisions across domains, including resource management, personal and household wellbeing, consumer behaviour and community engagement. This broad approach aligns with local practice and research, which highlight the role of Home Economics in nurturing sustainable lifestyles, critical thinking, and enhanced quality of life in diverse contexts (Piscopo et al, 2019).

By fostering these lifelong habits of reflection and responsible practice, the HESC empowers learners, from early years to adulthood, to adopt lifestyles aligned with international sustainability priorities, ensuring that personal consumption patterns contribute to broader ecological and societal wellbeing. Within this alignment, evaluation is key to determine the extent to which such programmes impact the learners' wellbeing beyond the learning context. This is an area where HESC's approach could be further strengthened. While programme-related evaluation is already embedded within HESC practice, there is scope to enhance its rigour and value through more systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks that capture measurable outcomes related to learners' wellbeing and community engagement. This highlights a valuable avenue for future research, specifically focusing on the design and evaluation of a robust framework tailored to HESC's educational goals. Implementing such a structured approach would not only measure the tangible outcomes of these programmes but also provide data-driven insights to refine and elevate their impact continually.

Pedagogical frameworks: STEAM and inquiry-based learning

The pedagogical framework underpinning HESC programmes is closely aligned with Malta's evolving curriculum reforms, including the National Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation [MEYR], 2023) and the National Inclusive Education

Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019). These frameworks prioritise learning that responds to learners' developmental stages while promoting holistic wellbeing, sustainability, and responsible citizenship. To support this, a structured scaffolding approach is implemented across all year groups, ensuring that key concepts are introduced in ways that match learners' developmental stages and grow in complexity over time. Within this framework, the HESC functions not only as a delivery site, but as a pedagogical space where interdisciplinary knowledge is actively constructed through experiential learning.

The integration of STEAM methodologies further strengthens this approach through inquiry-based and experiential learning (Taar et al., 2025). By engaging in hands-on food preparation, label analysis and practical financial scenarios, learners find meaningful application for abstract concepts (MEYR, 2023). This illustrates how the HESC facilitates transdisciplinary learning by connecting scientific and social knowledge within real-life contexts.

A critical component of this inquiry-based model is the strategic use of cooperative learning. According to a recent systematic review by Baqy et al. (2025), cooperative learning has evolved into evidence-based pedagogy, consistently demonstrating outcomes in conceptual understanding compared to individualistic learning environments. Within the HESC, collaborative tasks are designed to move beyond group work towards meaningful co-construction of knowledge and essential social skills, as these models are specifically designed to enhance interpersonal communication through the systematic targeting of specific learning outcomes (Ningsih et al., 2025).

Furthermore, Mendo-Lázaro et al. (2022) highlight that cooperative learning techniques are dynamic and significantly increase learners' perceptions of autonomy and competence. By encouraging the development of interpersonal skills, these methods motivate learners to participate more actively in the teaching and learning process, effectively boosting their motivation for mastery. Consequently, at the HESC, tasks are structured with a focus on positive interdependence, ensuring that learners move beyond simple group placement toward genuine collaboration, shared accountability, and collective problem-solving.

Home Economics is increasingly being characterised by STEAM integration, positioning the subject as a space for developing 21st-century competencies.

The Tallinn 2025 outcomes from the STEAMKitchen project (Paas et al., 2025) illustrate how Home Economics food laboratories are being reimaged as makerspaces where scientific inquiry and creative problem-solving intersect with everyday life. For these learning spaces to work, learners need to feel safe, supported and motivated to collaborate (Lindblom et al. 2025). The HESC educators play a crucial role in creating these conditions, nurturing an environment where learners feel confident to take risks, experiment and learn from one another.

Such an approach also helps learners tackle real-world issues, including sustainable food systems within the Maltese context. By making STEAM concepts tangible, like applying chemical principles to food preservation, or using Mathematics in financial planning, abstract ideas are brought to life. Consequently, the HESC serves as a bridge in the Maltese curriculum, transforming Home Economics into a modern human science that empowers learners to navigate complex global and local challenges (Nõmmik et al., 2025).

Food education as an inquiry-based pedagogical domain

Food education plays a significant role in developing consumer awareness, supporting sustainable food choices, and contributing to health equity (Hård et al., 2024). Within the HESC, this domain serves as a key entry point for transdisciplinary learning, where scientific knowledge, cultural understanding and everyday practices intersect. Contemporary research conceptualises food education as a multidisciplinary field that integrates health, sustainability and social and cultural dimensions (Kauppinen & Palojoki, 2024; Smith et al., 2022). Food possesses unique pedagogical qualities: its familiar nature supports concrete conceptual understanding, while its sensory properties enable sensory-based learning that broadens food preferences and motivates learners. By drawing on everyday food experiences familiar to learners, this approach enhances engagement and curiosity, making learning personally meaningful. In this regard, the HESC extends classroom-based provision by creating authentic learning environments where learners actively engage with food through preparation, tasting and analysis, thereby reinforcing the applied nature of learning.

Within this pedagogical framework, HESC programmes also employ creative and innovative learning activities that support active participation. Recent studies highlight how interactive food-tasting activities can challenge learners'

existing preferences while encouraging more sustainable food choices (Foinant et al., 2021; Gelinder et al., 2020; Hård et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of food education is also closely linked to teachers' professional knowledge and pedagogical skills. Educators require a sound understanding of nutrition, dietary guidelines, food-related risks and health communication, alongside pedagogical competencies to engage and motivate young learners (Esdaile et al., 2024). Food education benefits from moving beyond simplistic dichotomies of “good” versus “bad” foods, instead emphasising balanced and positive food messages that support informed and flexible food choices. At the same time, educators must also navigate the normative dimensions of sustainability education with sensitivity, recognising the diversity of cultural practices, values, and contexts that shape the learners' food experiences. Together, these competencies are essential for delivering inclusive, engaging and impactful food education in primary school settings. The HESC supports this through professional development and programmes for educators; yet there remains a need to strengthen this support so that it is more widely accessible, better tailored to diverse primary classroom contexts, and sufficiently scaled to equip primary school teachers with the skills and confidence to deliver effective, inclusive food education. While these approaches are pedagogically promising, their consistent implementation remains contingent on teacher willingness, preparedness and resource availability (Piscopo & Mugliett, 2022).

Inclusive methodologies and social mobility

The pedagogical flexibility inherent in the STEAM-integrated Home Economics model, provides a robust and theoretically grounded framework for inclusive and transformative education, particularly when working with learners who experience social, educational or economic vulnerability. Within this paradigm, inclusion is understood not simply as access to learning, but as the development of capabilities that enable responsible decision-making and sustainable wellbeing across the life course (Didham et al., 2015). This commitment to equity is exemplified through the Responsible Living Programme (RLP), a structured, accredited non-formal initiative at MQF Levels 2 and 3, designed for diverse learner profiles.

In alignment with Malta's Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (MEDE, 2019), the HESC moves beyond standardised curricular provision by offering individualised learning pathways that prioritise learner dignity, agency and

participation in meaningful everyday practices. Literacy within this framework is conceptualised as a relational and ethical capacity, extending beyond functional skills to encompass the ability to make informed, reflective and socially responsible choices in domains such as food, health, finance and resource management. Such an approach positions Home Economics as a human science concerned with how people live well together, within ecological and social limits. (Turkki, 2015).

Delivered by the HESC in collaboration with local social welfare support services such as Servizz Għożża, the RLP transforms the Home Economics food laboratory into a supportive learning space where academic knowledge is integrated with lived experiences and significant life-course transitions. This applied pedagogy enables learners to connect theoretical understanding with practical action, fostering both competence and action (McGregor, 2015). Local research highlights that inclusive educational practices which emphasise flexibility, relevance and learner wellbeing are particularly effective in engaging diverse learner populations and reducing barriers to participation (Madiona Fenech & Vella, 2025; Muscat, 2024).

By embedding nutrition education, financial literacy and responsible resource management within an inclusive, capability-oriented pedagogical framework, the HESC directly supports the equity and inclusion pillar of Malta's national education strategy. In practice, this is reflected in experiential and context-based learning activities that connect classroom knowledge to everyday decision-making. Such practice-oriented, supportive learning environments not only enhance engagement and wellbeing (Vassallo & Pace, 2024), but also contribute to social mobility by enabling learners, particularly those at risk of disengagement, to exercise agency in shaping their everyday lives. In this sense, HESC is positioned not merely as a provider of a curriculum of practical relevance, but as a vehicle for cultivating responsible living, equipping learners with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to navigate complex personal, familial and societal challenges. From a critical perspective, however, the extent to which such programmes can be effectively scaled remains an important consideration, particularly in light of constraints related to resource allocation and systemic curriculum integration.

Financial literacy as an inquiry-based dimension of Home Economics

Building on its role in fostering sustainable lifestyles and responsible citizenship, Home Economics education also encompasses financial capability

as a core life skill. Financial decision-making, such as food and resource choices, directly influences household wellbeing, social equity and long-term sustainability. Financial literacy initiatives implemented by the HESC in collaboration with the Malta Bankers' Association and other external stakeholders during the Global and European Money Week, incorporate a structured STEAM-informed pedagogical framework. A flagship initiative is the Financial Literacy Challenge, which empowers learners to collaboratively produce original work drawing on inquiry, problem-solving and creative processes. Through this STEAM-based approach, learners apply numeracy skills to budgeting scenarios, utilise digital literacy skills for research and representation, and engage in design-thinking processes. Similarly, a targeted programme for secondary school learners with diverse profiles integrates STEAM principles through hands-on engagement with financial technologies. Learners interact directly with Automated Teller Machines (ATMs), Electronic Point of Sale (EPOS) systems and various digital payment systems within authentic banking environments. This immersive experience enhances digital literacy and fosters systems thinking, reinforced by educational resources focusing on safety and responsibility. This pedagogical approach is supported by inquiry-based research, showing that simulated budgeting tasks naturally elicit mathematical reasoning, including calculation, proportional thinking and data representation, as learners allocate resources across needs, wants and savings within defined financial constraints (Chauhan, 2025).

At the primary level, HESC initiatives further exemplify an integrated STEAM-financial literacy model. Learners explore the historical evolution of money, alongside contemporary payment systems, engaging in in-depth inquiry and systems analysis. A key pedagogical tool used in these sessions is the sensory evaluation of currency. Learners examine both genuine and counterfeit money, allowing them to physically feel and identify intaglio printing, security threads and paper texture. Research on financial literacy education for young learners highlights that concrete, hands-on interactions with financial artefacts such as coins and bank notes can support cognitive development and strengthen foundational money concepts such as denomination, exchange, and distinctions between needs and wants (Omega et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the transition from physical currency to digital payment systems (ATMs, EPOS, mobile transactions) addresses the growing importance of digital financial fluency. In an increasingly cashless society, understanding digital payment tools and platforms forms a critical dimension of financial

capability. Studies in digital financial literacy indicate that combining traditional financial knowledge with competence in digital payment environments, enhances overall financial wellbeing and preparedness for contemporary transactions (Choung et al., 2023; OECD, 2021).

The combined approach used by the HESC supports learners in understanding not just abstract numerical concepts, but also the broader infrastructure of financial systems, including how value is transferred, recorded and managed across both physical and digital modalities. Such experiential engagement supports the development of financial competence that is both practical and relevant to young learners growing up in a digitalised financial ecosystem (European Union/OECD, 2023; Money and Pensions Service, 2024).

Finally, activities such as needs-versus-wants categorisation, extend beyond simple budgeting skills to reinforce the HESC's domain of sustainable resource management. This pedagogical strategy encourages learners to engage in systems thinking, where individual financial decisions are evaluated for their wider social, economic and environmental implications. Research into contemporary Home Economics pedagogy emphasises the integration of financial literacy as a prerequisite for sustainable consumption (Erjavšek, 2021, Paas et al., 2025). The HESC reflects this shift by supporting learners to critically evaluate their wants against their needs. Through implementation across diverse school settings, the HESC lays the groundwork for personal wellbeing and broader education for sustainability within the Maltese context. However, the extent to which such integrated approaches can be consistently implemented remains contingent on factors such as access to resources, and institutional support.

National advocacy

The HESC has contributed to several national campaigns translating health and financial policies into active learning experiences. This role illustrates how the HESC functions as a facilitative structure between policy and practice, ensuring that national strategies are not only disseminated, but meaningfully implemented within educational contexts. A significant contribution is HESC's partnership in the Healthy Food Plate initiative, spearheaded by the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate (HPDPD). The Healthy Plate serves as Malta's official visual guide for balanced nutrition complementing the national dietary guidelines (Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate [HPDPD], 2015). Through such initiatives, the HESC contributes to

the translation of complex policy messages into accessible, learner-centred educational tools. Further examples of HESC's collaborative role includes its partnership in national health promotion initiatives such as the *Milk is Good Naturally* campaign (Koperattiva Produtturi tal-Halib, n.d.), and the *Fun and Healthy Recipes for School Lunchboxes* booklet (HPDPD, n.d.), both developed through multi-agency collaboration.

An often-overlooked aspect of the HESC's work is its supportive role in health-related educational frameworks. During school-based interventions, the HESC engages in formal consultations with School Leadership Teams to address challenges in policy implementation and support health and wellbeing in schools. In particular, the HESC provides guidance and support directly to schools and collaborates with other stakeholders to support schools in aligning food provision with established dietary guidelines (MEDE, 2015), ensuring that local practices reflect national and international public health standards (World Health Organization & United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).

The policy document 'A whole school approach to a healthy lifestyle' (MEDE, 2015) primarily focuses on healthy eating, physical activity and the whole-school environment, and the HESC plays a key supportive and enabling role in achieving these objectives. Through school-based programmes facilitated by Home Economics Support educators, the HESC helps fulfil policy goals by addressing key aspects of health and wellbeing, including nutrition, food safety, hygiene, food preparation, allergy awareness, oral health, and the role of regular physical activity. These initiatives provide learners with essential knowledge and practical skills, reinforcing consistent messages related to food, drink and wellbeing, and supporting the application of learning through hands-on experiences such as food preparation.

Community outreach

In addition to its school-based programmes, the HESC undertakes targeted community outreach initiatives that extend its educational remit beyond formal schooling into lifelong health promotion and wellbeing. These initiatives reflect a broader commitment to lifelong learning, reinforcing the application of Home Economics across the life course and supporting informed decision-making, particularly among population groups who may be less engaged with formal education systems.

A key example is *Nimmaturaw f'Saħħitna*, a community programme delivered by the HESC across various localities in Malta. This initiative is focused on equipping senior citizens with practical strategies to support healthy ageing by translating core Home Economics principles into accessible, everyday practices that enhance autonomy and quality of life in later adulthood. In doing so, the programme illustrates how discipline-specific knowledge can be adapted to address the needs of older adults through context-responsive, practice-oriented learning.

In parallel, the HESC has contributed to community-based financial capability initiatives through cross-sector collaboration. In partnership with the Foundation for Social Welfare Services and other stakeholders, the *Inġeddu Flusna* programme was implemented through the delivery of tailored sessions combining theoretical input with practical, skills-based activities. The programme supported participants in developing financial awareness, budgeting skills and informed consumer decision-making within the context of everyday household management.

Another significant initiative was *Kampanja Flusi F'idejja*, organised by the Birkirkara Community Services of Aġenzija Appoġġ in collaboration with the HESC and other entities. This programme was implemented across several primary schools and targeted Year 5 and Year 6 learners together with their parents. The main aim was to foster awareness of effective budgeting and responsible financial decision-making within family units. The learning experience was delivered through informal and interactive educational approaches, encouraging joint participation by parents and children. The HESC played a central role in the conceptual and pedagogical design of the programme, thereby integrating creative methodologies to enhance participant engagement and learning outcomes.

Throughout the years, the HESC has also supported nutrition education for younger populations, including sessions for children attending football nurseries. These interventions focused on promoting healthy dietary habits from an early age, integrating practical nutrition guidance into the context of sports and physical activity.

This community-focused work aligns with national public health and social wellbeing priorities that emphasise preventive approaches, economic resilience and the reduction of vulnerability across the life course. Maltese

public health policy identifies nutrition education, physical activity and social participation as key determinants of healthy ageing (HPDPD, 2021). By situating both health and financial education within familiar community settings, the HESC contributes to these objectives through educational interventions grounded in daily living practices.

Beyond individual programme delivery, HESC's community outreach contributes to strengthening community capacity and social cohesion by creating shared spaces for learning and dialogue around everyday life challenges. Community-based education initiatives are particularly effective in reaching individuals who may be disengaged from formal learning, as they reduce structural barriers and frame learning within familiar, trusted environments (OECD, 2022). In the Maltese context, this approach is especially relevant given the strong role of local communities, voluntary organisations and parish-based networks in supporting wellbeing across the life course.

By embedding Home Economics education within community settings, the HESC supports informal and non-formal learning pathways that complement formal education provision. This model aligns with Malta's lifelong learning strategy, which emphasises accessibility, relevance and learner-centred provision as key drivers of participation and social inclusion (Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Employability, 2023). Through such outreach, the HESC not only disseminates practical knowledge, but also reinforces confidence, autonomy and social connectedness among diverse population groups. However, the long-term sustainability and scalability of these initiatives remain dependent on continued inter-agency collaboration, operational capacity and sustained community engagement within existing systemic and resource contexts.

Transdisciplinary stakeholder engagement in Home Economics education

Stakeholder engagement is a central element of the HESC's work, ensuring that learning is contextually grounded, sustained and linked to real-world applications across health, nutrition, financial literacy and sustainable living. By cultivating multi-level partnerships, the HESC bridges classroom education with broader societal, economic and community systems, enabling learners to develop practical skills and lifelong competencies (Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012). This approach reflects a shift from traditional, classroom-bound instruction towards more integrated and socially situated models of learning.

Community organisations, non-governmental organisations and educational partners further extend the reach and relevance of the HESC's work. HESC collaborates with local community groups and foundations to deliver nutrition, health and financial capability programmes tailored to diverse populations, while simultaneously fostering lifelong learning and the continuous development of personal skills (OECD, 2022).

Collaboration with industry and sector partners enriches the HESC programmes by bringing additional expertise, contextual insights and resources to support sustainable food practices, financial capability development and responsible consumption education. Collaborative contributions inform educator professional learning, the development of curriculum resources and experiential learning opportunities for learners, ensuring that theoretical content is closely aligned with societal and environmental realities (Janhonen & Elkjaer, 2022; Janhonen et al., 2025; Paas et al., 2025).

HESC's stakeholder engagement framework situates parents, educators, non-governmental organisations, community organisations and industry partners within a cohesive educational model that connects classroom learning with broader societal contexts. Grounded in Mc Gregor's (2016) concept of transdisciplinarity, the collaborative approach adopted by the HESC, supports learners' physical, social and emotional wellbeing, promotes sustainable practices at the family and community level and prepares learners for responsible, informed participation in society.

By engaging families, other stakeholders, and policy frameworks within a cohesive education model, the HESC ensures that knowledge is co-constructed, socially relevant and applicable beyond traditional academic boundaries. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary life-wide and lifelong learning frameworks (European Commission, 2019; OECD, 2022).

Parental engagement as a strategic stakeholder in Home Economics education

Parental involvement is widely recognised as a critical determinant of children's dietary behaviours, food literacy and long-term health outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that when parents are actively engaged in school-based nutrition and health education, learning is more effectively reinforced within the home environment, supporting sustained behaviour

change and consolidating healthy routines (Nutrition Education Expert Panel, 2012; OECD, 2022; Xu et al., 2024). Family engagement is therefore central to the development of food literacy, encompassing not only nutrition knowledge, but also skills, attitudes and motivation related to food and health.

Parental and family engagement remains an important dimension of the HESC programmes, enabling families to engage in shared dialogue about healthy, sustainable diets and nutrition with qualified Home Economics educators, as well as supporting the transfer of knowledge into everyday life, reinforcing practical competencies and nurturing reflective, critical practices. One such example is the current Year 3 programme *Smarter Lunches, Smarter You*, which combines pupil-focused learning with parallel parent sessions. While children engage in age-appropriate nutrition education, parents participate in guided discussions addressing common barriers to healthy eating among other related areas. This dual approach aligns with evidence indicating that parental food education enhances children's nutrition knowledge and motivation, even when direct dietary outcomes are not immediately measured (Nutrition Education Expert Panel, 2012; Xu et al., 2024). Crucially, the programme culminates in joint parent-child participation in the food laboratory, where families collaboratively prepare a healthy lunch, reinforcing learning through shared, hands-on experience.

Research shows that family-inclusive, hands-on approaches are particularly effective in supporting children's learning and wellbeing. When parents actively participate in structured nutrition initiatives, children demonstrate improvements in important health outcomes, including dietary confidence and weight-related indicators (Aleid et al., 2024). Similarly, family cooking sessions strengthen parent-child interaction and encourage healthier lifestyle habits within families (Tørslev et al., 2021). These findings highlight the value of practical, shared experiences in building both children's skills and parental confidence, an approach central to the HESC's family-inclusive programmes.

HESC has also extended parental engagement beyond primary education. In partnership with the Foundation for Educational Services, the HESC has delivered workshops for parents, educators and childcare coordinators focused on early childhood nutrition, wellbeing and effective parenting practices. These sessions integrate theoretical input with practical activities, supporting consistency of health-related messages across home and educational settings. Evidence suggests that collaborative parent-educator

models can enhance parental nutrition knowledge and support positive learning environments for young children (Nutrition Education Expert Panel, 2012; OECD, 2022). Engaging parents alongside educators creates opportunities for shared reflection and reinforces healthy behaviours across contexts.

At the secondary level, HESC-led parent sessions address the specific nutritional challenges of adolescence, a developmental period marked by increased autonomy and behavioural risk. Although evidence on parental involvement in adolescent dietary interventions is mixed, higher levels of parental engagement are associated with positive indicators of adolescent wellbeing, including healthier eating behaviours and supportive home environments (Nutrition Education Expert Panel, 2012; Mahmood et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2024). In school-based nutrition programmes, adolescents whose parents were more involved showed greater vegetable and fruit consumption compared with peers with lower parental involvement (Mahmood et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2024). Taken together, parental involvement across the HESC programmes functions as a strategic mechanism for strengthening learning transfer, reinforcing healthy behaviours, and fostering sustainable family practices (Mahmood et al., 2021). By positioning parents as active partners rather than passive recipients of information (OECD, 2021), the HESC contributes to a coherent home-school-community ecosystem that supports children's holistic development and long-term wellbeing, physical, social and emotional dimensions. However, the extent of impact may vary depending on levels of parental participation and engagement, which can be influenced by socio-economic and contextual factors.

Professional development and the 'train-the-trainer' model

Professional development plays a central role in ensuring that educators remain responsive to evolving pedagogical approaches, policy priorities and disciplinary knowledge. Within the HESC, professional learning is structured around disciplinary domains that reflect the interdisciplinary nature of Home Economics and Support educators in translating national health, food and sustainability policies into meaningful classroom and food laboratory practice. Such an approach enables coherence between policy and practice, while strengthening educators' capacity to deliver integrated learning experiences.

Aligning with contemporary research, this model draws on collaborative professional learning. Taar and Palojoki (2022) highlight the importance of

interthinking; a dialogic process through which participants collectively reason and problem-solve when engaging with complex tasks. Embedded within the HESC's train-the-trainer model, this process fosters a Community of Practice in which educators collaboratively interpret policy frameworks, share professional expertise, and negotiate practical solutions relevant to the dynamic and demanding environment of the Home Economics food laboratory.

Professional development sessions consistently articulate the interconnectedness of the Home Economics domains. Training given by HESC educators related to Food and Nutrition, for instance, is rarely addressed in isolation but is intentionally integrated with Safety and Risk Assessment and Practical Interventions. An interdisciplinary competence enables educators to manage the technical and organisational demands of modern food laboratories, while facilitating the curriculum. This perspective reflects Community of Practice theory, which emphasises that professional learning is most effective when it mirrors the collaborative, multifaceted realities of the professional work (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

Notably, the HESC training initiatives place strong emphasis on reflective practice and pedagogical adaptability, recognising that educators operate within increasingly complex classroom and food laboratory environments. Continuous professional learning enables educators to respond to diverse learner profiles, evolving curricular demands and emerging societal issues, such as sustainability, digitalisation and health literacy.

The Home Economics Support educators themselves regularly participate in professional development programmes organised by the national Directorate for STEM and VET to remain current with Home Economics curriculum developments, while also engaging in Communities of Practice with colleagues within schools to stay connected to classroom realities. International evidence suggests that sustained, practice-oriented professional development is more effective than one-off training sessions in supporting meaningful changes in classroom practice (OECD, 2022).

Another dimension of the HESC's professional development involves participation in sessions focused on organic food education and sustainable food systems. By attending these train-the-trainer initiatives, sometimes alongside Home Economics educators, the Home Economics Support

educators further develop the pedagogical insights and subject knowledge necessary to promote sustainable dietary practices. These sessions frequently involve contributions from external stakeholders, including representatives from organic and sustainable food initiatives, local producers and culinary professionals. By embedding professional learning within the local food context, HESC directly supports the objectives of the National Agricultural Policy for the Maltese Islands 2018–2028, which underscores the interconnectedness of local food production, environmental sustainability and public health (Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights, 2018). HESC's competency-building initiatives also help fulfil a key goal of Malta's Strategy for Resilient Food Systems (Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights, 2025) which is focused on promoting consumer education and awareness, through schools and other vehicles, to encourage informed and sustainable food consumption habits.

Within the Maltese education system, this emphasis on sustained professional learning aligns with national priorities that position educators as key agents of change in promoting wellbeing, inclusion and lifelong learning. By equipping educators with both disciplinary knowledge and applied pedagogical strategies, the HESC strengthens professional confidence and agency, contributing to the quality and consistency of programme delivery across schools. This also helps ensure that specific school requests and needs are translated into effective, context-sensitive classroom practice (Criss et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such professional development models depends on sustained participation and opportunities for ongoing reflective practice.

Conclusion: Implications, impact and future directions

This paper has outlined the HESC as a policy-practice interface within the Maltese education system, highlighting its role in operationalising transdisciplinary, inquiry-based and real-world-oriented learning. The analysis demonstrates that the HESC contributes meaningfully to the alignment of educational practice with national and European priorities related to sustainability, wellbeing and responsible citizenship.

At the same time, the study identifies key areas for further development. These include longitudinal evaluation of programme impact, challenges related to scalability and resource capacity, and the need for deeper theoretical integration within pedagogical practice. Addressing these factors within

existing systemic and resource contexts will be essential for strengthening the evidence base supporting HESC initiatives within an evolving educational landscape.

From a broader perspective, the HESC provides a valuable case study of how small-state education systems can operationalise policy priorities through contextually grounded, practice-oriented approaches. Its model offers insights for other systems seeking to integrate sustainability, wellbeing and life skills education within formal curricula.

Future research should build on this work by incorporating empirical methodologies, including learner outcome data, educator perspectives and longitudinal studies of behavioural change. Such research would enhance understanding of the long-term impact of context-based education and support the continued development of Home Economics as a critical field for addressing contemporary societal challenges.

Building on these insights, this article contributes to the field by offering a contextually grounded example of how Home Economics can operationalise transdisciplinary, real-world-oriented education within a small-state system.

Author Contribution Statement

AA wrote sections and managed references. SAV, DB, SG wrote sections and contributed to data collection; MRB wrote sections, contributed to data collection and to managing references. SC wrote sections, edited, collated and integrated sections and contributed to managing references. LDM wrote sections, led project conceptualisation and review, and was overall lead.

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