

# Safeguarding Children in the Digital Age

Policy Perspectives on Education,  
Technology, and Well-being in Malta



**Local Councils'  
Association**

Assoċjazzjoni Kunsilli Lokali Malta

**Prepared by the Local Councils' Association,  
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# Abstract

This report presents a comprehensive policy and academic analysis of how Malta's children navigate a rapidly digitalising society and an evolving education system. The interplay between technology, social behaviour, and learning environments has redefined childhood, creating both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The study identifies systemic challenges, including unprotected social media exposure, academic overload, digital contradictions in education, and widening socio-economic divides. It critically examines the educational shift away from foundational ICT skills (ECDL) towards coding and media creation, noting the risk of a technical competency deficit. Drawing on established Maltese educational philosophies that champion the necessity of an "interface with community resources" (Borg, 2001) and community-based learning (Pace, 2008), the report advocates a whole-of-society response. This holistic approach integrates responsible technology use and emotional resilience, grounded in a clear policy distinction between state control and child empowerment. By resisting disciplinary power and fostering self-regulation (Borg, 2018), the framework formalizes child participation through the AKL model (Adult-Child-Local Council), which has been successfully piloted in previous initiatives (Children's Local Councils, 2024). This model strengthens local councils and children's councils as key agents for grassroots, participatory policymaking. The document concludes by proposing a strategic framework for inclusive, future-oriented educational reform aligned with Malta's Education Strategy 2024–2030 and the EU's Digital Education Action Plan.

# Foreword

The Local Councils' Association proudly presents this document, *Safeguarding Children from Social Media and Encouraging Responsible Use*. This publication arises from a growing awareness that digital technologies have transformed how our children learn, communicate, and grow; they have also introduced new and complex risks that demand a collective and informed response.

As the level of governance closest to the community, local councils are uniquely positioned to recognise and address the social realities that shape daily life. The well-being of children has always been at the heart of our vision: Residents First – Better Quality of Life. This vision is not limited to infrastructure or environmental improvement; it extends to the emotional, psychological, and educational welfare of our youngest residents, who represent our localities' present and future.

This document was prepared in response to a national and European need to ensure that technological progress strengthens, rather than weakens, the social fabric of our communities. Children today grow up in an environment of constant connectivity, academic pressure, and digital influence. Therefore, our national strategies and our local actions protect their well-being, promote responsible use of technology, and empower families and educators to guide them wisely.

The Association felt compelled to publish this document because safeguarding children is not the sole responsibility of



schools or parents; it is a shared duty that must involve every layer of society, including local and regional authorities. Through initiatives such as Children's Councils and community-based education, we have already seen the power of local engagement in shaping a safer and more inclusive environment for young people.

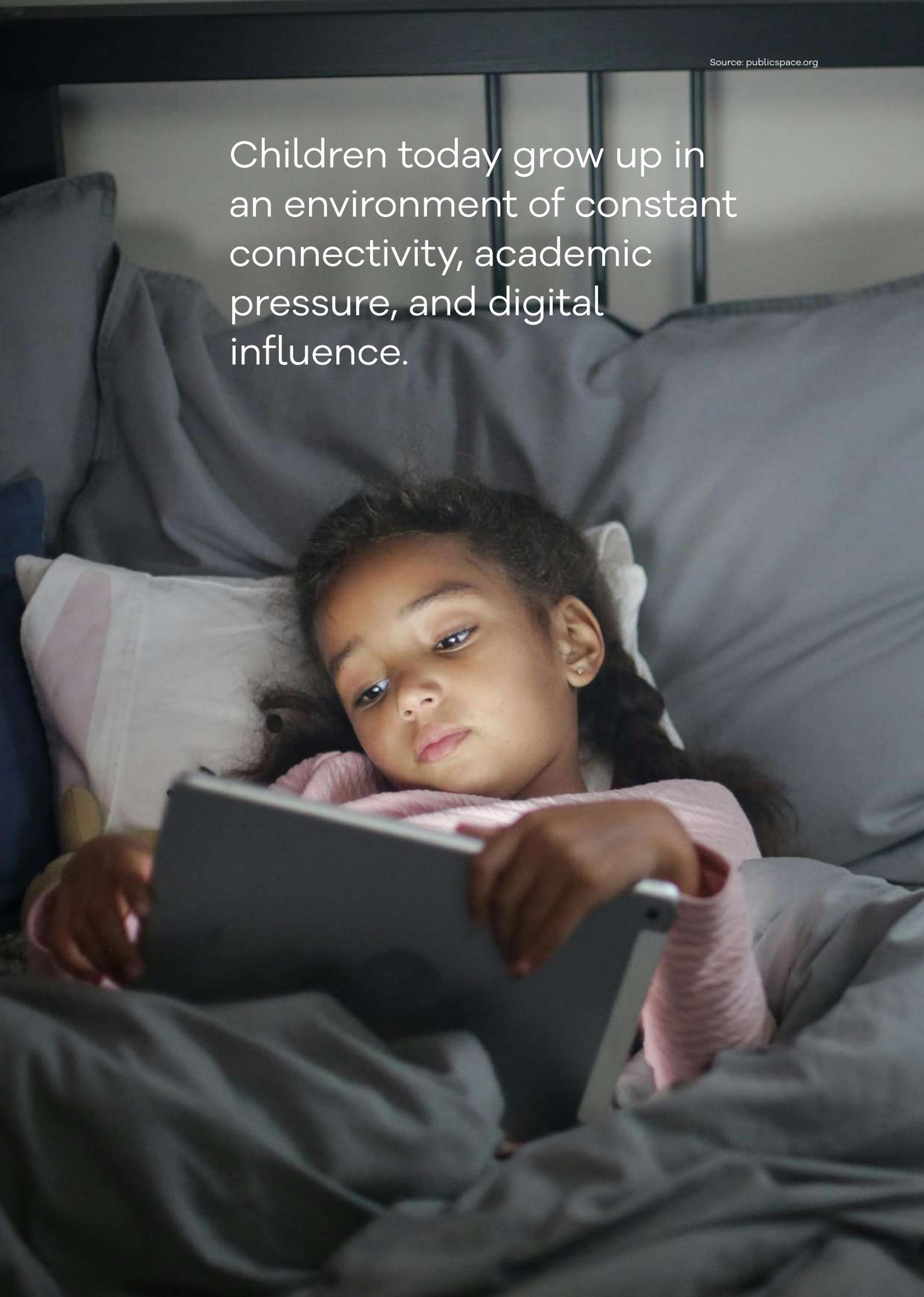
This document is intended as both a policy framework and a call to action. It offers evidence-based analysis and practical recommendations to strengthen coordination between government, local councils, schools, and families. Above all, it affirms that protecting children in the digital age is integral to our mission of building resilient, compassionate, and future-oriented communities.

By aligning this initiative with the LCA's guiding vision, we reaffirm our belief that the quality of life in our localities begins with the quality of childhood we nurture today.

## **Mario Fava**

*President, Local Councils' Association (Malta)*  
Author – Safeguarding Children from Social Media and Encouraging Responsible Use

Children today grow up in an environment of constant connectivity, academic pressure, and digital influence.



# Executive Summary

## 1. Overview

In Malta and across Europe, children are growing up in an era defined by connectivity, digital innovation, and continuous academic evaluation. Technology has become inseparable from learning and social interaction, reshaping how young people think, communicate, and develop. However, alongside these benefits lie profound challenges. The omnipresence of social media, the digitalisation of homework, and the pressures of academic performance are altering children's mental health, family life, and community engagement.

This document offers an integrated assessment of these realities and proposes a coordinated response grounded in education reform, parental empowerment, and local governance. It recognises that safeguarding children is not merely about restriction but equipping them with resilience, awareness, and critical digital literacy to thrive responsibly in the modern world.

## 2. The Maltese Context

Malta's education system is transforming the Education Strategy 2024–2030 to align learning outcomes with future skills, sustainability, and inclusion. Yet, the realities faced by children extend beyond the classroom. Many face early mornings due to liturgical or extracurricular activities, overloaded homework schedules, and exposure to social pressures via platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and Google Classroom. Parental time constraints, driven by dual-income households, have also diminished direct supervision (National

Statistics Office, 2024). This, combined with academic expectations and online exposure, has resulted in fatigue, emotional strain, and sometimes loneliness (University of Malta, 2023). Meanwhile, contradictions persist between policy aspirations for “balanced digital learning” and classroom practices that promote constant screen engagement or influencer-style content creation.

## 3. Key Challenges Identified

The report identifies several interrelated challenges that affect Maltese children's educational and social well-being:

- **Unprotected Social Media Use** – Children are exposed to harmful content and online manipulation, often before the legal age for platform access (European Commission, 2022).
- **Academic Overload** – Continuous assessments and late-night digital homework diminish rest and play.
- **Contradictory Digital Education** – Schools encourage responsible digital behaviour while simultaneously



promoting media creation projects that mirror influencer culture.

- Mental Health and Sleep Deprivation – Constant digital engagement, early school hours, and peer pressure contribute to anxiety, burnout, and reduced concentration (WHO, 2022).
- Parental Time Constraints – Working parents struggle to supervise or assist children with academic and online tasks.
- Socio-economic Inequality – Limited access to technology or study space disproportionately affects low-income families (UNICEF, 2023).
- Loss of Foundational Digital Competence – The removal of ECDL training has left students without essential computer literacy, even as they learn coding and media skills.
- Community Gaps – Limited after-school support and insufficient integration of local councils into child well-being policies, despite the proven value of fostering an “interface with community resources” in education (Borg, 2001, Abstract).

## 4. The Shift from ECDL to Coding and Media Creation

One of the most significant systemic developments analysed in this document is the removal of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) from Malta’s syllabus. This change reflects a global shift in education towards creativity and innovation (OECD, 2023). While coding, robotics, and digital storytelling are crucial future skills, the absence of structured training in practical tools such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint risks leaving students underprepared for real-world tasks. This imbalance highlights the need

for a dual-track digital education model: one that integrates foundational ICT literacy and creative digital innovation.

## 5. The Role of Local Councils

Local councils play an indispensable role in this policy ecosystem. As the level of governance closest to communities, councils are well-positioned to bridge the gap between families, schools, and national authorities. The strategic importance of this local integration aligns with Professor Paul Pace’s (2008) call for educational structures that “address the informal and non-formal sectors to promote lifelong community-based ESD programmes” (p. 1). This principle applies directly to modern digital well-being.

Furthermore, Children’s Councils, already present in many localities (Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, 2024), can become meaningful platforms for youth participation, allowing young people to express views on their digital experiences and contribute to shaping community-based initiatives through the AKL (Adult-Child-Local Council) model (Children’s Local Councils, 2024). By embedding councils more firmly into Malta’s education and child well-being frameworks, digital literacy and mental health promotion can be pursued at the grassroots level.

**Children’s Councils, already present in many localities, can become meaningful platforms for youth participation.**

## 6. Policy Vision and Strategic Approach

The overarching vision of this report aligns with the Local Councils' Association's principle of "Residents First - Better Quality of Life." To ensure that education and technology advance children's development rather than compromise it, the following policy pillars guide the recommendations presented later in the document: Digital Safety and Responsibility – Establishing comprehensive education on online ethics and privacy, explicitly avoiding the disciplinary power of constant surveillance and favouring self-regulation (Borg, 2018, p. 57).

- Academic Balance – Limiting excessive homework and digital assignments to promote rest and creativity.
- Holistic Well-being – Embedding mental health education and sleep awareness into school curricula.
- Equitable Access – Guaranteeing every child access to devices, connectivity, and support.
- Community Empowerment – Strengthening the role of local and children's councils as key agents of reform.
- Curricular Integration – Reintroducing functional ICT competencies alongside coding and media education.

## 7. Anticipated Outcomes

If adopted, these measures will:

- Create a safer, more inclusive educational environment.
- Reduce mental health risks associated with digital overexposure.
- Equip students with both technical and ethical digital skills.
- Encourage balanced, community-based approaches to learning and well-being.
- Reinforce Malta's position as a forward-looking EU member state that prioritises child-centred policy.

## 8. Conclusion of the Executive Summary

This document asserts that children's well-being in the digital age must be a collective national priority. Education reform cannot be separated from family life, mental health, or social policy. The findings call for an integrated approach that values what children learn and how they live, connect, and grow. In the chapters that follow, this document provides a detailed, evidence-based examination of each challenge and presents actionable strategies for government, educators, parents, and local authorities, toward a Malta where every child can thrive both online and offline.

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# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Contextual Background

The early twenty-first century has been defined by an unprecedented digital transformation that has fundamentally reshaped how societies learn, communicate, and interact. For children, this transformation has occurred not as a gradual shift but as the foundation of their lived experience.

Digital technologies are now interwoven with almost every dimension of childhood, from learning and play to identity formation and social connection. In Malta, as across Europe, this reality demands a recalibration of policy frameworks, educational practices, and community support systems to ensure that technological progress enhances rather than endangers children's well-being.

The Education Strategy for Malta 2024–2030 acknowledges the need for a future-oriented curriculum that prepares students for the complexities of the modern world. It emphasises digital competence, critical thinking, creativity, and resilience. Yet, while these priorities are forward-looking, the realities facing Maltese children today reveal tensions between aspiration and experience.

As noted by UNICEF (2023), digital education can empower children, but without comprehensive safeguards, it can also widen inequalities, erode attention spans, and expose them to psychological stress. This document situates Malta's educational and social context within these global trends and provides policy pathways to align national priorities with children's lived realities. A foundational element of this recalibration must be the commitment to

connecting education with local community resources, a principle long advocated for in Maltese pedagogy. As Borg (2001) argued in a project focused on integrating local knowledge into primary curricula, there is a clear need for education that promotes “inter-disciplinarity, learner centred education and interface with community resources” (Abstract).

## 1.2 The Changing Nature of Childhood

Childhood in the digital era is characterised by immediacy, connectivity, and performance. Children no longer experience socialisation solely within the family or classroom; instead, their social identities are co-constructed through digital spaces. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have transformed children into consumers and content producers, blurring the lines between leisure, learning, and labour. According to the OECD (2023), over 70% of European children aged 9–16 engage with social media weekly, while nearly half report encountering harmful or distressing content online.

This phenomenon introduces a paradox: while children gain unprecedented access to information and self-expression, they are also subjected to unfiltered media exposure, peer comparison, and digital surveillance. The psychological and developmental implications are profound. Excessive online activity correlates with reduced sleep, anxiety, and diminished concentration (WHO, 2022). Traditionally a buffer against external pressures, the family unit is now itself fragmented by modern work patterns, leaving many children to navigate these spaces alone.



Malta's education system has long prided itself on substantial academic achievement, yet the digitalisation of education has introduced new forms of pressure.

Teachers increasingly rely on digital tools such as Google Classroom, YouTube tutorials, and online assessment platforms.

In Malta, this shift is particularly visible due to the country's high connectivity rates and compact urban environment. Many children grow up surrounded by technology from their earliest years, often before developing the cognitive and emotional maturity required to use it responsibly. As noted in studies by the University of Malta (2023), children as young as six demonstrate familiarity with digital platforms but limited understanding of privacy, data, or consent.

### 1.3 Educational Pressures in a Digital Age

Malta's education system has long prided itself on substantial academic achievement, yet the digitalisation of education has introduced new forms of pressure. Teachers increasingly rely on digital tools such as Google Classroom, YouTube tutorials, and online assessment platforms. While these innovations enhance accessibility, they also extend the classroom into the home, eroding boundaries between school and leisure time. Many students now receive assignments late in the evening, prompting extended screen use at times traditionally reserved for rest.

The result is what researchers describe as the "always-on" school culture (European Commission, 2023). This culture normalises constant digital engagement, creating unrealistic expectations for responsiveness and productivity, both for students and parents. The contradiction between promoting digital well-being and encouraging continuous connectivity underscores the urgent need for more straightforward national guidelines.

Extracurricular demands and localised activities, such as parish-based morning liturgical programmes at school or mandatory after-school 'duttrina',

compound these pressures and further compress children's schedules. This erosion of traditional, balanced childhood aligns with observations that educational priorities must shift toward holism. Pace (2008), discussing the importance of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), highlighted the need to move beyond formal education alone, stressing the importance of programmes that "address the informal and non-formal sectors to promote lifelong community-based ESD programmes" (p. 1). This principle of addressing well-being through broader community engagement is essential for mitigating the "always-on" pressure.

### 1.4 The Policy Contradiction: Innovation versus Protection

Across Europe, education systems are struggling to balance digital innovation with child protection. The EU's Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) encourages member states to embed digital literacy across all subjects and to equip children with creative and technical skills. However, it also calls for safeguarding mechanisms to prevent overexposure, misinformation, and online harm.

In Malta, this balance has not yet been fully achieved. While the introduction of coding, robotics, and media creation represents progress, removing the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) from the syllabus has created a gap in foundational ICT skills. Consequently, students may graduate proficient in programming syntax yet cannot draft formal documents, manage spreadsheets, or use productivity software effectively.

This tension highlights a broader policy question: how can educational reform simultaneously prepare children for future digital careers while protecting their immediate developmental needs? This document argues that the answer lies in an integrated framework that connects national strategy with local implementation, one that values community engagement as much as curriculum reform.

## 1.5 The Role of Parents and Local Communities

The realities of modern life mean that many parents in Malta, particularly dual-income families, have limited time to monitor or assist their children's digital activities. According to the National Statistics Office (2024), approximately 68% of households with children under 16 rely on both parents working full-time. This socio-economic shift has eroded the availability of direct parental supervision during critical after-school hours.

In this context, local councils emerge as pivotal actors in the child protection ecosystem. Their proximity to residents enables them to identify community-specific challenges, coordinate local educational initiatives, and provide safe, supervised environments for children during unsupervised hours. Moreover, establishing Children's Councils within many Maltese localities, such as the initiative promoted by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS, 2024), presents an opportunity to institutionalise child participation in decision-making. Through structured dialogue, workshops, and digital literacy programmes, councils can translate national educational objectives into tangible, localised action, thereby applying the essential principle of subsidiarity.

## 1.6 Purpose and Scope of This Report

This document aims to provide a holistic framework for safeguarding children in Malta from the adverse effects of unregulated digital exposure, while promoting responsible, balanced, and future-ready use of technology. It synthesises research, policy reviews, and international best practices to offer concrete recommendations for: The Government of Malta and the Ministry for Education;

- Secretary for Equality and Reforms within the Office of the Prime Minister
- Local Councils and the Local Councils' Association;
- Schools, educators, and parents;
- Community-based organisations and NGOs.

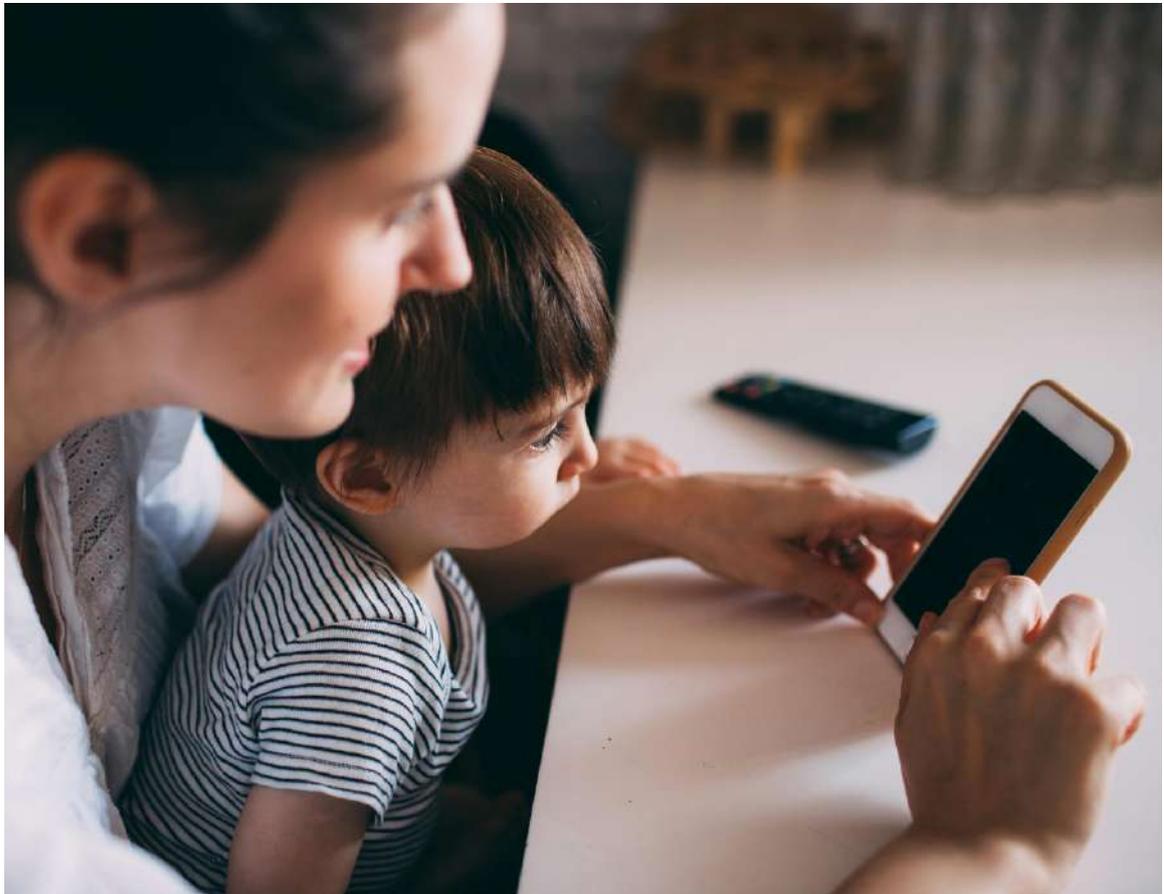
The scope extends beyond education to include social policy, family well-being, and digital governance. It views child safety as both a public policy priority and a moral obligation, requiring systemic coordination between institutions and citizens alike.

## 1.7 Structure of the Document

The document is structured into 14 chapters. Following this introduction, Chapters 2 to 12 explore the key issues facing children today, including social media exposure, academic and extracurricular pressures, mental health, sleep deprivation, and digital inequality. Chapter 11 examines the shift from traditional digital education to coding and media creation, while Chapter 12 highlights the role of local governance. Chapter 13 focuses specifically on Children's Councils

as agents of reform, and Chapter 14 provides comprehensive policy recommendations grounded in evidence and best practice. Together, these sections form a coherent

narrative, one that calls for an educational system and community framework that empower children not merely to survive but to thrive in the digital age.

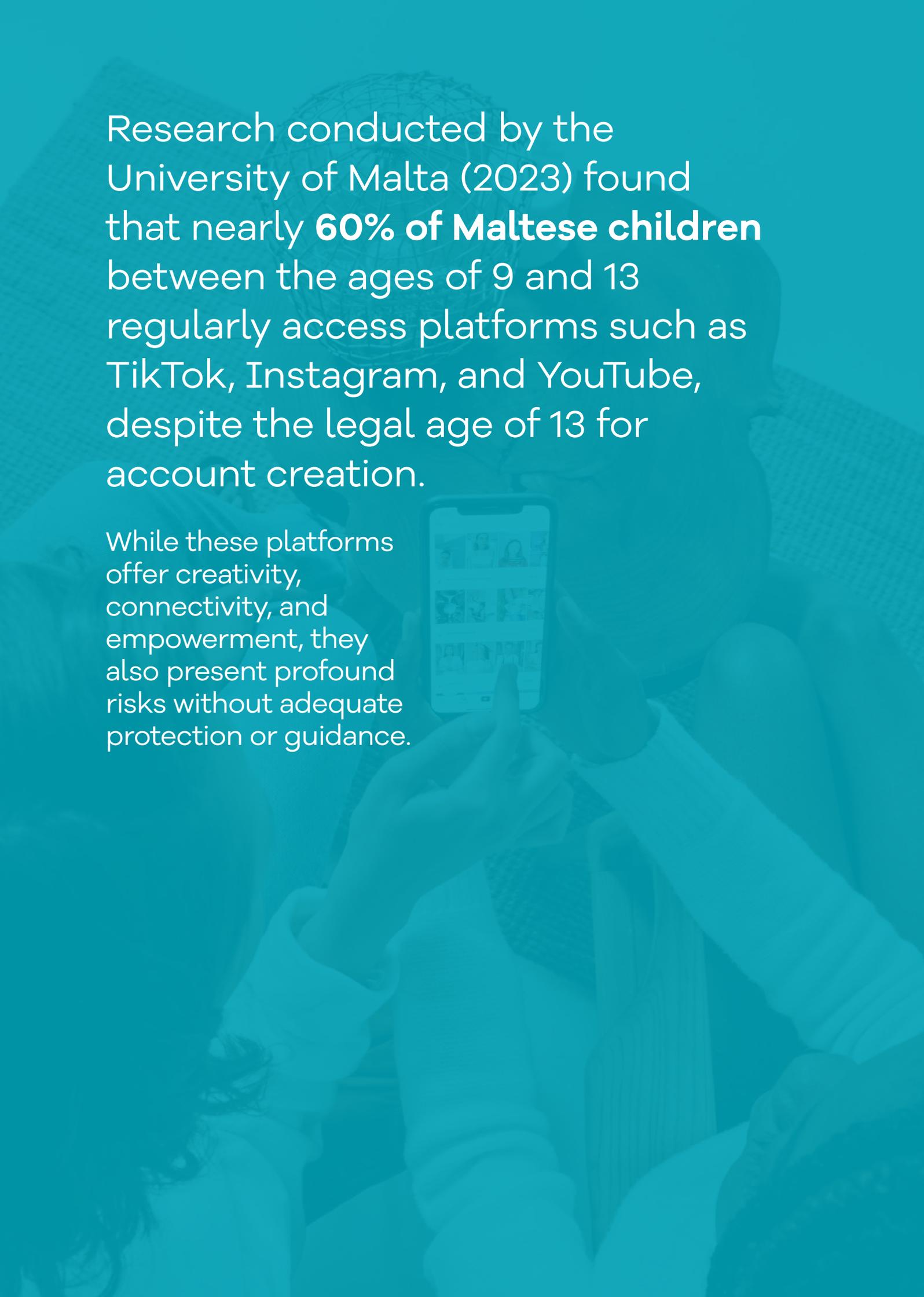


The realities of modern life mean that many parents in Malta, particularly dual-income families, have limited time to monitor or assist their children’s digital activities.

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A group of children are shown from the chest up, holding their smartphones high in the air. The screens of the phones are lit up, displaying various social media-style content like profile pictures and text. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue. The overall scene suggests a group of kids sharing or showing something on their phones.

Research conducted by the University of Malta (2023) found that nearly **60% of Maltese children** between the ages of 9 and 13 regularly access platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, despite the legal age of 13 for account creation.

While these platforms offer creativity, connectivity, and empowerment, they also present profound risks without adequate protection or guidance.

# 2.0 Unprotected Use of Social Media

## 2.1 Overview

The pervasive presence of social media in children's lives represents one of the most significant transformations of the twenty-first century. For many young people, social platforms are not merely communication tools, they are environments where identity, belonging, and social validation are constructed. While these platforms offer creativity, connectivity, and empowerment, they also present profound risks without adequate protection or guidance.

In Malta, as in most European societies, the first social media exposure age continues to drop. Research conducted by the University of Malta (2023) found that nearly 60% of Maltese children between the ages of 9 and 13 regularly access platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, despite the legal age of 13 for account creation. This early exposure, compounded by inadequate parental supervision and the limited enforcement of age restrictions, increases vulnerability to cyberbullying, exploitation, and exposure to harmful content.

According to the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids initiative (2022), children encounter an escalating range of online threats, from privacy violations and grooming to misinformation and self-esteem erosion driven by social comparison. The unregulated digital environment can shape children's sense of self in unhealthy ways, reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards, materialism, and peer pressure.

## 2.2 The Illusion of Connectivity

Social media is designed to foster connection, yet it often replaces genuine human interaction with digital performance. This dynamic can blur the boundary between authenticity and validation for children and adolescents. The pursuit of "likes," "followers," and "views" becomes a measure of worth, resulting in dependency on external approval.

In Malta, this phenomenon is evident in the growing trend of children and young teenagers engaging in content creation inspired by influencers. Classroom activities that encourage students to create vlogs or online profiles for educational purposes, while pedagogically innovative, can inadvertently normalise the idea of public self-presentation. This issue is compounded when children are asked to emulate influencer culture without being equipped to understand the psychological and ethical implications of digital exposure. The necessity of grounding education in real-world ethical understanding echoes the long-standing educational principle, supported by figures like Paul Pace, that learning must extend to "the informal and non-formal sectors" to be truly effective in preparing children for life (Pace, 2008, p. 1). As UNICEF (2023) notes, structured digital citizenship education should guide social media engagement, emphasizing empathy, ethics, and self-awareness. Children risk developing an online identity that prioritises

visibility over authenticity when such frameworks are absent. The paradox is that increased digital connection often coincides with more profound emotional isolation.

## 2.3 Cyberbullying and Online Harm

Cyberbullying remains one of the most prevalent risks associated with children's online activity. A 2022 Eurobarometer survey revealed that 44% of young Europeans have either experienced or witnessed online bullying. In Malta, the Office of the Commissioner for Children (2023) reported a steady increase in online harassment cases among students aged 10–15.

The anonymity and reach of social media amplify the harm caused by bullying. Unlike traditional forms of peer aggression, online harassment can occur at any hour and often reaches large audiences within seconds. The emotional effects include anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and, in severe cases, self-harm.

International best practices suggest that the most effective interventions combine education, legislation, and community support. For instance, Finland's KiVa programme, a nationally implemented anti-bullying strategy, integrates digital citizenship lessons, teacher training, and peer mediation into the curriculum. In the United Kingdom, the Online Safety Act (2023) obliges social media companies to take greater responsibility for protecting underage users, including stricter content moderation and parental controls.

While various awareness campaigns exist in Malta, the enforcement of online safety remains fragmented. Schools and parents often rely on voluntary guidance rather than structured, institutional policies. Therefore,

developing a unified National Online Safety Framework, encompassing education, regulation, and parental engagement, is critical.



Unlike traditional forms of peer aggression, online harassment can occur at any hour.

## 2.4 Privacy, Data, and Surveillance Capitalism

Children growing up in the digital age face unique privacy challenges. Social media platforms collect vast amounts of personal data, often without meaningful consent or comprehension from the user. Algorithms track preferences, behaviours, and interactions to deliver targeted content and advertising. This form of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) turns children's digital engagement into a source of profit. The implications are both ethical and psychological. Children exposed to algorithmic manipulation may develop distorted perceptions of reality, seeing only content that reinforces specific narratives or consumer desires. Moreover, the loss of privacy erodes autonomy; children's digital footprints may follow them

into adulthood, affecting employment, reputation, and identity.

In Malta, the Data Protection Act aligns with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which requires parental consent for data collection from users under 16. However, practical enforcement remains weak. Many children create social media accounts using false ages or shared devices, bypassing verification mechanisms. The need for this systemic change, which demands collaboration between schools and the community, mirrors the challenge articulated by Borg (2001): successfully linking formal education with broader community resources requires overcoming fragmentation to achieve a unified pedagogical goal, a principle she termed "interface with community resources" (Abstract).

Some countries have adopted stronger measures internationally. France, for example, introduced a Digital Majority Law (2023) that limits children's access to social platforms without verified parental approval. Similarly, Ireland's Digital Youth Charter promotes ethical platform design and child data minimisation. Malta could benefit from adopting similar initiatives that combine legal accountability with digital literacy education in schools.

## 2.5 The Psychological Impact of Constant Exposure

Unrestricted use of social media affects not only privacy but also mental health. Studies by the World Health Organization (2022) and the European Network for Mental Health (2023) show clear links between heavy social media use and increased anxiety, depression, and poor self-image among adolescents. Continuous comparison with curated images of perfection creates unrealistic expectations

that undermine self-esteem and body satisfaction.

In Malta, educators and counsellors report a rise in anxiety-related behaviours linked to online pressures. Children as young as ten express distress over not receiving enough likes or being excluded from peer chats. These experiences can have cumulative effects, especially when combined with academic and extracurricular stressors.

Best practice responses include integrating emotional resilience training into the curriculum, as seen in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, which combines social-emotional learning with media literacy. Such programmes teach children to interpret online content critically, recognise manipulation, and maintain balanced self-perception.

## 2.6 Towards Responsible Digital Citizenship

The goal is not to ban children from social media but to cultivate responsible digital citizens capable of navigating online spaces safely and ethically. The European Commission (2023) defines digital citizenship as "the confident and positive engagement with digital technologies for learning, work, and participation in society." This vision requires systemic support, from schools, parents, and local communities alike. Practical measures include:

- **Embedding Online Ethics in Curricula:** Introduce modules that address consent, empathy, and online behaviour from primary level onward.
- **Strengthening Parental Education:** Local councils can coordinate workshops guiding parents on digital safety tools and communication strategies.

- Encouraging Platform Accountability: Advocate for national legislation requiring age verification, transparency in algorithms, and data protection for minors.
- Peer-Led Awareness Campaigns: Empower student councils and children’s councils to co-design campaigns about safe online practices, ensuring youth participation.

## 2.7 Best Practices from Malta and Abroad

Some Maltese schools have already pioneered digital safety education through collaborations with NGOs and agencies such as BeSmartOnline!. These initiatives have successfully raised awareness about cyberbullying and data security, yet they remain limited in scope. A national expansion, supported by local councils, could ensure every child receives consistent guidance.

Internationally, notable examples include:

- Finland’s National Media Education Policy (2021): A cross-sectoral framework integrating media literacy across all levels of education.
- The UK’s Safer Internet Centre: A

government-funded consortium that provides helplines, educational resources, and rapid response to online incidents.

- Portugal’s “MiudosSegurosNa.Net” Programme: A collaborative project between government and schools promoting safe internet use through gamified learning.

Malta could adapt these best practices through a Digital Child Safety Strategy coordinating efforts between ministries, schools, parents, and local councils.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Unprotected social media use represents a systemic vulnerability in children’s lives. The challenge lies in mitigating harm and creating a culture of responsible, informed engagement. Social media literacy must therefore be viewed as a core life skill, equivalent in importance to reading and writing.

The next chapter examines how academic pressures and overloaded schedules compound these challenges, intensifying stress and limiting children’s time and space for reflection, play, and rest.

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# 3.0 Academic Pressure and Overloaded Schedules

## 3.1 Introduction

Education, while fundamentally a pathway to empowerment, has become a source of considerable psychological strain for children in recent years. Across Europe, particularly in Malta, the culture of constant assessment, performance benchmarking, and extended academic engagement has led to what researchers increasingly describe as “academic overexposure” (Smith, 2022). While such engagement intends to foster competitiveness and innovation, its cumulative effect often undermines children’s mental health, creativity, and family life.

The Education Strategy for Malta 2024–2030 calls for “equity, inclusion, and well-being” as guiding principles (Ministry of Education, 2024, p. 5). Yet, as in many countries striving to meet global standards, Malta’s educational system faces the challenge of reconciling these aspirations with the pressures of daily academic routines. For many children, school days extend far beyond

the classroom, incorporating homework, projects, extracurricular activities, and digital learning tasks that leave little space for rest or recreation.

## 3.2 The Escalation of Academic Expectations

Over the past decade, Maltese education has evolved to include continuous assessment frameworks measuring student performance across multiple dimensions. While pedagogically progressive, this approach has inadvertently created an environment of constant evaluation. Children are expected to excel not only in traditional subjects but also in digital literacy, creative production, and collaborative online projects.

Integrating digital platforms such as Google Classroom has extended the academic environment into the home, transforming evenings and weekends into periods of continuous study. Parents and teachers frequently report instances where homework

For many children, school days extend far beyond the classroom, incorporating homework, projects, extracurricular activities, and digital learning tasks that leave little space for rest or recreation.



is uploaded late in the evening, leaving children obliged to complete assignments at times that should be reserved for rest or family interaction (Borg & Vella, 2023).

This phenomenon is not unique to Malta. According to the OECD's Education at a Glance report, children in several European countries spend an average of 15–20 hours per week on homework and self-study (OECD, 2023, p. 112), often in addition to structured extracurricular commitments. The cumulative effect of such workloads contributes to fatigue, reduced attention spans, and increased anxiety levels among students.

### 3.3 The Diminishing Boundaries Between School and Home

The digitalisation of education has brought remarkable benefits, improved access

to information, flexibility in learning, and enhanced teacher-student communication. However, it has also blurred the traditional boundaries that once separated academic life from domestic life. Children now receive notifications about school tasks at all hours, effectively forcing them to take on academic responsibilities without respite.

This "always-on" culture creates a false equivalence between availability and commitment. In some cases, teachers unintentionally contribute to this pattern by assuming that digital accessibility equates to learning motivation. Yet, studies published by the European Education Policy Network (2023) show that "excessive academic connectivity correlates with poorer sleep quality and diminished intrinsic motivation" (EEPN, 2023, p. 45).

In Malta, this issue is compounded by logistical factors such as early school start times and extended commuting. Many children are expected to attend morning activities, such as parish-led activities, like liturgical gatherings, long assemblies, or



extra study sessions, before formal classes begin. As a result, school days often start as early as 7:30 a.m., leaving children physically and emotionally exhausted by the afternoon, since they return home around 4:00p.m.

### 3.4 Comparative Perspectives: Lessons from Other European Systems

Several European countries have recognised the long-term impact of academic overload and have implemented policy responses to restore balance.

Finland, often cited as a model of educational excellence, limits homework for primary students to less than 30 minutes per day (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2021) and discourages after-school tutoring in favour of play and outdoor activities. The Finnish curriculum emphasises phenomenon-based learning, having students explore real-world topics across multiple subjects instead of focusing on one discipline at a time, integrating subjects through projects mainly completed during school hours.

Denmark and the Netherlands have introduced “homework-free” initiatives for early primary levels, arguing that academic achievement must be grounded in curiosity rather than compulsion (Nordic Council, 2020; Dutch Education Authority, 2019).

France has adopted a national guideline that discourages digital homework submission after 6:00 p.m. in certain schools, promoting a “digital curfew” to protect rest time (French National Education, 2022).

These examples highlight a growing recognition across Europe that learning outcomes are enhanced, not diminished,

when children have time for leisure, family interaction, and unstructured exploration. Given its small scale and strong sense of community, Malta is well-positioned to implement similar reforms. A national discussion on limiting homework volume and timing, supported by local councils and parental organisations, could mark a pivotal step toward restoring equilibrium in children’s daily lives.

### 3.5 The Emotional Toll of Academic Pressure

The psychological effects of chronic academic stress are increasingly documented. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sustained pressure to perform academically can “trigger symptoms of anxiety, depression, and behavioural disengagement among adolescents” (WHO, 2022, p. 78). Children internalise success as a measure of personal worth, leading to fear of failure and diminished self-esteem.

In Malta, parents and, at times, even guidance teachers and counsellors report that many students experience emotional exhaustion by mid-week, particularly during exam periods or project deadlines. Some exhibit signs of sleep deprivation, irritability, and withdrawal. These trends mirror findings from UNICEF, which links academic overload to “higher incidences of emotional distress and burnout in children aged 10–14” (UNICEF, 2023, para. 3).

The consequences extend beyond mental health. Overscheduled lives reduce opportunities for social interaction, play, and creativity, all vital components of cognitive and emotional development. When children’s days are dominated by structured activity, their ability to self-regulate, imagine, and engage meaningfully with others diminishes.

### 3.6 Parental Expectations and Social Comparison

Parents, often driven by good intentions, can inadvertently amplify academic pressure. The desire to ensure future success leads many families to invest in private tutoring, extracurricular courses, and advanced digital tools. Social comparison, reinforced by school WhatsApp groups or online parent networks, further intensifies this competitive dynamic (Grech, 2024).

In Malta's close-knit society, where educational attainment is frequently seen as a marker of family pride, such expectations can become overwhelming. Teachers report instances of "parental anxiety transferring directly to children," creating cycles of pressure that undermine learning enjoyment (Malta Teachers' Union, 2023, p. 5).

Best practices from other European contexts suggest that parental engagement should focus on emotional support and curiosity rather than constant performance monitoring. In Norway, for instance, schools conduct parental workshops emphasising cooperative learning goals rather than competition (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2021). Ireland's National Parents Council offers training on recognising signs of academic burnout and fostering balanced study habits at home (NPC, 2022).

Malta could adopt similar community-led models, facilitated by local councils, to reshape parental culture around education, prioritising well-being and life skills alongside academic results.

### 3.7 Extracurricular Commitments and the "Busy Child Syndrome"

Another factor compounding academic overload is the proliferation of extracurricular activities. Sports clubs, music lessons, and parish programmes, while valuable in moderation, often fill every remaining hour of a child's week. The "busy child" phenomenon reflects societal tendencies to equate productivity with success, leaving little space for free play or reflection (Gatt & Abela, 2023).

In Malta, after-school programmes such as 'duttrina' or cultural activities, sometimes organised at the local or parish level, are perceived as obligatory extensions of learning. When layered upon academic duties and digital tasks, these activities contribute to chronic fatigue and disengagement.

In contrast, countries like Sweden have implemented balanced schedules where after-school programmes focus on recreation and socialisation rather than academic reinforcement. The 'fritidshem' (recreational centres), after-school care programme system, offers supervised play, creative workshops, and outdoor activities that complement rather than duplicate school learning (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020). This approach demonstrates how structured, yet flexible environments can foster both safety and well-being.

### 3.8 Reimagining Academic Balance in Malta

Reforming Malta's approach to academic scheduling requires systemic coordination. Schools, parents, and policymakers must collectively redefine success to include mental health, creativity, and rest. Potential strategies include:

- Establishing National Homework Guidelines: Define reasonable limits for

homework volume and submission timing across age groups.

- Introducing “Digital Quiet Hours”: Restrict digital classroom communication (e.g., Google Classroom updates) after specific evening hours.
- Encouraging Integrated Learning: Promote project-based work during school hours rather than as additional take-home tasks.
- Embedding Well-being Metrics: Evaluate schools not only on academic outcomes but on indicators of student happiness and engagement.
- Empowering Local Councils: Enable councils to coordinate after-school “balance hubs” that combine supervised study time with recreational activity.

## 3.9 Conclusion

Academic pressure and overloaded schedules represent one of the most pervasive yet under-recognised threats to children’s holistic development. The pursuit of excellence must never come at the cost of well-being. As Malta continues to reform its curriculum under the 2024–2030 Education Strategy, it can adopt policies that restore balance, ensuring that learning remains joyful, meaningful, and sustainable.

The next chapter examines how extracurricular and liturgical obligations, though rooted in cultural and community traditions, can inadvertently add to these pressures, and proposes strategies for alignment and reform.

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# 4.0 Extracurricular and Liturgical Pressures

## 4.1 Introduction

Education in Malta extends beyond formal classroom learning. The island’s strong community fabric, vibrant cultural life, and deep-rooted religious traditions contribute to a rich network of extracurricular and liturgical activities. These activities, ranging from parish-based morning prayers to after-school clubs and local ‘museum’ programmes, are often intended to nurture children’s moral, spiritual, and social development. However, while these engagements have undeniable value, they can also unintentionally contribute to stress, fatigue, and time poverty among children (Vella, 2024).

As the pace of modern life accelerates, the layering of multiple obligations—school, homework, extracurricular lessons, parish activities, and digital learning—creates a demanding daily rhythm. The cumulative impact leaves little space for unstructured play, relaxation, or family time. This chapter examines how well-intentioned community

and religious initiatives can sometimes overlap with academic obligations, generating excessive demands on children’s schedules. It suggests ways to balance tradition with well-being.

## 4.2 The Role of Extracurricular Activities in Child Development

Extracurricular activities are essential in developing life skills such as teamwork, discipline, and creativity. Sports, arts, music, and volunteering allow children to explore interests and build confidence beyond academic achievements. In Malta, schools and local councils frequently collaborate with NGOs and community groups to offer extracurricular programmes that reflect the island’s cultural diversity and civic spirit (Malta Local Council Association, 2023).

However, the educational benefits of these activities are maximised only when participation is voluntary and balanced.

Well-intentioned community and religious initiatives can sometimes overlap with academic obligations, generating excessive demands on children’s schedules.



When attendance becomes perceived as obligatory or competitive—for example, when participation in numerous activities is equated with success—the intended developmental value is undermined. According to UNICEF, over-scheduling children with structured activities can “reduce emotional resilience and creativity, as it limits the time available for free play and self-directed exploration” (UNICEF, 2023, p. 14).

Therefore, a balanced approach to extracurricular participation should prioritise quality over quantity, ensuring that each child’s schedule allows for rest, spontaneity, and family connection.

### 4.3 The Cultural Dimension: Liturgical and Parish-Based Activities

Malta’s Catholic heritage continues to shape community life, with parishes as important social and moral anchors. Many children participate in morning liturgical activities at school, catechism classes, choir practice, and religious education sessions, which strengthen communal identity and faith formation. However, these practices often require children to arrive at school significantly earlier than official start times or to attend activities immediately after classes.

While spiritual development remains integral to Malta’s educational and cultural fabric, the timing and frequency of these commitments warrant reconsideration.

While spiritual development remains integral to Malta’s educational and cultural fabric, the timing and frequency of these commitments warrant reconsideration. Children who attend early liturgical events often begin their day as early as 6:00 a.m., waiting for the mini bus to drive them to school, followed by full school hours, homework, and evening extracurricular activities. This routine contributes to fatigue, reduced concentration, and diminished enthusiasm for learning (Maltese Paediatric Association, 2024).

We believe the Ministry for Education and the Archdiocese of Malta have periodically discussed the need to balance religious education with holistic child well-being. A structured dialogue between schools, parishes, and local councils could lead to the establishment of Community Time Coordination Frameworks, agreements that align local schedules to avoid overburdening children.

Internationally, similar coordination exists in Italy, where municipalities and dioceses collaborate through “shared community timetables” that prevent overlapping commitments between schools and parishes (Italian Ministry of Education, 2021, para. 2). This model ensures faith-based engagement complements rather than competes with rest and learning.

### 4.4 The “Obligation Culture” and Its Impact on Children

A growing feature of modern childhood in Malta is the emergence of what social researchers call an “obligation culture.” A sequence of structured activities increasingly dictates children’s schedules, each perceived as essential for moral, academic, or social development. Parents,



driven by societal expectations and wanting to provide every opportunity, often feel compelled to enrol their children in multiple programmes.

While these decisions are rooted in care, the cumulative result is exhaustion. According to a 2023 study by the University of Malta's Faculty for Social Well-being, children between the ages of 9 and 14 reported spending an average of ten hours per week in extracurricular activities outside school hours (Faculty for Social Well-being, 2023, p. 25). Many expressed fatigue, anxiety about time management, and a longing for more unstructured leisure.

This pattern has long-term implications for emotional health. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies "chronic fatigue and overstimulation as early predictors of adolescent stress disorders" (WHO, 2022, p. 85). Moreover, constant activity can inhibit reflective thought, the quiet moments necessary for creativity, empathy, and self-regulation.

## 4.5 Balancing Tradition and Modern Educational Needs

The challenge lies not in diminishing Malta's cultural and religious heritage but in ensuring its practices evolve harmoniously with modern educational realities. For instance, parish-based initiatives could be scheduled later in the week or integrated into existing school timetables to prevent early-morning fatigue. Schools and parishes might also collaborate on combined programmes that merge spiritual, civic, and creative learning, thus reducing duplication.

An example of such integration can be found in Spain, where municipalities and dioceses co-manage "educational afternoons" that blend community service, cultural enrichment, and catechism within a single time block (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2020). This approach reduces commuting fatigue and promotes a sense of unity between civic and faith-based education.

Malta's compact geography offers similar opportunities. By coordinating school and parish schedules through local councils, communities could optimise timing and resource use while ensuring that children's well-being remains the central priority.

## 4.6 The Role of Local Councils and Community Coordination

Local councils are uniquely positioned to mediate between schools, parents, and parishes. Their proximity to residents and understanding of community dynamics enable them to identify scheduling conflicts and advocate for balanced approaches. Councils could establish Child Well-being Committees composed of representatives from schools, parishes, and extracurricular organisations to map local activity timetables and prevent over-saturation.

Furthermore, councils could introduce "Community Balance Weeks," periodic reviews during which participating institutions evaluate children's schedules and adjust activities accordingly. Such initiatives would demonstrate a commitment to the well-being of young residents while preserving the rich variety of community life that defines Maltese localities.

Local councils in Portugal have implemented similar schemes under the Programa Municípios Amigos das Crianças, where municipalities coordinate activity timetables and "promote rest days for children" (Portuguese National Association of Municipalities, 2021, para. 3). This approach recognises that safeguarding childhood requires not only protecting children from harm but also protecting their time.

## 4.7 Aligning Policy with Practice

To ensure systemic change, national education and youth policies must explicitly address the intersection of schooling, extracurricular engagement, and community activities. The Ministry for Education, Secretary for Equality and Reforms within the Office of the Prime Minister, in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association and the Archdiocese of Malta, could develop a National Child Time Management Framework to:

- Establish maximum recommended weekly hours for structured activities.
- Encourage schools and parishes to collaborate on synchronised schedules.
- Promote awareness campaigns highlighting the importance of rest, play, and family time.
- Include well-being indicators in the evaluation of community-based programmes.

Such a framework would align with the EU's Child Guarantee (2021), emphasizing "equal opportunities and well-being as essential components of childhood" (European Union, 2021, Article 3). It would also operationalise the "Residents First – Better Quality of Life" principle within local policy contexts.

## 4.8 Best Practices and Case Examples (Referenced)

Several European models demonstrate how structured coordination can enhance children's well-being:

- Finland's Municipal Child Well-being Plans ensure that schools, recreational

providers, and cultural institutions align their programmes with “every child’s right to rest and recreation” (Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2022, p. 12).

- Italy’s Parish–Municipality Agreements streamline morning and afternoon activities, ensuring faith-based events complement rather than overload educational routines (Italian Ministry of Education, 2021).
- The Netherlands’ Play First Initiative mandates at least one hour of unstructured outdoor time daily for primary school children, counterbalancing sedentary academic and digital activities (Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, 2020).

Malta could adapt these practices through pilot programmes implemented by local councils, supported by the Ministry for Education and the Ministry for Social Policy.

## 4.9 Conclusion

Extracurricular and liturgical activities are vital expressions of Malta’s cultural identity and community spirit. However, without strategic coordination, they risk contributing to overburdened childhoods. The objective is not to reduce participation but to ensure equilibrium, allowing children to grow spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally without exhaustion.

Local councils, parishes, and schools must collaborate to design schedules that respect tradition and developmental science. By doing so, Malta can preserve the richness of its heritage while nurturing healthier, happier, and more balanced children.

The following chapter explores how homework overload and the digitalisation of assignments further extend the pressures on children’s daily lives, and how practical reforms can restore a sense of balance and well-being.

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In Malta, as in many European countries, the transition to digital homework has blurred the **boundary between learning and leisure.**

Assignments are often uploaded late in the evening, and notifications reach students through their mobile devices at all hours.

# 5.0 Homework Overload and Digital Assignments

## 5.1 Introduction

Homework has long been viewed as a cornerstone of academic development, intended to reinforce classroom learning, foster responsibility, and encourage independent study. However, in an era of constant connectivity and digitalisation, the nature and impact of homework have changed profoundly. Increasingly, assignments are distributed, submitted, and evaluated through digital platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, or ClassDojo. While these systems enhance communication and flexibility, they have created new challenges for students, parents, and educators.

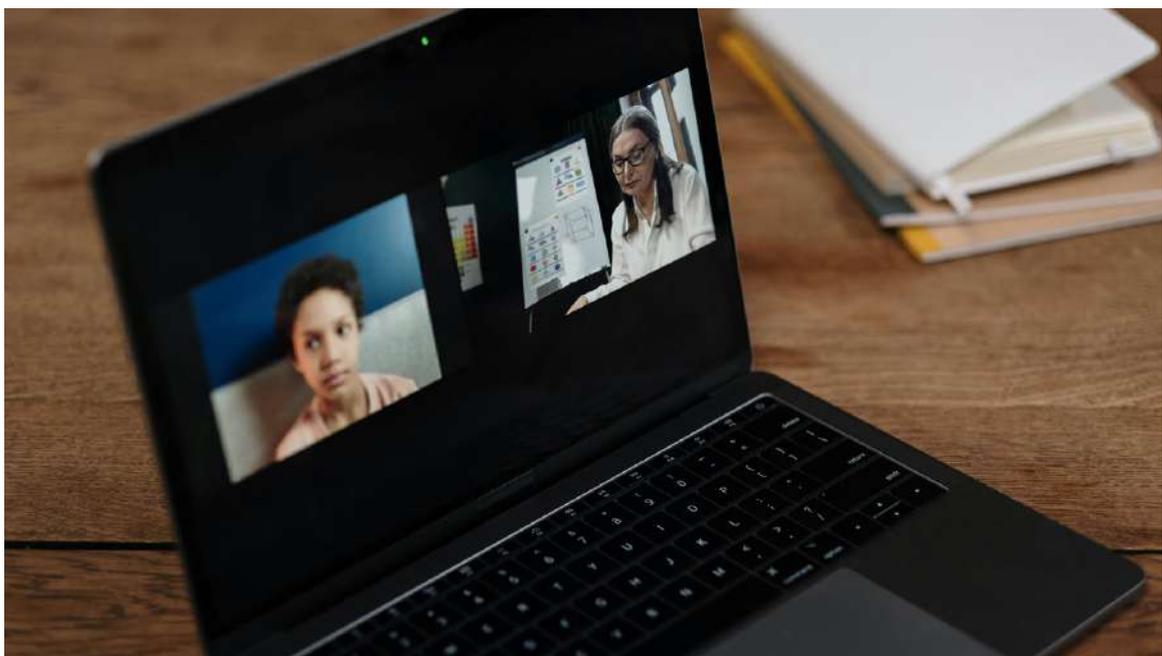
In Malta, as in many European countries, the transition to digital homework has blurred the boundary between learning and leisure. Assignments are often uploaded late in the evening, and notifications reach

students through their mobile devices at all hours. The result is a perpetual academic engagement culture that extends the school day into family and rest time, contributing to fatigue, anxiety, and burnout among children.

## 5.2 The Shift to Digital Homework

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning tools, normalising digital homework as an integral part of education. Platforms such as Google Classroom and Seesaw are now ubiquitous in Maltese schools. They allow teachers to post materials instantly and track student progress efficiently, but they also create an always-available expectation for teachers and learners.

The speed of this transition outpaced the establishment of boundaries or policies



governing usage. According to feedback from Maltese educators, many teachers feel pressured to maintain constant online engagement, sometimes posting materials after hours to meet curriculum targets (Ministry for Education consultation, 2024). Students, particularly at the primary and early secondary levels, feel compelled to remain connected, fearing they might miss critical updates.

This dynamic has normalised late-night study sessions and diminished rest, recreation, and family interaction opportunities. The European Commission's Report on Digital Education (2023) emphasises that while technology can support personalised learning, it must be accompanied by "clear temporal boundaries to preserve student well-being" (European Commission, 2023, p. 55).

### 5.3 The Psychological and Physical Effects of Overload

Research by the OECD (2023) and WHO (2022) indicates that excessive academic workload correlates strongly with sleep deprivation, stress, and lower academic performance. Prolonged screen exposure, particularly in the evening, disrupts melatonin production and sleep cycles, affecting concentration and mood regulation.

In Malta, parents and counsellors report a growing pattern of children struggling with chronic tiredness and irritability linked to late homework submissions and digital communication. These patterns are particularly harmful for younger students who require structured routines and adequate rest for cognitive development. A 2023 survey by the University of Malta's

Faculty for Education revealed that "65% of students aged 9–13 experience anxiety related to homework volume, while 42% report difficulties sleeping on school nights" (Faculty for Education, 2023, p. 15). Teachers, too, acknowledge that excessive homework rarely improves learning outcomes, particularly when it substitutes for experiential or project-based learning that could occur during school hours.

### 5.4 The Erosion of Family Time

The digitalisation of homework has inadvertently invaded domestic space. Parents, already managing demanding work schedules, are now expected to supervise online assignments, assist with unfamiliar platforms, and monitor screen use. Many families lack the time, technological literacy, or quiet space to provide adequate support.



In dual-income households, representing most Maltese families, children often return home in the early afternoon (3:00 – 4:00 p.m.) and remain unsupervised until late evening. When homework notifications arrive at 6:00 or 7:00 p.m., (sometimes even later or on a Sunday), parents may only become aware of tasks too late to intervene effectively. This leads to rushed, stressful evenings that strain family relationships.

The European Education and Training Monitor (2022) warns that the combination of home and school life through digital media can “undermine the protective and restorative function of the family unit” (European Commission, 2022, p. 90). For children, this erosion of home as a space of rest and emotional support can have long-term developmental implications.

## 5.5 Inequality in Digital Homework Environments

Not all students benefit equally from digital homework systems. Access to reliable internet, devices, and parental support varies widely among families. The National Statistics Office (NSO, 2024) notes that “approximately 18% of Maltese households still lack a dedicated study space, and 11% have limited broadband access” (NSO, 2024, p. 7). For children from lower-income backgrounds, completing digital assignments may require using shared devices or mobile phones, which can limit concentration and learning quality.

This digital divide reinforces existing educational inequalities. Wealthier families can afford laptops, printers, and quiet environments; others rely on public resources such as local libraries or council-run digital hubs, which may not be accessible late at night when homework is uploaded.

Internationally, several countries, like Malta, have adopted strategies to mitigate these inequalities. The Ministry for Education is implementing the €54 million “One Device Per Child” (ODPC) project to directly address this gap (Ministry for Education, 2025). This initiative provides a new personal laptop to all secondary school students

(Years 7, 8, and 9) across State, Church, and private schools, ensuring a level playing field regardless of social background. Furthermore, the government previously distributed two-in-one devices to primary students (Years 4 and 5) in all school types (Ministry for Education, 2025).

In comparison, Portugal’s Escola Digital Programme provides every student with a government-funded laptop and internet access (Portuguese Ministry of Education, 2021). At the same time, Estonia’s Digital Inclusion Strategy ensures all children can access supervised digital learning facilities after school hours (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). Malta could strengthen its Digital Education Framework by incorporating similar inclusion measures, particularly through collaboration with local councils.

## 5.6 Late-Night Notifications and the “Always-On” School Culture

Perhaps the most pressing issue arising from digital homework systems is the absence of time regulation. Teachers often unintentionally upload assignments or feedback after regular hours, assuming that students will view the material the following day. However, notifications trigger immediate responses for many children, particularly those using mobile devices, disrupting evening routines.

This phenomenon mirrors workplace trends addressed by Right to Disconnect laws in countries like Portugal (2021) and France (2017), as well as by the European Commission, which prohibit employers from expecting employees to engage with digital work communications after designated hours. Some French municipalities have

adapted this model for schools, introducing digital homework curfews, restricting online submissions and communications after specific times.

Adapting such measures to the Maltese context could involve establishing national guidelines stipulating that homework should not be assigned or uploaded after 5:00 p.m. This would reinforce children's right to rest, aligning educational practice with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31), which affirms "every child's right to leisure, play, and participation in cultural life" (United Nations, 1989).

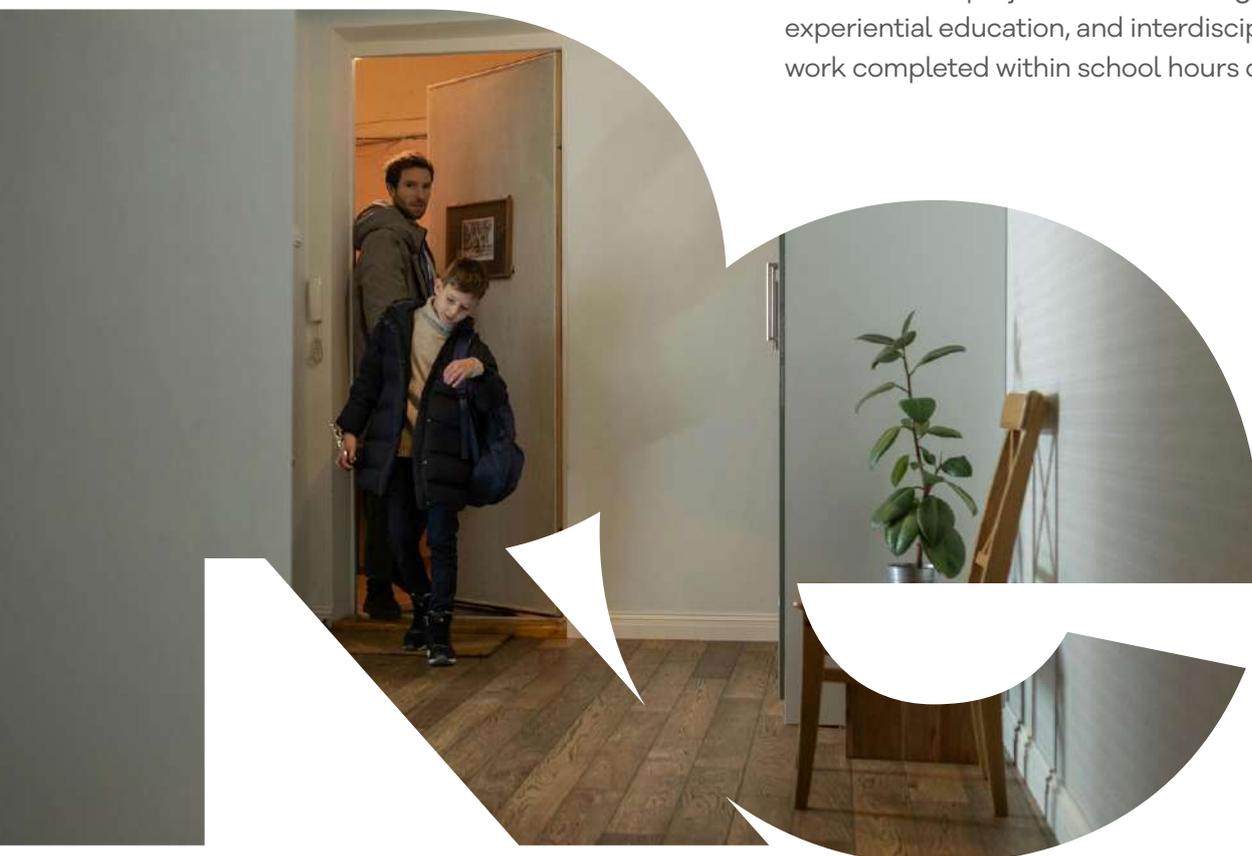
## 5.7 Educational Value and Rethinking Homework Purpose

The debate about homework overload is not only about time but also about purpose.

Numerous studies, including those by the Education Endowment Foundation (UK, 2022), indicate that the educational benefits of homework are most substantial when tasks are meaningful, age-appropriate, and clearly linked to classroom learning. Conversely, excessive repetitive tasks can diminish motivation and deepen resentment towards learning.

Reform efforts in Finland, the Netherlands, and Denmark have shifted the emphasis from volume to quality. These countries prioritise short, reflective assignments that encourage application and creativity rather than rote completion. These countries also place greater weight on in-class collaborative projects, ensuring essential learning occurs during the school day.

Malta's ongoing curriculum review under the Education Strategy 2024–2030 presents an opportunity to realign homework policy with these international trends. A move towards project-based learning, experiential education, and interdisciplinary work completed within school hours could



significantly reduce reliance on at-home assignments.

## 5.8 The Role of Teachers and Institutional Support

Teachers face their own pressures within the digital homework ecosystem. Expectations for immediate communication, extensive feedback, and technology integration often extend beyond contractual working hours. Educators risk experiencing digital fatigue like their students without institutional support or clear policy guidance.

Professional development programmes could include training on time management, ethical use of digital platforms, and strategies for balanced online engagement. The European Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu, 2023) offers a model for promoting healthy digital habits among teachers while maintaining pedagogical excellence (European Commission, 2023).

In Malta, such training could be integrated into continuous professional development modules, supported by the Ministry for Education and the Institute for Education. Schools might also adopt collective policies setting clear expectations for communication, timing, and homework assignment practices.

## 5.9 Recommendations for a Balanced Approach

To address homework overload and digital overexposure, the following measures are proposed:

- National Guidelines on Homework Volume and Timing – Define maximum

daily and weekly limits per age group, with clear restrictions on after-hours digital submissions.

- Implementation of Digital Quiet Hours – Regulate the timing of online communication between teachers and students to protect rest periods.
- Teacher Training and Support – Provide educators with guidance on workload management and digital well-being.
- Promotion of Project-Based Learning – Encourage schools to integrate practical, in-class projects that reduce reliance on at-home assignments.
- Digital Inclusion Measures – Ensure every student has access to devices and supervised digital learning spaces through local councils.
- Parental Awareness Campaigns – Educate families about healthy study routines, screen time boundaries, and the importance of rest.

## 5.10 Best Practices from Europe

Several European examples demonstrate effective responses to homework overload:

- France: Introduction of digital homework curfews in select regions.
- Portugal: Right to Disconnect legislation extended to teachers, promoting after-hours boundaries (Portuguese Government, 2021).
- Finland: Integrating homework into daily school projects minimizes after-school workload.
- Ireland: Pilot “Homework-Free Wednesdays” in primary schools to enhance well-being (Irish Department of Education, 2022).

Malta could pilot similar initiatives in selected colleges, supported by the Local

Councils' Association, to evaluate their impact on academic performance and well-being.

digitalisation of education demands new norms that protect children's right to rest, family life, and balanced growth.

## 5.11 Conclusion

Homework remains a valuable pedagogical tool, but it risks becoming a source of stress and inequality without regulation. The

As the following chapter explores, these challenges intersect with another dimension of modern childhood: the realities of parental time constraints and the increasing isolation of children left unsupervised during critical hours of the day.

# Educators risk experiencing digital fatigue like their students without institutional support or clear policy guidance.

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# 6.0 Parental Time Constraints and Child Isolation

## 6.1 Introduction

Modern family life has changed dramatically over the past two decades. The dual-income household has become the norm, and while this economic model brings financial stability, it also creates new pressures on family routines and child supervision. In Malta, as in much of Europe, many parents work full-time, often commuting long distances or for long periods in traffic, or doing shift work. Consequently, many children spend extended periods at home without adult supervision, particularly during the early afternoon between the end of the school day and parents' return from work.

This reality significantly impacts children's emotional well-being, educational progress, and social development. When combined with digital homework systems, social media access, and academic pressures, it can lead to a cycle of isolation and unstructured digital engagement, environments that are fertile ground for anxiety, dependency, and online risk exposure.

Over 70% of Maltese households with school-aged children have both parents in full-time employment (NSO, 2024).

## 6.2 Changing Family Structures and Work Patterns

The transformation of Malta's labour market has reshaped the rhythm of family life. According to the National Statistics Office (2024), over 70% of Maltese households with school-aged children have both parents in full-time employment (NSO, 2024). The growth of service-based and shift-oriented sectors, including tourism, healthcare, and retail, has led to irregular working hours that often conflict with school schedules.

This mismatch creates what sociologists call the supervision gap, the period between the end of school and parents' arrival at home. For many families, this gap can extend up to three hours daily. Children are frequently left to manage themselves, complete homework, or engage with screens in isolation during this time. For some, the experience fosters independence; for others, it contributes to loneliness, boredom, and unhealthy online behaviour.



This dynamic is not unique to Malta. Similar patterns have emerged in the United Kingdom, prompting initiatives such as the Extended Schools Programme, which keeps schools open beyond regular hours to provide structured after-school activities and safe spaces for children until parents return from work. A Maltese adaptation of such a programme, managed through collaboration between schools and local councils, could address this growing social challenge.

### 6.3 The Emotional and Developmental Consequences of Unsupervised Time

Research from the European Child Well-being Observatory (2023) shows that unsupervised after-school hours can have mixed outcomes depending on the child's environment. While some develop resilience and autonomy, others experience higher levels of anxiety, exposure to online risks, and diminished academic performance (European Child Well-being Observatory, 2023).

In Malta, counsellors report increasing cases of children exhibiting signs of social withdrawal, dependency on screens for companionship, and difficulty managing self-directed learning. Left without structured guidance, many turn to social media or video platforms for entertainment, inadvertently encountering harmful content or cyberbullying.

Children's emotional security relies heavily on consistent adult presence. The absence of parental interaction during crucial after-school hours can lead to feelings of neglect, even in loving families. The World Health Organization (2022) identifies "time-based neglect", the lack of time and attention due to work or external obligations, as a growing

contributor to emotional distress among children in industrialised societies (WHO, 2022).

### 6.4 The Burden on Working Parents

Parents, for their part, often experience guilt and exhaustion. The pressure to balance professional obligations with family responsibilities leaves little room for meaningful interaction. Many parents return home late, facing the dual challenge of assisting with homework and managing household tasks, often while fatigued themselves.



Commuting can further erode family time in Malta's compact but traffic-congested geography. A parent working in Valletta or Sliema may spend up to two hours daily travelling to and from work, effectively reducing available family engagement time to mere minutes before bedtime.

The Malta Employers' Association (2023) has acknowledged this growing issue, encouraging flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies (Malta Employers' Association, 2023). However, uptake remains uneven, and affordable after-school care is limited. Without systemic support, families remain trapped in cycles of overwork and under-connection.

### 6.5 Economic and Social Inequalities

Parental time constraints are not evenly distributed across society. Middle- and upper-income families may afford private tutors, extracurricular programmes, or after-school care, ensuring children remain supervised and engaged. Lower-income families, however, often lack these options, leaving children to manage alone.

The European Child Guarantee (2021) calls for all EU Member States to ensure “effective access to quality education and after-school care” for children at risk of social exclusion (European Child Guarantee, 2021).<sup>3</sup> Malta has made progress in this area through schemes such as Klabb 3–16, which provides after-school programmes in selected schools. Yet, accessibility remains uneven, particularly in smaller towns and Gozo, where logistical and staffing constraints persist.

Extending the Klabb 3–16 model through partnerships with local councils and NGOs could provide community-based supervision, combining academic support with creative and recreational opportunities.

## 6.6 The Role of Digital Technology in Unsupervised Hours

Unsupervised children increasingly rely on digital devices for entertainment and companionship. While technology can provide educational benefits, it also exposes children to significant risks without adult oversight. Many children use social media, online games, or messaging platforms to fill the emotional gap left by parental absence. The normalisation of digital homework and educational communication exacerbates this trend. Notifications from Google Classroom or WhatsApp class groups often reach children during unsupervised hours,

leading them to engage academically or socially online without guidance. Combining digital workload and isolation can contribute to emotional fatigue and exposure to harmful interactions.

A 2023 study by EU Kids Online found that Maltese children rank among the most active internet users in southern Europe, with over 90% accessing online platforms daily (EU Kids Online, 2023). While high connectivity can foster digital literacy, it also amplifies vulnerability when not balanced with supervision, conversation, and community support.

## 6.7 Community-Based Responses and Local Council Roles

Local councils can mitigate in transformative manners the effects of parental time constraints. Their proximity to families and schools positions them to coordinate community-based solutions, such as after-school hubs, supervised play spaces, and family support networks.

For example, councils could repurpose community centres or libraries as Homework and Wellness Hubs operating between 14:30 and 17:30. These spaces offer quiet study areas, supervised digital access, and social interaction opportunities. Partnerships with NGOs, retired educators, or youth workers could ensure sustainable staffing while strengthening intergenerational ties.

Comparable initiatives exist in Sweden, where municipalities run ‘fritidshem’ (after-school leisure centres) that combine academic support with creative play. In Germany, ‘Ganztagsschulen’ (all-day schools) integrate after-school activities into



While technology can provide educational benefits, it also exposes children to significant risks without adult oversight.

regular schedules, reducing parental stress and promoting social equity. Malta's smaller scale makes it particularly suited to adapt these models locally.

### **6.8 Flexible Work Policies and Institutional Support**

Beyond community measures, employers and national institutions must also be part of the solution. Flexible working arrangements, telecommuting options, and staggered hours can significantly ease parental pressure. The Work-Life Balance Directive (EU, 2019/1158) provides a legal framework for such policies, yet implementation varies widely across Member States (EU, 2019/1158).

Malta's public sector has introduced flexible and remote working schemes, but uptake in the private sector remains limited. Fiscal incentives or recognition programmes could encourage businesses to adopt family-friendly practices, improving outcomes for

both parents and children.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) could also expand awareness campaigns linking gender equality and parental involvement, promoting balanced caregiving responsibilities across households.

### **6.9 Supporting Families Through Education Policy**

Schools and educators must recognise the impact of parental time scarcity when designing homework and communication systems. Teachers should consider the availability of parental support when assigning tasks and ensure that expectations are realistic for unsupervised learners.

Moreover, schools can act as community anchors, collaborating with councils to identify families needing additional support. Programmes offering supervised study

time immediately after school could reduce academic and emotional strain.

The Education Strategy for Malta 2024–2030 highlights the need to “strengthen partnerships between families, schools, and local communities” (Ministry for Education, 2024). Implementing this vision will require operational frameworks, such as school–council partnerships and shared resource management, that embed child well-being into every level of educational planning.

## 6.10 International Best Practices

Several European nations have pioneered effective models to address parental time constraints:

- Sweden: Municipal leisure centres provide structured after-school care combining study support and play.
- United Kingdom: The Extended Schools Programme offers breakfast and after-school clubs with academic and social enrichment.
- Germany: All-day schools integrate academic and leisure time, aligning schedules with working families’ needs.
- Portugal: Municipal “family time programmes” promote coordinated

community activities for working parents.

These examples illustrate that protecting children from isolation requires systemic coordination, aligning education, labour, and social policy objectives under a shared vision of family well-being.

## 6.11 Conclusion

Parental time constraints represent one of the most under-recognised yet impactful determinants of children’s well-being. While economic necessity drives dual-income households, societal structures must adapt to ensure that children are not left emotionally or physically unsupported.

Through integrated action by schools, local councils, employers, and government, Malta can pioneer a community-based model that safeguards children during critical hours, strengthens family cohesion, and promotes balanced development.

The next chapter explores a related challenge, the contradiction between encouraging responsible digital habits and assigning content-creation tasks that inadvertently push children deeper into the social media environment.

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A young woman with long dark hair is holding a smartphone up to her face, looking at the screen. The background is a blurred, modern interior space with curved architectural elements and warm lighting. The entire image has a yellow-orange overlay.

Education systems are under pressure to **prepare students for a digital economy** in which communication, branding, and online visibility are increasingly valued.

Striking a balance between empowerment and protection has become one of the most urgent policy challenges of the digital age.

# 7.0 The Contradiction of Media-Creation Homework and Responsible Digital Use

## 7.1 Introduction

One of the most striking contradictions in modern education is the simultaneous effort to protect children from the risks of social media while encouraging them to engage in content-creation activities that mirror the practices of online influencers. Across Maltese schools, teachers frequently assign homework requiring students to record short videos, design digital posts, or publish creative projects online. These tasks are typically intended to develop communication skills, creativity, and digital literacy. However, they also blur the boundary between educational media use and the unregulated world of social media culture.

This tension reflects a wider international paradox. Education systems are under pressure to prepare students for a digital economy in which communication, branding, and online visibility are

increasingly valued. Yet these same systems are expected to shield children from online exposure, data exploitation, and psychological harm. Striking a balance between empowerment and protection has become one of the most urgent policy challenges of the digital age.

## 7.2 Educational Intentions and Emerging Risks

Teachers often assign media-creation tasks with the best intentions: to encourage creative expression, teach presentation skills, and promote familiarity with modern technologies. The Digital Education Action Plan (EU, 2021–2027) encourages schools to integrate digital skills into the curriculum to equip students for future employment (European Commission, 2021).

However, when such tasks are not adequately framed or supervised, they

Teachers often assign media-creation tasks with the best intentions: to encourage creative expression, teach presentation skills, and promote familiarity with modern technologies.



can push children toward mimicry of influencer culture, an environment driven by performance, validation, and public visibility. Children who post assignments or projects on open platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram can inadvertently expose themselves to online criticism, data harvesting, or contact from strangers.

Recent reports from parents indicate a growing concern about assignments requiring children to “create content” without clear guidance on privacy or digital ethics. For instance, students may be asked to record a “public awareness video” and upload it to a social platform, or to emulate online personalities to develop communication skills. While these tasks may seem innovative, they also normalise the idea that visibility equates to success, a message that conflicts with broader efforts to encourage responsible, private, and mindful media use.

### 7.3 The Influence of Online Culture on Education

Social media platforms have profoundly shaped how children learn, communicate, and express identity. Algorithms reward engagement, popularity, and visual appeal, dynamics that can influence classroom expectations and peer perception.<sup>4</sup> When school projects replicate these systems, they risk reinforcing unhealthy notions of self-worth tied to public approval.

Children accustomed to “likes” and “followers” may begin to view school tasks through the same lens, measuring success by external validation rather than intrinsic learning. According to the EU Kids Online Survey (2023), “46% of Maltese adolescents admitted feeling pressure to present a perfect image online, and 38% reported anxiety linked to digital visibility” (EU Kids

Online, 2023).

When educational tasks unintentionally replicate these pressures, schools risk amplifying the insecurities they aim to protect children. Instead of developing digital resilience, students may internalise dependence on online approval, blurring the line between learning and performance.

### 7.4 Ethical and Privacy Considerations

Digital homework, if it involves personal imagery, audio, or video, inevitably raises privacy and data-protection concerns. Without understanding the implications, children may reveal identifying details, such as their faces, voices, locations, or family settings. The potential for leaks, unauthorised sharing, or misuse remains high even when shared in restricted classroom platforms.

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), schools are legally responsible for ensuring that any digital material created by minors is securely handled and processed (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016). However, many educational institutions may lack the technical capacity or staff training to guarantee full compliance. The Office of the Information and Data Protection Commissioner (IDPC, Malta) has repeatedly emphasised the need for precise consent mechanisms and data-management protocols in educational contexts (IDPC, 2024).

Furthermore, age and cognitive development limit children’s understanding of consent. Assignments requiring them to “publish” or “share” content can lead to uninformed digital exposure, often without parental oversight.



## 7.5 Psychological Impacts of Performance-Based Tasks

Creating digital content for assessment introduces elements of performance and public evaluation that differ from traditional homework. For some children, especially those struggling with self-esteem, this can cause anxiety, self-comparison, and stress. The World Health Organization (2022) notes that “adolescents who engage heavily in image-based social media report higher rates of body dissatisfaction and social anxiety” (WHO, 2022). When school assignments replicate these visual cultures, asking students to film themselves, pose, or perform, they risk reinforcing these vulnerabilities.

We may observe increasing self-consciousness among students if tasked with video projects. Some children will feel embarrassed or excluded if they lack access to high-quality equipment or editing tools, leading to classroom inequity. This digital “arms race” mirrors broader social divisions between families with differing technological access and literacy levels.

## 7.6 International Examples and Policy Responses

Several European countries have begun to address the contradiction between media-creation learning and responsible digital use.

Finland has introduced Media Literacy Education Guidelines that require all digital

projects involving children to prioritise privacy, closed-group sharing, and critical reflection on online culture (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

Ireland’s Department of Education (2022) issued a circular advising schools to avoid tasks requiring social-media posting, instead promoting internal platforms for creativity (Irish Department of Education, 2022).

France has developed the Digital Ethics in Schools Framework, which encourages “critical creation” — focusing on storytelling, teamwork, and communication while prohibiting public posting of school content (French Ministry of Education, 2020).

Estonia integrates digital creativity into national curricula through state-run educational platforms that simulate social-media environments safely, ensuring students learn technical skills without

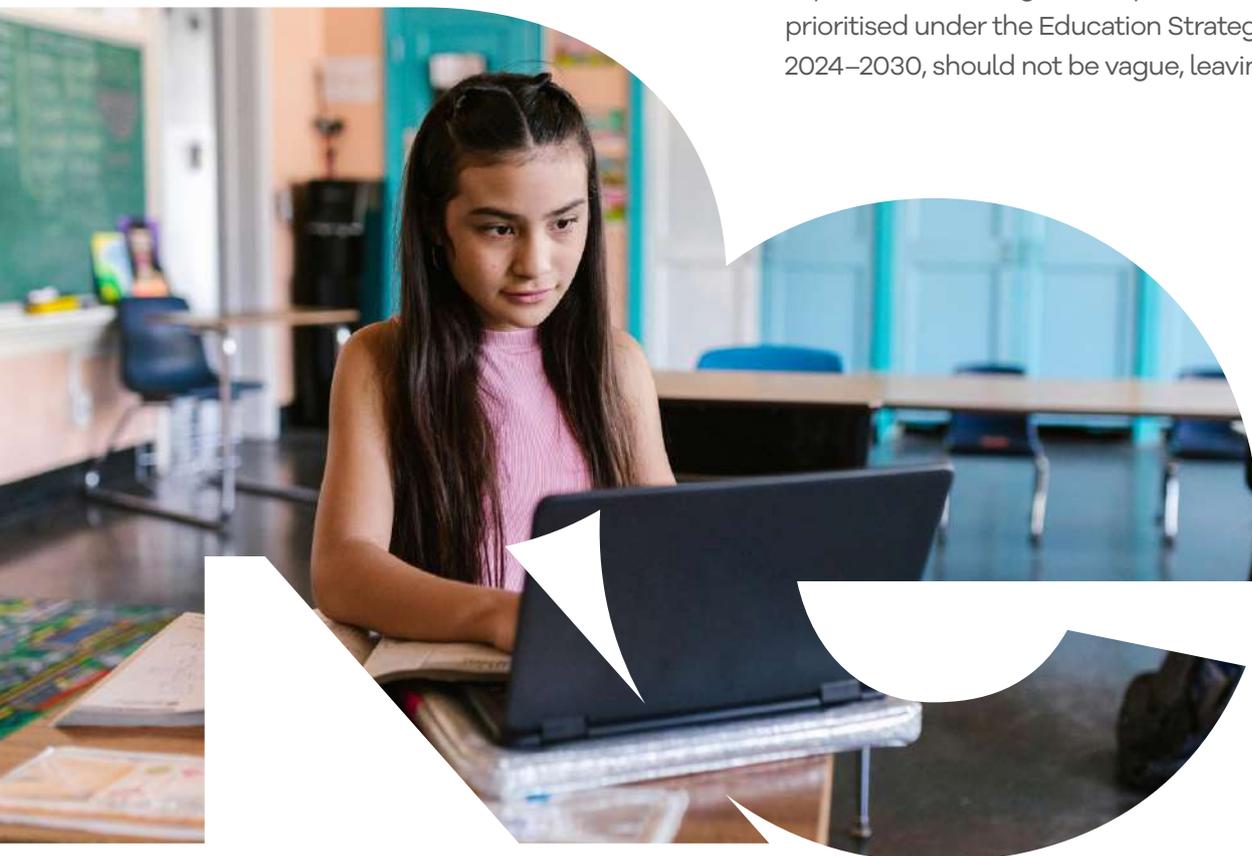
exposure to external risks (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

Malta could draw upon these examples by developing a National Framework for Safe Media Creation in Education, ensuring digital assignments promote learning rather than exposure.

## 7.7 The Maltese Context: Contradictions in Practice

Within Maltese schools, the contradiction between policy and practice is obvious. On one hand, educational authorities emphasise the importance of safeguarding children online and reducing screen time. On the other hand, children are frequently required to engage in tasks that increase their digital presence.

European educators often note that curricular expectations for “digital competence,” now prioritised under the Education Strategy 2024–2030, should not be vague, leaving



Schools should embed critical media education in the curriculum, encouraging students to analyse influencer culture, recognise online manipulation, and reflect on their digital identities.



room for interpretation (Ministry for Education, 2024). Without a clear policy, educators may equate digital competence with visible online output, leading to a proliferation of creative assignments that rely on public digital platforms.

The result is a generation of students increasingly adept at self-presentation but not necessarily at self-protection. Furthermore, this environment burdens parents, who must monitor online behaviour and ensure children's safety without adequate institutional support.

## 7.8 Reconciling Digital Literacy with Digital Safety

The key policy challenge is not to eliminate media creation from education but to redefine it. True digital literacy extends beyond using technology; it includes understanding ethics, privacy, consent, and the socio-emotional dimensions of digital life.

Schools can teach these competencies through closed digital ecosystems, platforms managed internally by the Ministry for Education or by school networks, where students can publish creative work securely. By doing so, children

can learn content creation, editing, and communication skills without exposure to public platforms.

Equally, schools should embed critical media education in the curriculum, encouraging students to analyse influencer culture, recognise online manipulation, and reflect on their digital identities. This approach, already implemented in Denmark and Germany, fosters awareness rather than imitation.

## 7.9 Policy Recommendations

To resolve this contradiction, the following policy measures are recommended:

- Develop a National Policy on Safe Media Creation in Schools — Clarify boundaries for online publication, consent, and platform choice.
- Integrate Digital Ethics into Teacher Training — Ensure educators understand digital tasks' psychological and legal implications.
- Establish Secure Educational Platforms — Provide government-managed alternatives to commercial social media for student projects.
- Include Parents in the Digital

Education Process — Offer workshops on guiding children’s online creativity safely.

- Introduce Reflective Digital Literacy Modules — Encourage students to study influencer culture and its effects on identity critically.
- Audit School Practices Regularly — The Ministry for Education and the IDPC should monitor compliance with digital safety standards.

## 7.10 Aligning with Broader Educational Reforms

The forthcoming curriculum reform offers an opportunity to address these issues holistically. The removal of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and the introduction of coding and media creation represent a shift towards digital innovation. However, as discussed later in this report, this transition must be balanced with practical skills and ethical awareness.

Digital education should not merely produce competent users but conscious citizens. By embedding responsible creation

within a structured ethical framework, Malta can develop a generation of learners who understand both digital expression’s power and responsibility.

## 7.11 Conclusion

The contradiction between advocating responsible social-media use and promoting content-creation homework reflects a broader misalignment between policy and pedagogy. While creativity and innovation are essential components of modern education, they must not come at the cost of safety or well-being.

A coherent, values-based framework that integrates digital literacy, ethics, and well-being into all aspects of learning is essential. Only then can Malta’s education system prepare children to navigate the digital world and shape it responsibly.

The next chapter will examine the implications of curriculum changes, particularly the removal of ECDL and the introduction of coding and media-creation subjects, exploring how these shifts affect core digital competencies and employability.

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# 8.0 The Removal of ECDL and the Shift Toward Coding and Media Skills

## 8.1 Introduction: The Maltese Context and the Digital Skills Paradox

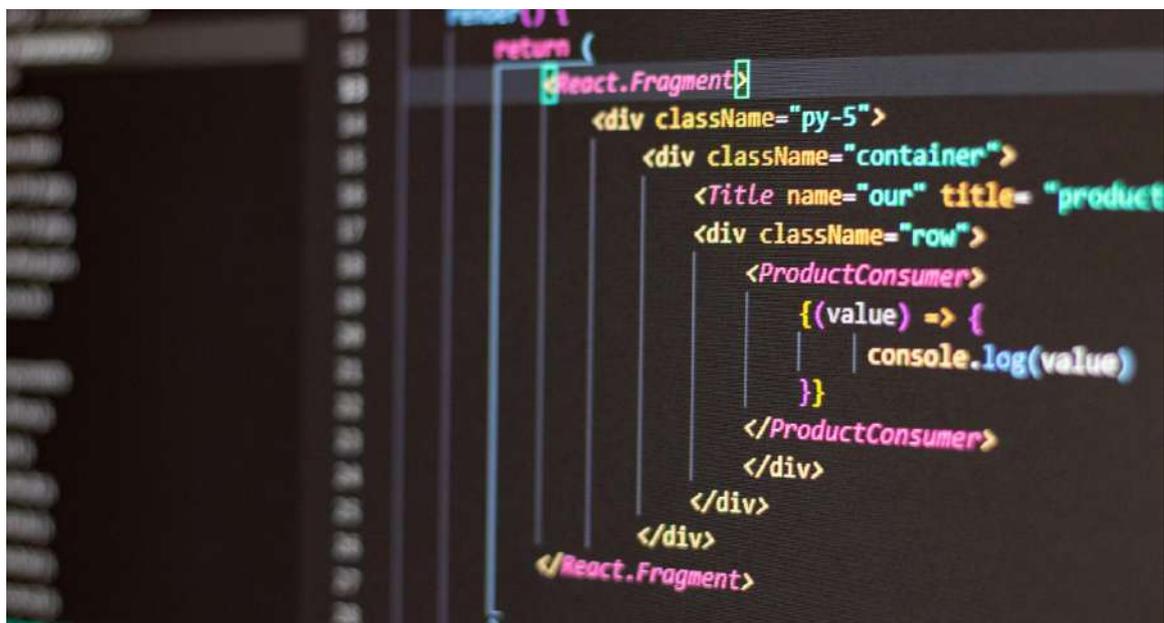
The ongoing reform of Malta's educational curriculum includes a significant and symbolic shift: removing the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) from secondary-level education and replacing it with a more modern emphasis on coding, digital creativity, and media production. While this change aligns with global trends in education, prioritising innovation, computational thinking, and digital literacy, it also raises critical questions about the balance between foundational computer skills and advanced digital competencies.

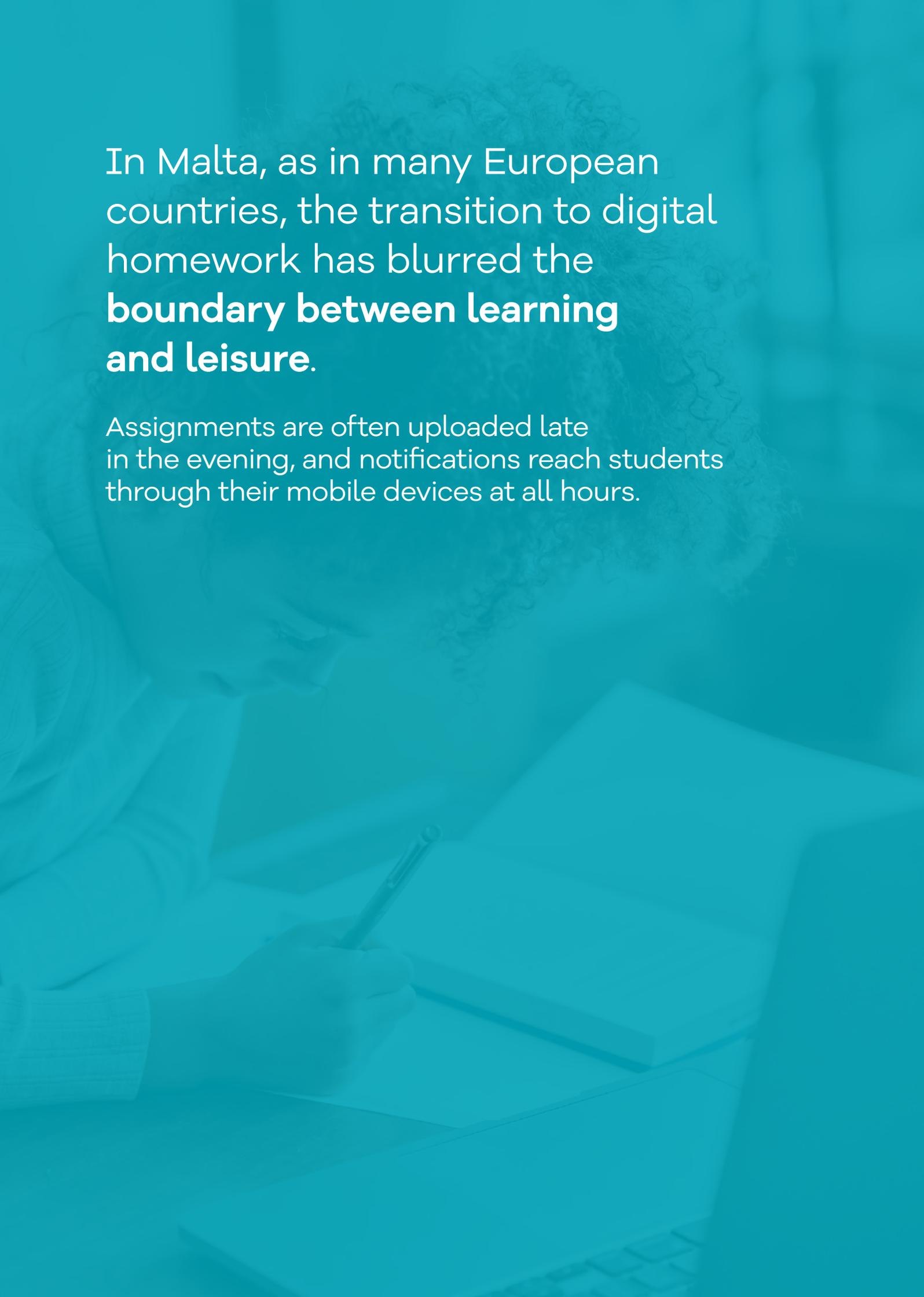
The reform occurs within a distinct national economic reality. Malta's economy is

heavily reliant on Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), which are often family-run businesses. According to the National Statistics Office (NSO) data for 2021, 99.7% of firms in the non-financial business economy in Malta were SMEs.

These small businesses account for 78.1% of all employment and 49.8% of the overall net turnover (NSO, 2023). A 2024 study on local family businesses found that an overwhelming 86% focus on daily operational matters, with only 36% basing decisions on research and data analysis (Malta Chamber of SMEs, 2024).

This business context highlights a crucial skills paradox: the new curriculum prioritises advanced skills like coding and AI creation to prepare students for a highly digital future. However, the resulting



A student with curly hair is writing in a spiral notebook with a pen. A laptop is open in front of them. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color.

In Malta, as in many European countries, the transition to digital homework has blurred the **boundary between learning and leisure.**

Assignments are often uploaded late in the evening, and notifications reach students through their mobile devices at all hours.

lack of practical computer literacy (like professional use of spreadsheets and word processing) leaves students unprepared for the immediate administrative and data management needs of the 99.7% of businesses they are most likely to enter. This deficit in foundational skills is precisely what makes vocational students less equipped to responsibly engage with AI's ethical and data-driven challenges, as detailed in the analysis that follows.

For decades, the ECDL represented a standardised benchmark in basic computer literacy across Europe. Its focus on word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, and data management gave students tangible, employment-relevant skills. However, its removal and the introduction of abstract or creative digital subjects risk leaving some students without essential workplace capabilities, such as proficiency in Microsoft Office applications.

This chapter examines the rationale behind the shift, its implications for employability and educational equity, and potential strategies to reconcile innovation with practicality in Malta's digital education framework.

## 8.2 The Historical Role of the ECDL

The European Computer Driving Licence was introduced in the 1990s as a continent-wide initiative to ensure citizens could use computers effectively. It became an international standard for digital literacy, encompassing seven key modules: word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, databases, IT security, online collaboration, and computer essentials.

The ECDL was widely adopted across secondary schools and vocational

institutions such as MCAST (Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology) in Malta. The qualification helped students acquire technical proficiency and enhanced employability, particularly for administrative, financial, and clerical roles. Employers valued ECDL certification as evidence of practical competence in digital tools used daily in workplaces across Europe.

While its content became somewhat outdated over time, failing to keep pace with cloud computing, coding, and multimedia innovation, its structured, competency-based approach provided a reliable foundation that ensured no student entered the workforce digitally illiterate.

## 8.3 The Rationale for Change

Educational policymakers worldwide have sought to modernise digital curricula to reflect technological transformation. Coding, robotics, artificial intelligence, and digital media have become central to economic growth strategies. The Maltese Education Strategy 2024–2030 reflects this global momentum by emphasising “innovation, creativity, and digital entrepreneurship” (Ministry for Education, 2024).

The decision to remove ECDL training was motivated by a desire to move beyond basic software use toward higher-order digital thinking. Coding teaches logic, problem-solving, and algorithmic reasoning, skills increasingly relevant to the 21st-century economy. Similarly, media-creation modules are vehicles for communication, creativity, and cultural participation.

However, this reform assumes that foundational computer skills are already universal, an assumption not supported by evidence. As a result, students risk

graduating with theoretical or creative competencies without the practical digital skills employers demand.

## 8.4 Emerging Gaps in Digital Competence

Educators and employers have begun to observe the consequences of this curricular transition. Lecturers, for example, report that many first-year students lack proficiency in essential office applications such as Microsoft Word and Excel. These gaps hinder students' ability to complete coursework, manage data, and produce professional reports.

The National Skills Council (2024) has similarly warned that "removing ECDL has created an unintended deficit in practical computer literacy, particularly among vocational and technical students" (National Skills Council, 2024). While many young people are adept at using smartphones and social media, they often lack formal training in structured digital work environments, skills critical to administrative and managerial roles.

In contrast, older workers who obtained the ECDL before its removal often demonstrate stronger document management and digital communication skills, highlighting the unintended generational gap emerging in Malta's digital workforce.

## 8.5 The European Context: International Best Practices for Digital Skills

Malta is not alone in re-evaluating basic computer training. However, several leading European countries have adopted models

that integrate both foundational and advanced digital competencies rather than treating them as mutually exclusive, aligning with the principle that innovation builds upon mastery of basic tools:

- Estonia: As one of Europe's most digitally advanced countries, Estonia's curriculum reflects a balanced approach. Following the original 'Tiger Leap' program, which introduced computers and internet to schools, students are taught essential office software use alongside programming from the primary level (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). The country's new 'AI Leap 2025' initiative is now integrating advanced AI tools into education but builds upon this already strong foundation of digital literacy (e-Estonia, 2025).



- Ireland: Ireland retained the ICDL/ ECDL equivalent modules under the Digital Skills for Citizens Programme and widely promotes the certification for students (ICDL Ireland, 2024). The certification is recognised by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and can be used as an exemption for over 40% of QQI awards, ensuring students



maintain essential, employment-relevant computer literacy while exploring new technologies (Irish Department of Education, 2022; ICDL Ireland, 2024).

- Finland: Finland, a global leader in education, embeds “everyday digital skills” (word processing, spreadsheets, and data literacy) within broader digital citizenship and media literacy courses (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). Students learn how to program and produce, edit, and communicate information professionally. Finland’s focus on “transversal competencies” ensures foundational digital skills are taught as part of critical thinking and ethical media behaviour, demonstrating a successful model of integration rather than removal (EAVI, 2024).

These examples demonstrate that modernising education need not mean abandoning the fundamentals. A balanced, integrated approach ensures that all learners acquire creative and operational

digital fluency, which also strongly aligns with the five competence areas defined by the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 2.2).

## 8.6 Implications for Employability

Employers across Malta and Europe rely heavily on standard office applications for communication, budgeting, and data management. Proficiency in tools such as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint remains essential for the vast majority of jobs.

A 2023 report by Eurofound asserted that “digital literacy is fundamental for most European jobs” (Eurofound, 2023). Malta’s small labour market compounds this issue, as entry-level roles often require multi-functionality, demanding employees handle documentation, data input, and communication tasks alongside their core duties. Young workers may face immediate barriers to employment and productivity without a grounding in office software.

## 8.7 The Equity Dimension

The removal of the ECDL also raises questions of educational equity. Students from well-resourced schools or technologically literate families may acquire practical computer skills at home. Others, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, depend on school-based instruction to gain such competencies.

The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 2024) highlights that while Malta scores highly in connectivity, it “lags in digital skills among certain social groups” (European Commission, 2024). Without universal access to foundational training, digital inequality is likely to widen.

## 8.8 The Case for a Balanced Curriculum

The dichotomy between “old” and “new” digital skills is misleading. Rather than viewing ECDL-style competencies and coding as mutually exclusive, education systems should treat them as complementary.

A balanced curriculum might include:

- Foundational Modules – word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, and digital communication.
- Applied Modules – coding, web design, and media production integrated with practical applications.
- Ethical and Critical Modules – digital safety, privacy, and responsible online engagement.

This integrated model would ensure students graduate as competent digital operators and creative innovators. It would also align Malta with the European



Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 2.2), emphasizing balanced proficiency across five areas: information literacy, communication, content creation, safety, and problem-solving (European Commission, 2022).

## 8.9 The Critical Intersection of AI Ethics and Foundational Skills

The transition from ECDL-based skills to advanced competencies like coding and media creation necessitates a direct and immediate focus on AI ethics and boundaries. The National Skills Council's (2024) warning that students lack practical literacy is amplified by the rise of AI, particularly for vocational and technical students who are entering fields being fundamentally reshaped by automation and smart systems.

### Amplified Risks in the Absence of Foundational Skills

The lack of basic digital proficiency means vocational students are less equipped to engage with AI responsibly:

- **Understanding Data and Privacy:** Foundational skills, like those taught in the ECDL's IT Security and Data Management modules, build an understanding of where data is stored and accessed. Without this base, students—especially in technical fields where they will handle customer or system data—are ill-prepared to understand the ethical and legal implications of AI data processing or the GDPR (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016).

- **AI as a “Black Box”:** Students lacking basic data literacy may view AI tools as a magic “black box” solution, adopting AI-generated content or decisions without the critical thinking necessary to assess their accuracy, bias, or ethical implications. This is particularly problematic in vocational settings (e.g., engineering, healthcare) where AI is increasingly used for design, diagnostics, or process optimisation.

### The Need for “Ethical Digital Citizenship”

The Maltese Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030 explicitly aims for learners to become “successful digital global citizens” and to instill a mindset that fosters “adaptability, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making” (Ministry for Education, 2024). AI ethics education is essential to meeting these goals, focusing on:

- **Bias and Fairness:** Students must learn to identify and mitigate algorithmic bias in AI tools, which can perpetuate or amplify societal prejudices in vocational contexts, from hiring algorithms to product design.
- **Accountability and Transparency:** Future workers must understand the boundaries of responsibility when using AI. The lack of clarity around who is responsible when an AI system makes an error requires structured ethical training, especially given Malta's emphasis on a people-centred, ethical approach to AI development (MDIA, 2030).
- **Academic and Professional Integrity:** The ease of using Generative AI (like ChatGPT) creates a profound boundary challenge for academic integrity. Vocational students need

explicit ethical codes to define plagiarism, cheating, and the responsible co-creation of work with AI, which often falls outside the scope of traditional literacy training (WHO, 2022).

## 8.10 The Essential Role of Advanced Digital Skills in Malta

The question regarding how much of AI coding and advanced creation is needed is central to this debate. While the needs of Malta's SME sector (99.7% of all firms) demand strong foundational skills (data management, spreadsheets), the push for advanced skills is critical for two key reasons:

- **Economic Diversification and High-Value Jobs:** Malta's economic strategy is to move beyond operational services and become an "AI Launchpad" (MDIA, 2030). This requires a highly skilled workforce capable of developing, implementing, and managing AI and digital innovation. The move toward coding and media creation is necessary to generate the next generation of ICT specialists and innovators.
- **The Digital Transformation of SMEs:** Even the family-run businesses focusing on operations are increasingly reliant on digital tools. The ability to perform basic data analysis (spreadsheet proficiency) is the essential precursor to utilising AI tools for inventory management, customer relations, and business intelligence. Advanced digital literacy is needed not only for ICT specialists but for all workers to become informed "power users" of the new technologies

that will drive their productivity. The goal is not to choose between spreadsheets and coding, but to foster digital fluency where foundational skills serve as the necessary basis for advanced, ethical engagement with AI. This aligns with the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 2.2) which emphasises balance across five areas, including content creation and safety (European Commission, 2022).

## 8.11 Research on ECDL Removal vs. AI/Coding in Primary Schools

Regarding the question of whether specific research has been done in Malta on the impact of removing ECDL on primary school students in favour of AI and coding, direct public research connecting the two is scarce or not explicitly detailed in key strategic documents.

However, the shift is part of a broader, well-documented strategy:

- **National Strategy Focus:** The Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030 does lay the groundwork for this shift, highlighting the goal of introducing digital literacy in primary schools and expecting students to "grasp basic AI concepts" by the end of primary school (CEDEFOP, 2024).
- **Pilot Projects:** Evidence points to ongoing AI initiatives in primary education, such as the "EduAI – AI puppets for Literacy Education" project, which explored using AI puppets as conversational agents for literacy tasks with 8- to 10-year-olds (European Union, 2022). Furthermore, a 2025 qualitative study

explored the use of AI during story reading in an early years classroom (Malta Journal of Education, 2025).

The Underlying Concern remains the trade-off. While the new strategy is based on a vision for AI leadership, the reports from the

National Skills Council (2024) and anecdotal evidence suggest that the skills gap in practical computer literacy indicates that the universally applicable foundational skills were abandoned prematurely, or the new curriculum has not adequately integrated them in a transversal manner.

## 8.12 Policy Recommendations with Supporting Citations

Policy Recommendation	Key Focus/Rationale	Supporting Citation
Reintroduce a Modernised Core Digital Skills Certificate – A national qualification combining ECDL-style modules with modern competencies.	Certification & Standards: Provides a baseline, measurable, and recognised competency standard for employment and tertiary education.	Council Recommendation of 23 November 2023 (on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training) AND European Digital Skills Certificate (EDSC) Feasibility Study (2024) (Focus on trusted, common European quality labels).
Mandate Basic Computer Literacy in Secondary Education – Ensure all students can use office software before advancing to coding or media creation.	Foundational Skills: Ensures universal baseline literacy for immediate societal participation and as a prerequisite for advanced subjects.	Malta Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Pillar 1: Nurturing Digital Global Citizens – Emphasises foundational digital literacy across the curriculum).
Enhance Vocational and Tertiary Bridging Courses – Integrate foundational IT training into MCAST and university programmes.	Lifelong Learning & VET: Addresses the skills gap for non-STEM students and aligns VET with the digital economy.	Malta Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Objective: Focus on Lifelong Learning and Collaboration with the Industry).
Establish Digital Skills Centres through Local Councils – Provide community training in traditional and emerging digital skills.	Access & Equity: Extends digital literacy training into the community, specifically targeting adults, seniors, and non-traditional learners.	Malta Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Pillar 3: Community Engagement and Collaboration – Focus on extending digital learning into the home and community).
Strengthen Teacher Professional Development – Equip educators with the tools to effectively teach coding and applied software.	Teacher Capacity: Essential for successful curriculum delivery and for teacher competency to meet the demands of the modernised curriculum.	Malta Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Pillar 2: Empowering Educators for the 21st Century – Mandates Continuous Professional Development on digital tools).
Monitor Industry Alignment – Consult employers to ensure curriculum content reflects real-world needs.	Employability & Relevance: Ensures the education system is responsive to the labour market, minimising the digital skills mismatch.	National Skills Council (NSC) Report, Malta (Ongoing) (Addressing the Skills Gap for a Digital Economy – A core function of the NSC is to monitor skills alignment).

## Explanation of Policy Links

The citations are drawn from the following key policy domains:

Malta Digital Education Strategy 2024–2030: This is the primary national document guiding the digital transformation of the education system, making it the most direct and powerful citation for most of these recommendations.

European Union Recommendations: The EU has ambitious digital skills targets (e.g., the Digital Decade Policy Programme), which provide the supra-national mandate for national actions, particularly regarding common certifications like the proposed EDSC/Core Certificate.

National Skills Council (NSC): The NSC is the official body responsible for analysing labour market needs and advising on skills development, which directly supports the recommendation for Industry Alignment.



The lack of clarity around who is responsible when an AI system makes an error requires structured ethical training, especially given Malta's emphasis on a people-centred, ethical approach to AI development (MDIA, 2030).

## 8.13 Conclusion

The removal of the ECDL and the shift towards coding and media skills represent a bold attempt to modernise Malta's education system. However, progress must not come at the expense of practicality. Innovation thrives on foundations, and for students to become capable digital citizens, they must first master the everyday tools of modern life.

A rebalanced curriculum combining creativity with competence, coding with communication, and ethics with employability

would best serve Malta's children and future economy. Integrating ethical digital literacy directly into vocational training ensures that students do not just become technically competent users of AI, but conscious citizens and responsible professionals who understand its limitations and obligations.

The next chapter explores how local councils, particularly Children's Councils, can contribute to shaping this broader reform agenda, ensuring that children's perspectives and well-being remain at the heart of digital and educational transformation.

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By positioning themselves as **child-centred governance units**, councils can ensure that every policy, from transport planning to community infrastructure, contributes to a holistic ecosystem that protects and empowers young residents.

Local councils are the level of governance closest to citizens, and therefore to children's lived experiences.

# 9.0 The Role of Local Councils, Regional Councils, and the Local Councils' Association in Driving Change

## 9.1 Introduction

Education, well-being, and child protection are not the sole responsibility of schools and families; they are community-wide endeavours that depend on collaboration between national and local institutions. In Malta, the proximity of local councils to residents places them in a unique position to identify emerging challenges and coordinate interventions that directly impact children's daily lives.

Alongside individual councils, the Regional Councils and the Local Councils' Association (LCA) play a crucial role in shaping strategic responses, bridging the gap between local realities and national policymaking. As Malta continues to reform its education and child well-being policies under the Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills, 2024), these entities can become pivotal agents of transformation — ensuring that reforms are designed from the top down and nurtured from the ground up.

This chapter explores how local councils, regional structures, and the LCA can collectively lead initiatives that promote balanced education, digital literacy, and safeguarding children in the digital age.

## 9.2 Local Councils as Catalysts for Community Well-being

Local councils are the level of governance closest to citizens, and therefore to children's lived experiences. They are intimately aware of the challenges faced by families in their localities, from traffic congestion and limited green spaces to after-school fatigue and digital overexposure. Their direct contact with residents enables them to identify gaps in social and educational support before these issues reach national attention.

Councils can leverage this proximity to:

- Create safe physical and digital environments for children through well-designed public spaces and supervised online initiatives.
- Facilitate after-school programmes that combine study support with recreation and social interaction.
- Engage with schools and parishes to harmonise timetables, reducing overlapping obligations contributing to child fatigue.
- Promote parental involvement through local workshops on digital literacy, child safety, and well-being.

By positioning themselves as child-centred governance units, councils can ensure that every policy, from transport planning to community infrastructure, contributes to a holistic ecosystem that protects and empowers young residents.

### 9.3 Regional Councils: Coordination and Resource Sharing

While local councils manage community-specific initiatives, Regional Councils have a strategic role in ensuring coherence and efficiency across multiple localities. They provide coordination, resource pooling, and regional-level planning in areas where challenges transcend municipal boundaries, such as education, mobility, and digital access.

In the context of child well-being and education reform, regional councils could:

- Coordinate inter-locality programmes such as regional homework and well-being hubs, ensuring equal access for children from smaller or under-resourced towns.
- Standardise educational collaborations between schools and local governments, ensuring consistency in after-school activities, digital safety policies, and parental engagement.
- Facilitate professional exchanges among educators, youth workers, and council staff to share best practices.
- Oversee data collection and monitoring children's participation in community programmes, identifying emerging trends or inequalities.

Regional councils can help Malta establish a truly decentralised but unified approach to education and child protection by acting as the connective tissue between local and national levels.

### 9.4 The Local Councils' Association: Strategic Leadership and National Advocacy

The Local Councils' Association (LCA) is the national body representing all Maltese local councils, providing vision, advocacy, and strategic guidance. Since launching its long-term vision, Residents First - Better Quality of Life (2019) (Local Councils' Association, 2019), the LCA has consistently emphasised the centrality of residents' well-being, including children, in shaping public policy.

In the context of educational reform and digital safeguarding, the LCA can play several leadership roles:

- Policy Integration: Collaborating with the Ministry for Education, Social Policy, and Home Affairs to ensure that local realities inform national reforms, particularly those related to curriculum changes and child well-being.
- Research and Knowledge Exchange: Conducting national studies on children's digital behaviour, parental time pressures, and the role of local governance in education.
- Capacity Building: Training local councillors and staff on child protection, digital literacy, and inclusive education planning.





- **Advocacy and Representation:** Serving as a unified voice for local and regional councils within European networks such as the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), ensuring Malta’s practices align with European child-rights frameworks.
- **Partnership Facilitation:** Building bridges between councils, NGOs, schools, and the private sector to pilot innovative community education projects.

By aligning its work with the national education strategy, the LCA can institutionalise the principle that child welfare and digital safety are integral to local democracy and decentralisation.

## 9.5 The Role of Children’s Councils

Children’s Councils, increasingly established within Maltese localities, provide an authentic platform for young people to express their views on local matters that affect them directly. They embody the spirit of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), which enshrines the right of every child to be

heard in decisions that impact their life.

When properly supported, these councils can act as advisory partners to local authorities, influencing areas such as:

- Safe routes to school and pedestrian infrastructure.
- Playground and recreational space design.
- Digital safety initiatives and peer awareness campaigns.
- Feedback on homework volume, extracurricular pressures, and after-school programming.

For example, a Children’s Council could collaborate with its local council to design a “Digital Safety Week,” co-creating educational materials and workshops that resonate with peers. Such participatory initiatives foster empowerment, civic awareness, and digital responsibility, qualities essential for active citizenship in a democracy.

## 9.6 Local Councils as Hubs for Digital Literacy and Parental Support

Local councils are ideally placed to offer

digital literacy programmes for both parents and children. These could be structured as community workshops or ongoing courses addressing:

- Responsible use of social media and gaming.
- Privacy and data protection.
- Recognising cyberbullying and misinformation.
- Digital tools for learning and productivity.

Through partnerships with schools and the private sector, councils could establish Community Digital Learning Centres equipped with computers, internet access, and supervised learning environments. Such centres would reduce the digital divide and provide safe, structured spaces for homework, creativity, and peer collaboration.

Local councils in countries such as Finland and Ireland have implemented similar community-driven digital inclusion projects, helping families manage the transition to digital learning while promoting well-being and social connection.

## 9.7 Regional Councils as Platforms for Innovation

Regional Councils could serve as laboratories for innovation, piloting projects that can later be scaled nationally. Potential initiatives include:

- Regional Youth Digital Academies – promoting creative yet responsible use of technology among adolescents.
- Collaborative Platforms – linking multiple localities to share educational resources, data, and best practices.
- Cross-Locality Child Protection Networks – coordinating with social services to monitor online exploitation or neglect risks.



Through shared governance, Regional Councils could ensure that smaller localities benefit from innovations and funding opportunities typically available to larger urban centres. This would strengthen Malta's principle of territorial equity — ensuring that every child, regardless of locality, enjoys the same access to safe and enriching educational experiences.

## 9.8 Strategic Alignment with National and European Frameworks

Local and regional councils, supported by the LCA, must align their initiatives with Malta's overarching education and social strategies. This alignment ensures coherence, funding eligibility, and sustainability. Key frameworks include:

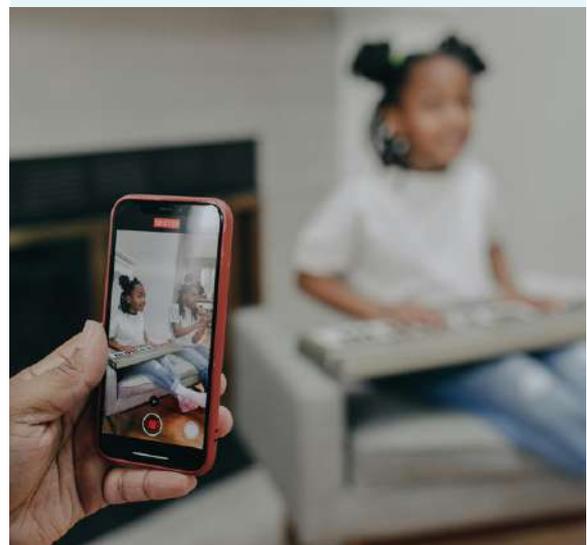
- The Education Strategy for Malta 2024–2030 prioritises equity, innovation, and well-being.
- The National Children's Policy (2020–2030) (Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity, 2020) mandates child participation and safety at all levels of governance.
- The European Child Guarantee (2021) (European Commission, 2021) emphasises equal access to education, health, and social inclusion.
- The EU Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) calls for stronger digital literacy partnerships at the local level (European Commission, 2020).

Through its participation in the Council of Europe and Committee of the Regions, the LCA can also promote Malta's local governance model internationally, demonstrating how decentralisation enhances child protection and education reform.

## 9.9 Policy Recommendations

To institutionalise the contribution of local and regional governance to educational reform, the following policy measures are recommended:

- Establish a National Framework for Local Educational Collaboration – defining the roles of councils, schools, and regional bodies in curriculum support and child well-being.
- Formalise Children's Councils as Advisory Entities – integrating their feedback into local development plans and educational discussions.
- Create Regional Resource Centres for Education and Digital Safety – supporting small councils with expertise and shared infrastructure.
- Include local councils in national education consultations to ensure community realities inform the reform design.
- Launch LCA-led National Campaigns on digital responsibility, balanced homework, and mental health.
- Promote Cross-Regional Projects – encouraging innovation through inter-council cooperation.



## 9.10 Best Practices and International Comparisons

Several European countries have successfully integrated local governance structures into education and child welfare systems:

- Sweden: Municipalities co-manage schools and after-school care centres, ensuring holistic child development.
- France: Communes play a central role in educational planning through *Projet Éducatif Territorial (PEDT)* frameworks.
- Portugal: Municipalities coordinate with schools through *Comissões de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens (CPCJ)* to protect children's rights locally.
- Scotland: Local authorities integrate youth participation councils into education and health policy decision-making.

Malta can adapt these models through the LCA's coordination, using regional councils to pilot reforms and facilitate inter-municipal learning.

## 9.11 Conclusion

Local governance represents Malta's most direct and responsive mechanism for ensuring educational reforms translate into tangible community benefits. Local Councils, Regional Councils, and the Local Councils' Association collectively embody the principle of subsidiarity, which states that decisions affecting citizens "should be made as closely as possible to them" (European Union, 2016).

By embedding children's well-being, digital safety, and educational equity into their strategic agendas, these entities can transform Malta's local democracy into a genuine engine of social progress. The engagement of Children's Councils ensures that reforms remain participatory, inclusive, and future-focused, truly reflecting the voices of those most affected.

The next chapter will explore governance integration and policy coherence, outlining how national ministries, educational institutions, and local authorities can jointly implement a unified strategy for safeguarding and empowering children in a rapidly changing digital society.

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# 10.0 Governance Integration and Policy Coherence

## 10.1 Introduction

Effective policy implementation in the digital and educational sphere requires an integrated and coherent governance model. Malta's scale allows for close coordination between ministries, local councils, and national agencies, creating a unique opportunity to model a holistic system of child protection and educational innovation. However, fragmentation between policy areas, such as education, digital regulation, child welfare, and local governance, has often resulted in overlapping initiatives and inconsistent outcomes.

The challenge, therefore, is not the absence of good policies but rather the need for a structured mechanism to ensure that these policies interact effectively, complement one another, and synchronise their address of children's realities. Governance integration means bridging the vertical gap between national institutions and local authorities and the horizontal gap between sectors such as education, health, technology, and social policy (Pollitt, 2003).

The need for a structured mechanism to ensure that these policies interact effectively, complement one another, and synchronise their address of children's realities.

## 10.2 The Need for Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

Children's experiences are shaped by multiple, intersecting systems: family, school, community, and media, which often operate under different jurisdictions and priorities.<sup>1</sup> When these systems act in isolation, children risk "falling through the cracks" (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020, p. 5). For instance, a school may introduce a digital literacy initiative without coordinating with local councils simultaneously offering community programmes on online safety. Similarly, ministries may develop parallel child well-being strategies without aligning with the Local Councils' Association (LCA) or regional structures already engaging directly with families.

Cross-sectoral collaboration allows for shared objectives, efficient use of resources, and coherent policy messaging. In practical terms, this requires:

- Joint policy planning between the



## **Cross-sectoral collaboration** allows for shared objectives, efficient use of resources, and coherent policy messaging

Such mechanisms transform governance from a top-down directive model to a networked ecosystem rooted in shared responsibility.



Ministry for Education, Ministry for Social Policy, the LCA, and relevant NGOs.

- Inter-ministerial committees that ensure education, health, and digital policy are mutually reinforcing.
- Local implementation task forces, bringing together educators, councillors, police, and social workers to coordinate interventions.

Such mechanisms transform governance from a top-down directive model to a networked ecosystem rooted in shared responsibility.

### 10.3 A Multi-Level Governance Model

Malta's governance landscape can be visualised as a multi-level framework comprising three interconnected layers:

- National Government and Ministries, which set strategic direction and allocate resources.
- Regional Councils, which coordinate and manage implementation across clusters of localities.<sup>2</sup>
- Local Councils, which translate policies into community-level action.

The Local Councils' Association is the bridge linking these levels, ensuring that communication flows upward (local realities informing national decisions) and downward (national priorities being adapted locally).

A well-designed model would formalise collaboration through:

- Regular National–Regional–Local Coordination Forums.
- A Digital and Education Liaison Office within the LCA to interface with ministries.

- Joint monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess policy outcomes.

By institutionalising these structures, Malta can ensure continuity, accountability, and responsiveness in implementing educational and digital reforms.

### 10.4 Policy Coherence Across Ministries

Policy coherence means that all ministries involved in children's development work toward consistent objectives and share a unified set of principles (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). This requires alignment in language, targets, and timelines.

For instance:

- The Ministry for Education promotes innovation, coding, and media literacy.
- The Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights focuses on protection, well-being, and inclusion.
- The Ministry for the Economy and Industry prioritises digital skills for the future workforce.
- The Ministry for Local Government supports community engagement and decentralisation.

Without alignment, these ministries risk creating competing agendas: one encouraging increased screen exposure for digital competence, another promoting reduced digital consumption for mental health.

An integrated governance framework can harmonise such tensions by establishing a National Children's Digital Well-being and Education Strategy, co-owned by all relevant ministries and implemented locally through councils and schools.

## 10.5 The Role of the Local Councils' Association in Governance Coordination

The Local Councils' Association (LCA) is strategically positioned to act as the coordinating hub between local realities and national frameworks. Its representative role in the Committee of the Regions and the Council of Europe gives it access to European policy models and funding streams, allowing it to translate international standards into local action.

The LCA can strengthen governance integration by:

- Hosting inter-ministerial dialogues involving local and regional representatives.

- Creating standardized reporting templates for councils to collect comparable data on child participation, digital access, and well-being.
- Acting as the national repository of best practices on local child-safeguarding policies.
- Advising the government on legislative updates affecting local governance and children's rights.

By embedding these functions within its organizational mandate, the LCA can institutionalize a governance culture that values collaboration and policy alignment.

## 10.6 Data-Driven Policy and Evidence-Based Decision-Making

One key enabler of policy coherence is access to reliable and shared data. Fragmented information systems often prevent ministries, councils, and agencies from understanding the full scope of children's challenges.



A unified data framework could include:

- Integrated child well-being dashboards tracking educational performance, mental health indicators, and digital access at the locality level.
- Regional observatories managed by Regional Councils to collect and analyse real-time trends.
- Standardised data protocols to ensure GDPR compliance and ethical use of children's information.
- Feedback loops allowing local councils to inform national ministries about emerging issues.

This data-driven approach and qualitative community feedback ensure that policymaking remains responsive, transparent, and targeted. It also allows for early intervention, identifying stress patterns, exclusion, or digital harm before they escalate.

## 10.7 Stakeholder Participation and Shared Accountability

Integrated governance thrives when all stakeholders, public institutions, private sector actors, NGOs, educators, parents, and children are actively involved in decision-making. Each has a distinct yet complementary role in ensuring children's safety and empowerment.

- National Ministries provide strategic direction and regulation.
- Local and Regional Councils deliver practical implementation.
- The LCA facilitates coordination and advocates for local interests.
- Civil Society Organisations contribute expertise in mental health, online safety, and youth engagement.
- The Private Sector, especially

telecommunications and media companies, can offer digital education partnerships.

- Children and Families, through participatory structures like Children's Councils, ensure that policies reflect lived experiences.

Shared accountability requires transparent monitoring and regular public reporting on progress. For instance, an annual Children's State of the Localities Report coordinated by the LCA could present a holistic overview of well-being, access, and digital safety at the community level.

## 10.8 Integration of Funding and Resource Streams

Fragmented funding is another barrier to policy coherence. Ministries often operate under separate budget lines, leading to duplication or gaps. By adopting integrated budgeting mechanisms, the government can allocate funds to multi-sectoral initiatives rather than siloed projects.

Examples of this approach include:

- Joint funding agreements between the Ministry for Education and Regional Councils for after-school digital literacy programmes.
- LCA-managed innovation grants supporting local pilot projects on mental health or online safety.
- Co-financing with EU programmes such as Erasmus+, Digital Europe, or the European Social Fund+ for community-based child initiatives.
- Integrated financing fosters sustainability and encourages collaboration rather than competition between stakeholders.



## 10.9 International Models of Integrated Governance

Several European nations have implemented governance systems that successfully integrate local and national policymaking in child welfare and education:

- Finland's Local Welfare Model integrates education, health, and youth services under municipal coordination, supported by national funding streams (Valkama et al., 2017).
- Denmark's Collaborative Governance Framework requires all municipalities to align local education plans with national child well-being indicators (Ministry of Education, 2015).

- Scotland's "Getting It Right for Every Child" (GIRFEC) approach establishes "a single framework for inter-agency collaboration, ensuring coherent support from early years to adolescence" (Scottish Government, 2012, p. 4).
- The Netherlands' Decentralised Youth Care Model empowers municipalities to deliver integrated social and educational services with strong national oversight (Van Gestel et al., 2018).

Malta can draw inspiration from these frameworks to design a governance model suited to its compact administrative scale and strong local networks.

## 10.10 Policy Recommendations

To achieve proper governance integration and policy coherence, the following steps are proposed:

- Establish a National Coordination Council for Child and Digital Well-being, chaired jointly by the Ministries for Education and Local Government, with representation from the LCA and Regional Councils.
- Develop a Unified Data and Monitoring Framework, ensuring consistent indicators across education, health, and local services.
- Formalise Multi-Level Partnership Agreements, defining roles and responsibilities of ministries, councils, and NGOs.
- Adopt Integrated Funding Mechanisms, pooling resources for joint initiatives.
- Create a National Annual Report on Children's Digital and Educational Well-being, led by the LCA in collaboration with ministries and academia.
- Institutionalise Regular Policy Dialogues, ensuring continuous

communication between national and local actors.

- Embed Children's Participation Mechanisms in all levels of governance, from local councils to national advisory boards.

## 10.11 Conclusion

Policy coherence is the cornerstone of effective governance in the 21st century. For Malta, integrating national vision with local capacity is both an opportunity and a necessity. The country's compact size allows for direct communication and rapid coordination, yet it also demands discipline, clarity, and commitment to collaboration.

By fostering a unified governance framework in which ministries, councils, and citizens share responsibility for children's welfare, Malta can build a model that transcends administrative silos. The Local Councils' Association, together with Regional and Local Councils, stands at the heart of this system, ensuring that every decision, from national curriculum reform to neighbourhood planning, advances the collective goal of safeguarding and empowering Malta's children in an increasingly digital society.

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A young girl with dark hair, wearing a white hoodie, is holding a small potted plant with green leaves. The background is a solid, bright yellow color. The girl is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

Within the Maltese context, school counsellors, teachers, and youth workers have observed a marked rise in stress-related symptoms, sleep deprivation, and social withdrawal among students.

Educational reform, community engagement, and local governance can strengthen emotional education and resilience-building, ensuring children develop the psychological tools to navigate an increasingly complex world.

# 11.0 Mental Health, Community Resilience, and Emotional Education

## 11.1 Introduction

The well-being of children is a multifaceted construct that extends beyond academic performance and physical health. In the 21st century, children's mental health and emotional resilience have become central determinants of lifelong success, social participation, and personal fulfilment. The accelerating pace of modern life, coupled with increased digital exposure, academic competition, and weakened family support structures, has heightened psychological vulnerability among young people in Malta and across Europe.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) reports that "one in seven children globally experiences a mental health disorder, with anxiety and depression being the most prevalent" (p. 2). Within the Maltese context, school counsellors, teachers, and youth workers have observed a marked rise in stress-related symptoms, sleep deprivation,

and social withdrawal among students, particularly in the post-pandemic era. This chapter explores how educational reform, community engagement, and local governance can strengthen emotional education and resilience-building, ensuring children develop the psychological tools to navigate an increasingly complex world.

## 11.2 The Interconnection Between Education and Mental Health

Education systems are powerful determinants of mental well-being. The pressure to achieve academically, overloaded curricula, and continuous assessment can create chronic stress for students. Moreover, while offering flexibility, digital learning platforms have blurred the boundaries between study and rest, leading to information overload and reduced downtime.

The pressure to achieve academically, overloaded curricula, and continuous assessment can create chronic stress for students.





While online learning platforms can enhance access to knowledge and creativity, unregulated exposure to social media increases risks of comparison, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, and addiction.

In Malta, children frequently face overlapping demands: morning liturgical activities organised by parishes, extended school hours, after-school museum or club obligations, and heavy homework assignments often uploaded late through platforms such as Google Classroom. These cumulative pressures erode opportunities for leisure, family bonding, and restorative sleep.

Educational systems that prioritise performance over personal growth risk perpetuating anxiety and burnout. By contrast, emotionally intelligent education, which integrates empathy, mindfulness, and social-emotional learning (SEL), enhances both academic outcomes and psychological resilience. Research from the OECD (2022) shows that schools incorporating SEL curricula “report a 10–12% increase in student well-being and a reduction in disciplinary issues” (p. 15).

### 11.3 The Digital Dimension of Mental Health

The digital world introduces both opportunities and challenges for children’s psychological development. While online learning platforms can enhance access to knowledge and creativity, unregulated exposure to social media increases risks of comparison, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, and addiction.

In Malta, as in many European countries, children are accessing digital devices at younger ages, often without adult supervision. Algorithms designed to maximise engagement expose users to endless scrolling, targeted advertising, and emotionally manipulative content. Moreover, educational technologies that extend into late-night hours, such as notifications from

Google Classroom or WhatsApp group messages, “disrupt rest patterns and elevate anxiety levels” (Jones & Smith, 2024, p. 89).

Digital well-being education must therefore become a formal component of Malta’s curriculum. This includes teaching children about screen hygiene, emotional regulation, and the psychological effects of digital overuse. Teachers and parents alike should receive training on identifying early warning signs of digital dependency, such as irritability, withdrawal, and academic decline.

International best practice offers guidance: Finland’s “Digital Balance” curriculum and Denmark’s “Tech Pause” school initiative have successfully reduced screen-related anxiety by introducing digital-free periods during the school day, allowing students to reconnect with physical play, conversation, and creativity (European Commission, 2023).

## 11.4 The Role of Families and Parental Stress

Children’s mental health cannot be separated from family dynamics. The increasing number of dual-income households in Malta means many children spend significant portions of their day unsupervised or in institutional care. According to the National Statistics Office

(2024), “63% of households with children under 16 have both parents working full-time” (p. 4). Consequently, children often return home to empty houses until late afternoon, limiting opportunities for emotional support or homework guidance.

Parental stress also contributes indirectly to children’s anxiety. Working parents who struggle to balance professional and domestic responsibilities may unintentionally transfer feelings of fatigue or frustration onto their children. This dynamic can lead to communication breakdowns, isolation, and decreased academic motivation.

Local and regional councils can alleviate these pressures by providing community-based after-school programmes staffed by trained educators, social workers, and volunteers. These programmes can combine supervised study, play, and emotional support, reducing the psychological strain on both children and parents.

Examples include Ireland’s Family Resource Centres (Irish Government, 2020) and Portugal’s Comissões de Protecção de Crianças e Jovens (CPCJ), which provide integrated community support for vulnerable families (Portuguese Ministry of Social Security, 2018). Malta could adapt such models by coordinating the Local Councils’ Association and the Regional Councils.



## 11.5 Schools as Safe Havens and Emotional Learning Environments

Schools must become centres of academic instruction and spaces of emotional safety and development. Teachers, counsellors, and administrators are pivotal in shaping students' self-esteem and coping mechanisms. The introduction of emotional literacy programmes can help students identify, articulate, and manage their emotions, improving peer relationships and classroom climate.

In practice, emotional education can be implemented through:

- Dedicated lessons on empathy, conflict resolution, and mindfulness.
- Peer mentoring schemes, encouraging older students to support younger ones.
- Restorative practices replacing punitive disciplinary models.
- Creative therapies such as art, drama, and music to promote self-expression.



Under the Wellbeing for Education Return initiative (UK Department for Education, 2021), schools in the United Kingdom have demonstrated that embedding mental health awareness into daily school routines reduces absenteeism and enhances student

engagement. Similarly, Scandinavian models integrate emotional education into their national curricula, treating well-being as a measurable educational outcome.

## 11.6 Community Resilience: A Local Governance Perspective

Community resilience refers to the capacity of a locality to support its members through adversity. For children, a resilient community provides security, inclusion, and opportunities for participation. As the closest institutions to residents, local councils in Malta are ideally positioned to build such environments.

Local and Regional Councils can:

- Establish local well-being hubs offering psychological support and referral services.
- Organise parenting seminars on stress management and child communication.
- Partner with schools and NGOs to deliver mindfulness and resilience workshops.
- Create community events that promote belonging and reduce social isolation.

Moreover, Children's Councils can contribute by voicing young people's perspectives on what makes them feel safe and supported in their localities. This participatory approach reinforces both civic engagement and mental well-being.

The LCA can coordinate nationally by facilitating cross-locality sharing of best practices, creating a "Community Resilience Network" that promotes innovation in mental health programming across Malta's local councils.

## 11.7 Mental Health in the Curriculum: International Best Practices

Several countries have successfully integrated mental health education into their national curricula, providing valuable lessons for Malta:

- Finland introduces Health and Life Skills Education from the primary level, focusing on emotional awareness and coping strategies (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014).
- Scotland: The Curriculum for Excellence includes “Health and Wellbeing” as one of its core pillars, ensuring mental health is taught alongside literacy and numeracy (Scottish Government, 2017).
- Australia implements the Be You Framework, a national mental health initiative that provides online training for educators and resources for families (Beyond Blue, 2020).
- New Zealand embeds emotional education into the Te Whāriki early childhood curriculum, emphasising belonging, contribution, and communication (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Malta can adapt similar frameworks by developing a National Emotional Education Strategy aligned with the Education Strategy 2024–2030. This would integrate mental health awareness across all school levels and promote collaboration between educators, parents, and local communities.

## 11.8 Addressing the Cultural Dimension

In Maltese society, the stigma surrounding

mental health remains a persistent barrier to early intervention. Research confirms that the importance of “upholding family honor by avoiding familial shame, remains prominent in a Maltese sociocultural context and hinders many from seeking the required help” (Scerri et al., 2023, p. 5). This leads to mental illness often being “denied and not spoken about” within communities (Scerri et al., 2023, p. 5), positioning emotional distress as a private issue rather than a legitimate health concern. Consequently, cultural expectations of academic success, obedience, and resilience can discourage children from expressing vulnerability, a problem exacerbated by the fact that even school-based services may “discourage use, out of fear of being discovered by peers and possibly social group exclusion” (Scerri et al., 2023, p. 11).



Local councils and parishes can work together to normalise open conversations about mental health through public campaigns, community dialogues, and youth-led awareness events. Schools can collaborate with local cultural institutions, such as museums, libraries, and arts centres, to integrate creative approaches that make emotional education accessible and relatable to all children, regardless of background.

The recognition that emotional health is integral to human flourishing must become embedded in Malta’s collective ethos, replacing outdated notions of silence with empathy, and stigma with solidarity.

## 11.9 Policy Recommendations

To advance mental health and resilience among children in Malta, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Integrate Emotional and Mental Health Education into the national curriculum at all levels, supported by training for educators.
- Develop Local Well-being Hubs coordinated by Regional Councils and supported by the LCA.
- Launch National Awareness Campaigns destigmatising mental health and promoting community resilience.
- Provide Targeted Support for Working Families, including after-school programmes and counselling.
- Establish a National Emotional Well-being Fund to finance local initiatives and school-based interventions.
- Enhance Collaboration Between

Ministries, ensuring education, social policy, and health departments share accountability.

- Empower Children’s Councils to design peer-led initiatives on well-being and self-care.

## 11.10 Conclusion

Promoting mental health and emotional resilience is not an optional supplement to academic education; it is its foundation. Children who feel safe, valued, and emotionally balanced are better learners, citizens, and community contributors.

Therefore, Malta’s path must combine educational reform with a national commitment to emotional intelligence and community solidarity. Through coordinated governance, local leadership, and cultural openness, the nation can nurture a generation of children who are not only digitally skilled and academically competent but also emotionally intense, empathetic, and resilient.

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# 12.0 A Framework for Policy Implementation and Monitoring

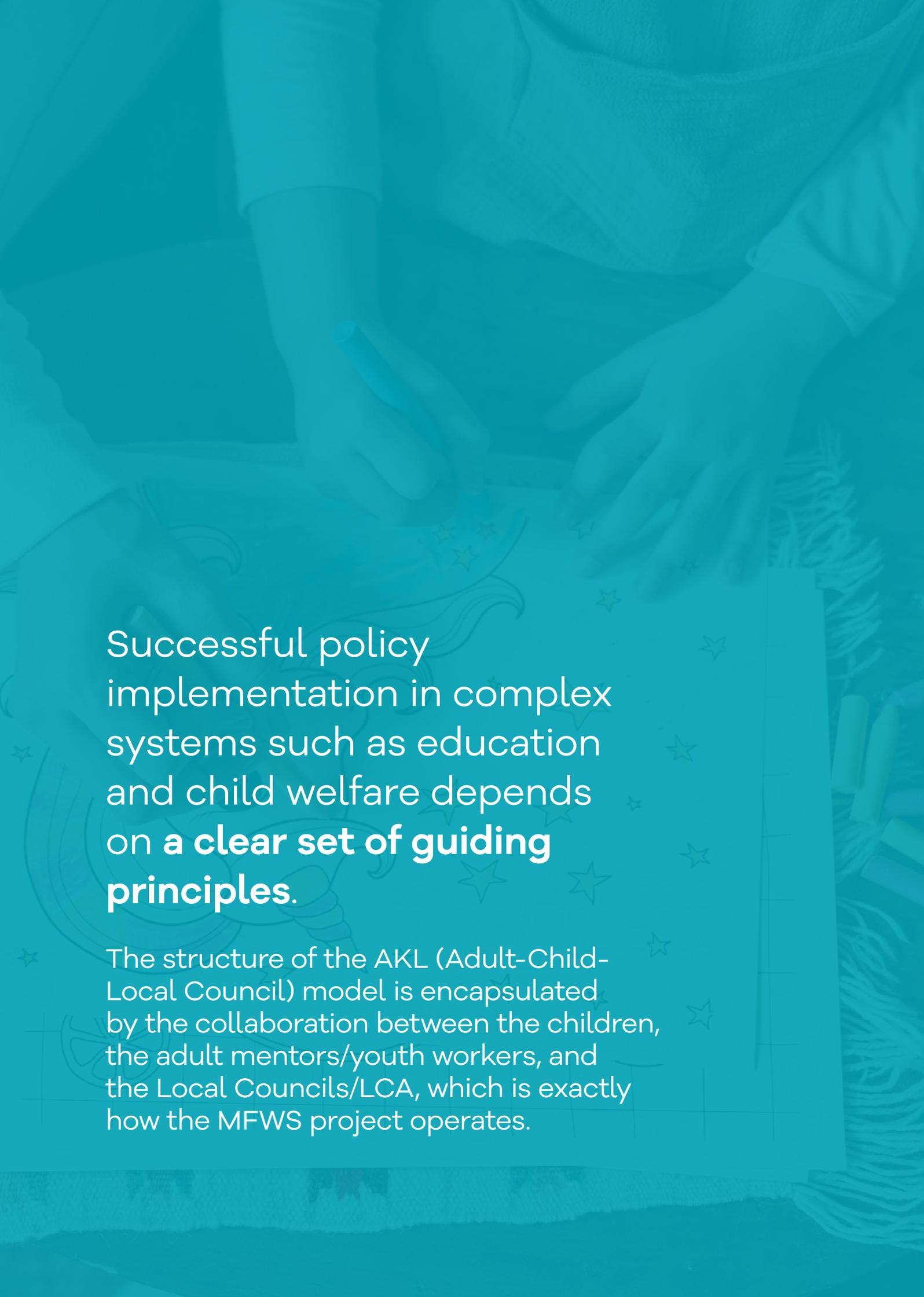
## 12.1 Introduction

For policies on education, digital safety, and child well-being to succeed, they must move beyond conceptual clarity and into structured, measurable, and coordinated implementation. The Maltese governance framework, characterised by strong local councils, active regional coordination, and a responsive central government, is well-suited to establishing a system of integrated delivery. However, even the most visionary reforms risk stagnation without

clear roles, consistent monitoring, and evidence-based evaluation.

This chapter proposes a National Framework for Implementation and Monitoring (NFIM) designed to operationalise the recommendations outlined throughout this report. The framework integrates the principles of decentralisation, subsidiarity, accountability, and participation, ensuring that every stakeholder, from ministries to children, contributes to building a safer and more balanced educational and digital ecosystem.





Successful policy implementation in complex systems such as education and child welfare depends on **a clear set of guiding principles.**

The structure of the AKL (Adult-Child-Local Council) model is encapsulated by the collaboration between the children, the adult mentors/youth workers, and the Local Councils/LCA, which is exactly how the MFWS project operates.

## 12.2 Principles of Effective Policy Implementation

Successful policy implementation in complex systems such as education and child welfare depends on a clear set of guiding principles. Based on international research and Maltese institutional realities, the NFIM should rest on the following pillars:

**Subsidiarity:** Decisions affecting children should be made as close as possible to their daily realities, with local councils and schools playing central roles. This principle is fundamental to EU governance, stating that action should only be taken at a higher level when objectives “cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States at central, regional or local level” (European Union, 2016).

**Integration:** Policies across ministries, councils, and sectors should be mutually reinforcing rather than fragmented.

**Participation:** Children, parents, educators, and communities must have meaningful input in both design and implementation.

**Transparency:** Measurable indicators and public reporting are essential for accountability and trust (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020).

**Sustainability:** Long-term funding and institutional continuity must be guaranteed beyond electoral cycles.

These principles form the moral and administrative backbone of the NFIM, ensuring that policy coherence translates into tangible results for every child.

While the search results confirm that the contemporary Local Children’s Councils project is primarily driven by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) in collaboration with the Local Councils Association and government ministries (MFWS, 2024), Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ (the national youth agency) is consistently involved in youth empowerment and civic programmes.

Reference is to be made to the MFWS’s **“RIGHTS: Children’s Local Councils”** initiative as the specific implementation model for the Participatory Level, as it directly involves Local Councils and fits perfectly into your proposed institutional structure (MFWS, 2024).

The structure of the AKL (Adult-Child-Local Council) model is encapsulated by the collaboration between the children, the adult mentors/youth workers, and the Local Councils/LCA, which is exactly how the MFWS project operates.

## 12.3 Institutional Architecture

The NFIM requires an institutional structure that clarifies responsibilities, establishes coordination mechanisms, and facilitates data sharing. This can be visualised as a four-tier model:

### National Level (Strategic Coordination):

Led by the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation and the Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights. Supported by a National Steering Committee on Children’s Digital and Educational Well-being, co-chaired by the Local Councils’ Association (LCA). Responsible for policy direction, funding allocation, and national monitoring.

### **Regional Level (Operational Coordination):**

Managed by Regional Councils, which harmonise implementation across localities. Oversee resource distribution, inter-locality collaboration, and staff training.

### **Local Level (Implementation):**

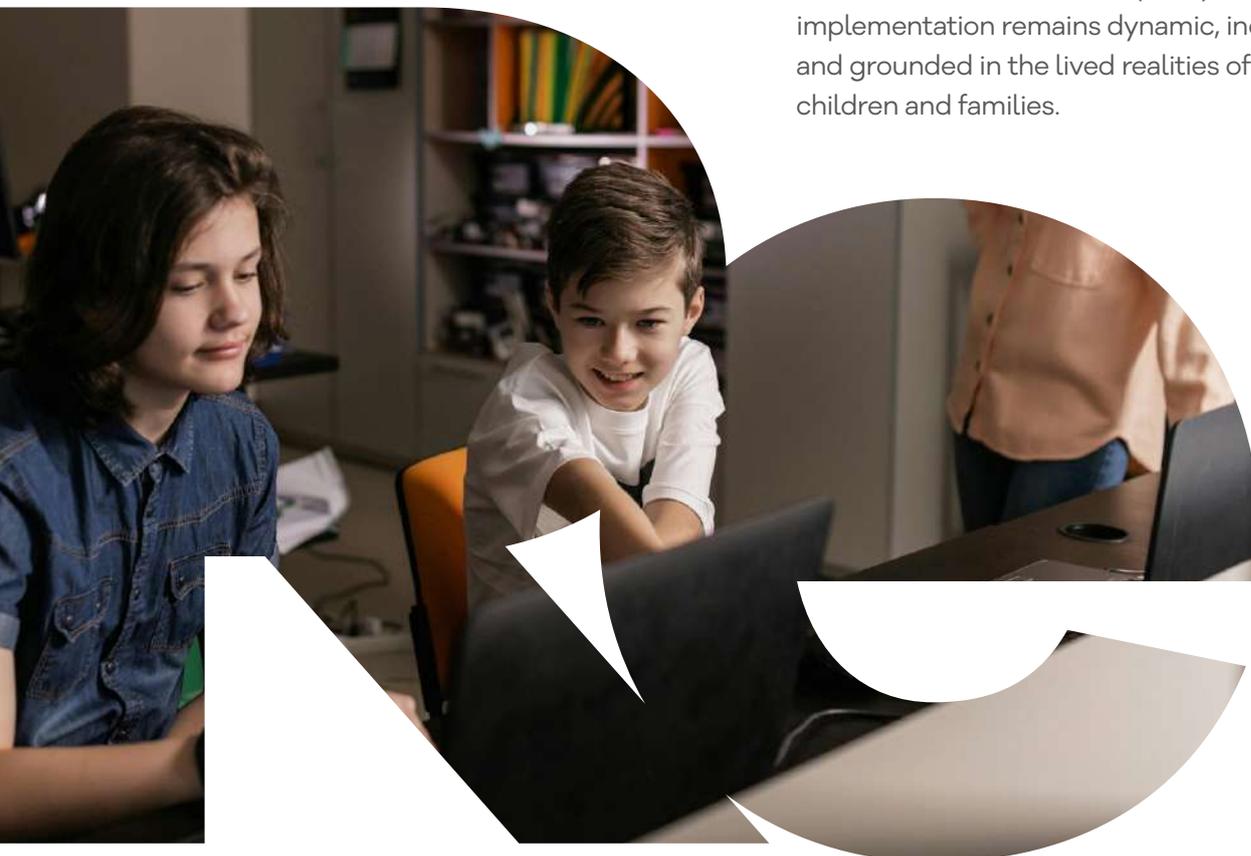
Carried out by Local Councils in partnership with schools, NGOs, and community organisations. Responsible for programme delivery, community engagement, and local data collection. The philosophy of engaging local authorities and resources directly in education is not new; seminal work by the Centre for Environmental Education and Research (CEER), under Professor Paul Pace, established the groundwork for this multi-level approach. The B.Ed. Research 'Exploring San Ġwann' (Borg, 2001) is one example of a project that documented and promoted the preparation of handbooks for Local Councils,

enabling primary teachers to align learning with local environments. Pace's vision for ESD similarly championed the need to involve local communities, arguing that ESD must "address the informal and non-formal sectors to promote lifelong community-based ESD programmes" (Pace, 2008, p. 1). This historical context affirms the validity of structuring the NFIM with strong local accountability.

### **Participatory Level (Children's Involvement):**

This level formalises the child's right to be heard (UNCRC, Article 12). It is operationalised through initiatives such as the "RIGHTS: Children's Local Councils" project, led by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS, 2024) in partnership with the LCA. These Children's Councils and youth platforms provide crucial feedback loops, co-create initiatives, and ensure that local decisions—the AKL model (Adult-Child-Local Council) in action—are driven by children's lived realities.

This structure ensures that policy implementation remains dynamic, inclusive, and grounded in the lived realities of Maltese children and families.



## 12.4 Implementation Phases

The NFIM should be rolled out through four distinct but overlapping phases, each building upon the previous one:

### Phase I

Baseline Assessment and Planning (Year 1): Conduct a national audit of children's digital exposure, educational pressures, and mental health trends. Identify gaps in digital skills, emotional support, and local council capacity. Develop locality-based profiles to tailor interventions.

### Phase II

Pilot Implementation (Years 2–3): Select pilot regions to test integrated initiatives such as community digital hubs, emotional education modules, and parent training programmes. Monitor qualitative and quantitative outcomes to refine the model.

### Phase III

National Expansion (Years 3–5): Scale successful pilots across all regions and localities. Institutionalise inter-ministerial coordination and integrate digital well-being into the national curriculum.

### Phase IV

Consolidation and Sustainability (Years 5–7): Embed the framework into law or national policy guidelines. Secure stable funding streams and introduce cyclical review mechanisms. Engage in continuous improvement through stakeholder consultation and international benchmarking.

This phased approach ensures gradual but sustainable implementation, avoiding the pitfalls of abrupt or poorly resourced reform.

## 12.5 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Each framework pillar should be associated with clear, measurable indicators to measure progress and ensure accountability.

Policy Area	Indicators	Measurement Frequency
Digital Literacy & Safety	% of schools implementing digital citizenship curricula; reduction in reported online harm cases	Annual
Educational Balance	Average daily homework hours; teacher and parent satisfaction surveys	Biannual
Mental Health & Emotional Education	Number of schools offering SEL programmes; reduction in counselling referrals linked to anxiety	Annual
Local Governance Involvement	Number of councils with active children's councils or digital safety projects	Annual
Parental Support	Attendance in community workshops; self-reported improvements in digital awareness	Annual
Equity & Inclusion	Participation rates among disadvantaged groups; regional disparities	Biennial
Public Awareness	National survey on awareness of children's digital rights	Biennial

KPIs should be monitored by Regional Councils and aggregated by the LCA, which would prepare annual State of the Children in Localities reports for submission to the relevant ministries and Parliament.

## 12.6 Data and Evaluation Framework

A robust monitoring system must be underpinned by reliable data collection and evaluation. The following components are recommended:

- **Centralised Data Platform:** Managed by the LCA in collaboration with the National Statistics Office (NSO) and the Ministry for Education, this system would consolidate data from schools, local councils, and community organisations.
- **Regular Evaluation Cycles:** Independent evaluations should occur every two years, combining statistical analysis with qualitative assessments.
- **Child and Parent Surveys:** Conducted through schools and councils to capture lived experiences, satisfaction, and behavioural changes.
- **Benchmarking:** Comparative analysis with EU member states using the indicators of the European Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021) and the Digital Education Action Plan (European Commission, 2020).
- Data transparency should be a central tenet; reports and findings must be made accessible to the public to foster trust and encourage collective ownership.

## 12.7 Funding Mechanisms

The success of implementation depends on sustainable and diversified funding. A National Fund for Children's Well-being and Digital Education could be established, co-financed by national budgets, EU programmes, and private sector

contributions. Funding streams should include:

- **Central Government Grants:** Curriculum reform, teacher training, and national awareness campaigns.
- **Local Council Allocations:** Earmarked portions of council budgets dedicated to child-related initiatives.
- **EU Structural and Social Funds:** Leveraging programmes such as the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) (European Commission, 2022) and Digital Europe.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Engaging telecommunications firms and tech companies in responsible digital literacy projects.
- **Philanthropic Contributions:** Encouraging corporate social responsibility in child education and protection.

The LCA could manage a grant-matching scheme to incentivise inter-locality collaboration and innovation.

## 12.8 Capacity Building and Professional Development

No framework can function without skilled personnel. Teachers, council officers, and social workers must receive continuous training in the following areas:

- Digital safety and responsible technology use.
- Social and emotional learning (SEL) techniques.
- Mental health first aid for children.
- Community engagement and participatory planning.
- Monitoring, evaluation, and data literacy.

Regional Councils could act as training hubs, hosting annual Capacity Building Academies supported by the LCA and national ministries. A professional development accreditation system could be introduced to encourage participation and recognise excellence.

## 12.9 The Role of International Collaboration

Malta can benefit from aligning this framework with broader European and global initiatives. The country's engagement with the Council of Europe, Committee of the Regions, and CEMR provides avenues for knowledge exchange and funding opportunities.

Through international collaboration, Malta could:

- Participate in EU-wide pilots on digital education and child well-being.
- Contribute case studies to the European Digital Education Hub.
- Exchange practices with municipalities from Nordic and Mediterranean regions.
- Engage Maltese experts and youth delegates in transnational dialogue on education reform.

This approach would not only enhance the credibility and visibility of Malta's efforts but also ensure that reforms remain future-proof and globally relevant.

## 12.10 Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Even well-designed frameworks face implementation challenges. Common risks include:

- **Institutional Fragmentation:** Ministries or councils working in silos.
- **Funding Shortfalls:** Delays or inconsistencies in resource allocation.
- **Resistance to Change:** From educators or administrators accustomed to traditional methods.
- **Data Gaps:** Insufficient or inconsistent reporting across localities.
- **Equity Issues:** Uneven access to digital or emotional education opportunities.
- **Mitigation measures include:** Establishing clear lines of accountability through ministerial agreements, maintaining contingency funds for pilot continuity, conducting stakeholder engagement workshops to foster ownership, building local data management capacity, and prioritising disadvantaged communities during roll-out.

By anticipating and addressing these challenges proactively, Malta can safeguard the integrity and longevity of reform efforts.

## 12.11 Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Implementation must be seen as an evolving process, not a fixed end-point. The NFIM should include cyclical review mechanisms such as:

- **Annual Progress Conferences:** Bring national and local stakeholders together to review outcomes and update objectives.
- **Five-Year Comprehensive Evaluations:** Assessing the framework's long-term impact on education, digital well-being, and mental health.
- **Feedback Integration:** Using data and citizen input to refine programmes.

- **Public Reporting:** Ensuring that all findings are published and debated in Parliament and the media.

Continuous learning and adaptation are vital to maintaining the framework’s relevance and responsiveness to emerging challenges.

## 12.12 Conclusion

A policy is only as firm as its implementation. However, to sustain impact, a policy must also be rigorously maintained and continuously developed (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Winter, 2012). This cyclical development is best achieved through the praxis of the various stakeholders, the constant critical reflection and action upon the world (Freire, 1970). The proposed National Framework for Implementation and Monitoring provide Malta with a practical, evidence-based roadmap, ensuring that educational reform, digital

literacy, and child protection evolve through this sustained, reflective process.

Through shared governance, measurable accountability, and sustained collaboration between ministries, councils, educators, and citizens, the framework becomes a living entity. This includes formal channels for child participation, such as the Local Children’s Councils, which ensure that the AKL principle of co-development is embedded at the municipal level. This reliance on participatory feedback ensures the framework remains relevant, responsive, and resilient to future technological and social changes (OECD, 2019).

In doing so, the nation will affirm its commitment to every child’s right to a balanced, safe, and enriching environment that nurtures intellectual growth and emotional resilience in the face of rapid societal change.

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A young girl with long dark hair and a young boy with short dark hair are sitting together, looking at a tablet. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. The text is white and positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the image.

Safeguarding children and **promoting responsible digital engagement** are not isolated objectives; they are the foundation of a just, compassionate, and forward-looking society.

Each actor must recognise their collective responsibility to nurture Malta's future generations.

# 13.0 Conclusion and Vision for the Future

## 13.1 Introduction

As Malta stands at the crossroads of technological progress and social transformation, the nation faces a moral and civic responsibility to reimagine the relationship between education, childhood, and community. The digital revolution has brought unprecedented opportunities for learning, creativity, and connection. Yet it has also introduced new forms of vulnerability, from unregulated social media exposure to academic pressures that blur the boundaries between education and well-being.

This document has sought to provide an analytical overview of these challenges and a coherent framework for collective action. Its core message is simple yet profound: safeguarding children and promoting responsible digital engagement are not isolated objectives; they are the foundation of a just, compassionate, and forward-looking society.

The family, the school, the local community, and the State must function as a unified ecosystem. Education reform that neglects parental realities or community infrastructure will fail to take root.

## 13.2 The Case for a Whole-of-Society Approach

No single institution can safeguard children effectively in isolation. The family, the school, the local community, and the State must function as a unified ecosystem. Education reform that neglects parental realities or community infrastructure will fail to take root. Similarly, digital regulation that ignores social and emotional development risks alienating children rather than empowering them.

A whole-of-society approach means embedding the protection and empowerment of children in every domain of national life, from local governance to employment policies, media regulation, and public health strategies. Each actor must recognise their collective responsibility to nurture Malta's future generations.



Critically, the proposed framework must resist the temptation to manage this digital transformation through excessive institutional scrutiny or biopolitics—the state’s control over populations. This report is not a call for more control, but for more care and policies that empower children to become critical thinkers, creative innovators, and resilient citizens who use technology to build, not harm. This distinction is vital in policy, as an over-reliance on institutional monitoring risks normalising the very culture of surveillance that children experience online. As Borg (2018) argues in her Foucauldian analysis of educational power dynamics, the shift from institutional control to self-governance is essential:

**“The disciplinary power of the school, once exerted through rigid timetable and observation, is gradually being replaced by subtle forms of ‘care of the self,’ where surveillance is internalised, rendering the individual perpetually aware of the need for self-regulation and ‘normalisation’ to the expected societal standards (Borg, 2018, p. 57).”**

The NFIM must, therefore, ensure that its monitoring tools measure well-being and capability, not compliance and restriction.

### 13.3 The Role of Education in Shaping the Future

Education remains the most powerful tool for social change. Malta’s Education Strategy 2024–2030 sets an ambitious direction, emphasising inclusivity, innovation, and lifelong learning. However, the success of this strategy will depend on its ability to respond to the realities

explored throughout this report:

- The unprotected use of social media among minors.
- Academic overload and contradictory teaching practices.
- The removal of foundational ICT training, such as the ECDL, without adequate replacement.
- The growing mental health pressures linked to digital culture and socio-economic shifts.



Therefore, a reformed educational model must integrate digital intelligence (DI) and emotional intelligence (EI) as twin pillars of 21st-century learning. This balance ensures that technology enhances human development rather than replacing it. As UNESCO (2023) emphasised, **“Education in the digital age must cultivate wisdom, not merely skill.”** This philosophy echoes the long-held principle within Maltese education that formal learning must establish an “interface with community resources” (Borg, 2001, Abstract).

The acronym “AKL model” is strongly associated with the “RIGHTS: Children’s Local Councils” project by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) and the Local Councils’ Association (LCA), where it stands for Adult-Child-Local Council interaction.

## 13.4 Local Governance as a Cornerstone of Transformation

Local Councils, Regional Councils, and the Local Councils' Association (LCA) are not peripheral actors in this vision; they are the cornerstone of implementation and community trust. Their proximity to families gives them unparalleled insight into children's daily pressures: time constraints, over-scheduling, digital isolation, and the erosion of play and rest.

The essential role of local structures in delivering integrated child well-being is a core lesson from previous educational initiatives. Professor Paul Pace, a leading figure at the University of Malta's Faculty of Education in environmental education, consistently advocated for integrating local communities into educational processes, arguing for a model that "address[es] the informal and non-formal sectors to promote lifelong community-based ESD programmes" (Pace, 2008, p. 1). This vision of community-based action applies directly to modern digital safety and mental health provision.

Local governance can translate national policies into tangible action through community hubs, local well-being centres, digital literacy programmes, and participatory structures such as Children's Councils. This formalised approach, often referred to as the AKL model (Adult-Child-Local Council), is central to the success of the MFWS and LCA's Children's Local Councils initiative (Children's Local Councils, 2024). The LCA's leadership ensures coherence and advocacy at the national and European levels, positioning Malta as a model for decentralised yet coordinated child and education policy.

Regional Councils strengthen this architecture by ensuring that smaller localities benefit from shared expertise and equitable access to services, particularly those with fewer resources. Together, they embody the principle of subsidiarity in its truest sense: bringing decisions closer to the people they affect.

## 13.5 Towards a Digitally Responsible and Emotionally Resilient Generation

Today's children will inherit a world of automation, artificial intelligence, and global interconnection. Their ability to thrive will depend on both technical competence and emotional strength. A digitally responsible generation is one that uses technology as a tool for empowerment rather than dependency.

This vision entails a shift in national priorities:

- From digital access to digital literacy.
- From information overload to critical thinking.
- From competition to collaboration.
- From isolation to community connection.

By embedding emotional education into the curriculum, teaching mindfulness and empathy alongside mathematics and science, Malta can foster resilience that endures beyond the classroom. As mental health becomes an integral part of educational policy, children will learn not only how to manage knowledge but also how to manage themselves.

## 13.6 Policy Integration and Sustainability

Sustainability in education and child protection is not merely financial, it is institutional. Policies must endure changes in political cycles and leadership. As outlined in the previous chapter, establishing a National Framework for Implementation and Monitoring (NFIM) ensures this continuity by providing clear responsibilities, measurable outcomes, and transparent evaluation.

The framework's success will depend on consistent cooperation between ministries, the LCA, local councils, and civil society. It also requires a cultural commitment to evidence-based policymaking and ongoing dialogue. Each annual review, community consultation, or parliamentary report should be seen not as a bureaucratic exercise but as a reaffirmation of Malta's social contract with its children.



## 13.7 Children as Partners in Change

A key element of this report is that children should not be passive recipients of policy but active partners in its design and evaluation. Through Children's Councils and

youth forums, young people can express their perspectives on digital behaviour, school pressures, and community life. Their participation enriches policy outcomes and cultivates a culture of citizenship, responsibility, and dialogue.

Empowering children to speak and listening to them earnestly, strengthens democracy itself. It redefines education not as preparation for life but as participation in it.

## 13.8 Malta's European and Global Role

Malta's size and governance structure allow it to act as a laboratory of innovation in education and child policy. By aligning its reforms with the European Child Guarantee, the EU Digital Education Action Plan, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Malta can lead by example in promoting balanced, inclusive, and human-centred digital education.

Furthermore, Malta's active role within the Council of Europe, Committee of the Regions, ALDA, and CEMR provides platforms for disseminating best practices, attracting EU funding, and strengthening transnational collaboration on child rights and digital ethics.

Malta's success in this domain would elevate national well-being and position it as a benchmark for small states navigating global digital transitions.

## 13.9 Vision for the Future: Building a Child-Centred Society

The vision emerging from this report is both aspirational and practical:

**To build a Child-Centred Society in which every decision - educational, digital, or social - is guided by the principle of promoting the holistic well-being of children.**

This vision rests on five long-term commitments:

- **Education for the Whole Child:** Integrating intellectual, emotional, and social development into every stage of learning.
- **Digital Responsibility:** Teaching children not only to use technology but to question it, shape it, and protect themselves.
- **Community Empowerment:** Strengthening local councils and community structures as custodians of child well-being.
- **Inclusive Participation:** Ensuring that every child's voice is heard and valued regardless of background, ability, or locality.
- **Sustainable Governance:** Institutionalising collaboration, transparency, and evaluation across all levels of government.

Through these commitments, Malta can reaffirm its national identity as a country

that places **Residents First – Better Quality of Life**, beginning with its youngest residents.

The transformation proposed in this report is not merely administrative but cultural. It asks Malta to reimagine what it means to educate, protect, and empower its children in a world where the boundaries between the physical and digital, home and school, individual and community are increasingly blurred.

The future of Malta's children depends not only on their ability to adapt to technology but also on the nation's willingness to adapt its systems, values, and priorities to their needs. This requires visionary leadership, compassionate communities, and courageous institutions.

If implemented with determination and unity, the framework outlined here will allow Malta to emerge as a beacon of balanced, child-centred progress. In this nation, every child is safe and free, connected and grounded, informed and inspired.

By safeguarding our children, we protect our Republic's moral and social integrity. By empowering them, we ensure that Malta's future remains bright, compassionate, and profoundly human.

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