

## Beyond The Headlines: Economic Realities of Migration and The Labour Market in Malta

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**Abstract.** In January 2016, the International Monetary Fund released a report confirming that increased labour mobility to Malta had a positive impact on the country's economy. A mass inflow of non-Maltese workers has boosted Malta's potential growth and offset the declining working Maltese age population. The presence of foreign nationals has dramatically increased in one the world's most densely populated countries. Political discourse, social tensions and the government's slow response addressing the needs of increasingly diverse constituency have proven that Malta is still an island in transition. By establishing the rapid change in demographics and economic expansion, this paper explores the media's role in informing the public on economic realities and implications that an increase in migrants and immigrants has had on the economy.

Received:  
July, 2016  
1st Revision:  
October, 2016  
Accepted:  
December, 2016

DOI:  
10.14254/2071-  
8330.2016/9-3/7

**Keywords:** international mobility, Malta, labour market, immigration, public attitudes

JEL Classification: F22, J61

### Introduction

How has a rapid increase in diversity and foreign investment affected the current social and political climate in Malta? In 2011, boats of migrants were landing on shore from North Africa at a rate that put the islands asylum procedures and detention centres to the test. As such, there is a state of social tension amongst migrant communities and local populations owing to the differences in cultural backgrounds (Lazányi, 2012). The Maltese have developed a reputation amongst all foreigners on the island to be resistant to integrating not only with the EU nationals, but also with non-EU nationals that have come to make the island a temporary or permanent home. As a result, local NGOs have begun examining areas in daily interactions that could use improvement and how the government can address the process of integration on the island. This study is the analysis of media's portrayal of migrants and immigrants and how this portrayal helps or hinders the Maltese perception of foreigners and their effect on local economy.

This article introduces a brief discussion of recent developments within the realm of international mobility and international student mobility and migration in Malta. This opening follows a strong statement, that recent political discourse and social tensions are the result of the perception that migrants take more than they contribute to the Maltese economy and that immigrants and migrant take jobs from the Maltese. By establishing the rapid change in demographics and economic expansion, the authors conduct a media audit to understand the information and toner describing the interrelated topics of migration and economy in Malta. After evaluating the publically available information on Maltese economy and the contribution EU and non-EU national's make to it over the several years, it becomes clear that the media has not played a role in informing the public on the topic that had become divisive at the national and the EU levels. The media has the potential to mitigate social tensions and help promote the benefits of international and student mobility and also help the public embrace it.

## **ECONOMIC CHANGE AND INTERNATIONAL AND STUDENT MOBILITY IN MALTA**

Studies have shown that Malta's EU membership resulted in a diversified labour force to meet the needs that the country's human capital was unable to meet. In 2014, Malta's potential growth was estimated at 3%. According to the International Monetary Fund's report on Malta for FY2015, Malta's growth is attributed to the strong labour market performance. When Malta experienced a decline in outputs, a steady increase in labour contribution led by a growing working age population was followed by strong gains in labour force participation (IMF, 2015). Furthermore, the IMF claims that steady immigration flows since the beginning of the last decade have contributed strongly to growing age population in the pre-crisis years (before 2008). Malta's labour participation increased by around 7 percent over 2008-2014, one of the highest in Europe, though starting from a low level. Malta has opened up its borders to EU business and economic migrants in 2004. Since that time the Island has experienced a huge influx of immigration of seasonal foreign workers, and workers from the EU intent to take up residency. To that end, Malta was recently scrutinized by the EU for putting its citizenship up for sale, so to speak. Allowing non-EU citizens to invest in real estate or open businesses on the Island in exchange for EU citizenship.

Human capital has been a limiting factor for the Maltese economy. Despite its growth, the potential for human capital amongst the Maltese population remains low (IMF, 2015). Despite its recent catch up, with higher upper secondary attainment rates among the younger cohorts, Malta's education outcomes for the total population are still below the EU average, which is a relevant indicator of potential economic growth (Lazányi, 2013, 2014). In addition, the equivalent of high school education enrolment rates are low and drop-out rates are among the highest in the EU. Skilled net migration flows have been a major contributor in the increased quality of labour. Employment participation increased, in total, from about 2% to more than 10% (IMF, 2015).

The tourist sector's direct contribution to the GDP is 14,7% in Malta (the highest among the Mediterranean countries) (European Commission report on Malta, 2016). The demand for seasonal labour generates high flow of workers plus the ease of language for English speakers and Italians. Business development and competition requires also (the import of) skilled labour in Malta.

### **Increase in International Student Mobility in Malta**

As mentioned before, Malta is among the worst EU performers in regards to early school leaving and basic skills. A new program is intended to solve this problem that contributes to regional and international traineeship placements: "The Youth Guarantee is a new approach to tackling youth unemployment which ensures that all

young people under 25 - whether registered with employment services or not - get a good-quality, concrete offer within 4 months of them leaving formal education or becoming unemployed” (European Commission, 2016).

The University of Malta regularly hosts a large number of Erasmus and other exchange students. Through its membership of the Utrecht Network Exchange, the University of Malta also participates in student exchanges with the Mid-American Universities International (MAUI) and the Australian-European Network (AEN) (University of Malta, 2016). The most significant international mobility program in Malta is the Erasmus (European Commission report on Malta Erasmus+ statistics 2014). The traineeship mobility numbers are also visible, including trends from the past years. Following the incoming trend line, in the academic year of 2016/2017 approximately 3000 Erasmus+ interns are active in Malta. Maltese labour market takes advantage of Erasmus interns by employing them without providing compensation, all year round. They do not get paid (except in some cases in the hotel sphere when 150-200 Euro pocket money is allocated). Interns, who are unpaid, input the EU given scholarship and their savings into the Maltese economy (Holicza, 2016), (Holicza-Pasztor, 2016).

## THE STATE OF DIVERSITY IN MALTA

At present, much of the research and policy discussion regarding migrant integration in Malta is still focused on the development and strengthening of policy targeting the intricacies of the process (education, access to nationality, political participation, family reunion and labour market mobility). According to the 2015, Migrant Integration Policy Index, Malta placed at 33 out of 38 countries as a rating on integration policy. With regard to the issues covered in this project, Malta was seen only as halfway favourable in the categories of labour mobility and halfway favourable in anti-discrimination. To that end, the literature and research available on the discussion of how migrants, with regard to employment and social benefits, affect the Maltese economy is scarce. This study provides an analysis of media portrayal and suggests a role media plays in shaping public opinion on the subject. There have been various studies on public opinion conducted at the national level through the Ministry for Social Dialogue and at the EU level, respectively. This serves to discuss the relationship between media and public opinion and if the two are connected (MIPEX, 2015), (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2007, p.119.)

Media helps to cross the barriers of information for the higher levels of government or attained information to the public sphere. The public sphere refers to the concept where information and point of views are processed, filtered, synthesized and, political opinion is formed (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Virk, 2012). The media plays a vital role in the exchange of information in the public sphere. As long as the information in the public sphere is fair and inclusive, then the debate should withstand critical scrutiny and assures that discourse is rational. At times, news media and political discourse may affect opinion quality amongst the public (Iftikhkar, Ullah, Naureen, Ali 2016). Studies have shown that it is difficult for media to change the predisposition of an individual significantly, but can help build upon or reassure a already firmly held belief, or otherwise have no effect at all (Lenz 2009), (Tesler 2015). However, the introduction of a new element, either in the form of more information or varied perspectives and point of views can result in the refining of an individual's opinion quality or, consequently create more confusion (Iftikhkar, Ullah, Naureen, Ali, 2016). Therefore, although in the past studies have not given great weight to the role the media plays in the public sphere, there is definitely a case to continue to investigate based on studies that now question how individuals use the media, discuss what they receive from the media and what the media can provide in the exchange. Given the socio-economic developments in Malta and the increase of divisive political rhetoric - What role does the media play in facilitating a positive outcome in the face of increased diversity in the labour market?

## A MEDIA ANALYSIS ON HOW MIGRATION IMPACTS ECONOMY AS PORTRAYED IN THE MEDIA. METHODOLOGY

A study that analyzed the extent to which mainstream print media in Malta discusses the effect of migration on the Maltese economy, and whether the discourse has a positive, negative or neutral tone. We then proceeded to find the quantitative data regarding the effect of migration in Malta, in order to compare numerical information with what was being portrayed in the media.

What we discovered in our research that in the entire year of 2015, *The Malta Independent* and *The Times of Malta* only produced 24 articles available online discussing migration and its effect on the economy, 23 of which were news and one which was an editorial. Our media analysis results suggested there was no specific bias in the tone of any of the articles, we attribute this to the fact that both news sources identify as “neutral.” We infer from these results that although the public informed by these two media sources is not being provided with biased information, it is also not being provided with very much information at all.

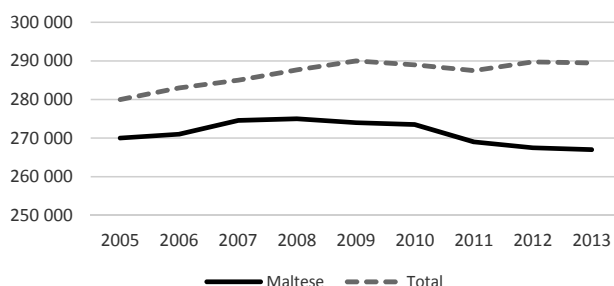


Figure 1. Malta's Working Age Population since EU Accession

Source: Understanding the Macroeconomic Impact of Migration in Malta, Central Bank of Malta.

Our quantitative data findings showed that although the number of foreign workers in Malta increased significantly over the last decade and a half, this influx has actually provided Malta with desperately needed aid rather than flooding and overcrowding the workforce. A report by the Central Bank of Malta provided us with this information, along with data showing an increase in the number of Maltese workers in the last decade and a half, as well as the 10,1% contribution immigrant workers are making to the Maltese economy through taxes and national insurance.

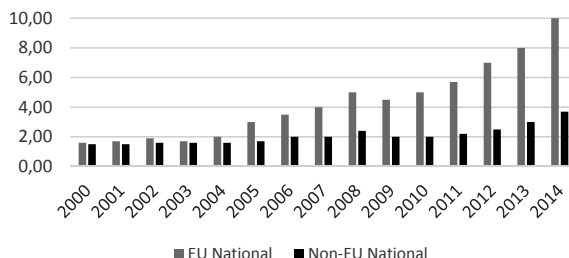
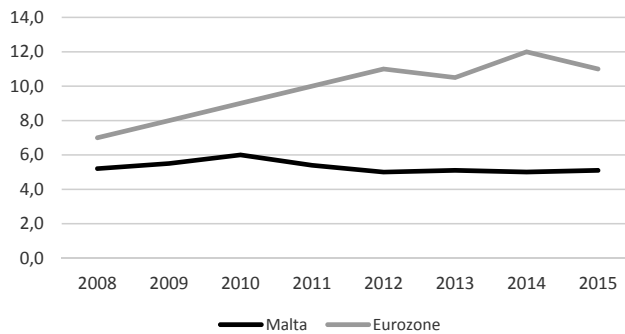


Figure 2. Employment rate in Malta

Source: International Monetary Fund.



**Figure 3. Unemployment rate in Malta**

Source: International Monetary Fund.

We began this study after becoming aware of certain rumours circulating around the Maltese population blaming immigrants for an economic recession, and accusing them of stealing jobs and taking advantage of the social welfare system. Some of these remarks were focused toward migrants as a whole, and some specifically focused on irregular migrants or “refugees” as they are sometimes generalized. Our analysis of the media sources aimed to discover whether mainstream print media paralleled any of these opinions, and if not then in what context was migration portrayed. We then decided to make the addition of the quantitative economic data, in order to show readers what kind of information the media could be providing the public with.

With the question of the extent to which media affects public opinion being studied in many different formats, and the effects of the information age still unforeseen, we believe it is important to analyze not only the tone but also the content of mainstream media sources. As Carmen Sammut identifies in her study, in Malta one finds a variety of stakeholders who are willing to use media to “...reproduce their dominance through their significant influence on public opinion.” This could range from the dominant elites to political parties. With the innumerable types of media outlets available to the average individual, print media in Malta could be used to not only provide its readers with breaking news, but also to promote things like positive integration techniques or policies that could ease the transition for both Maltese citizens and immigrants.

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

All 24 articles were analyzed and coded – coding was intended to identify the occurrence of particular terms: ‘migrants’, ‘benefits’ and ‘economy.’ At the end of the audit we summarized a trend of common words or phrases surrounding these keywords, in order of most to least common. In order for a word to be deemed as valid for our research, it must occur more than twice in the entire pool of articles, of course with the exclusion of common adverbs or pronouns used in the English language (And, Is, Or, Who, Was, In, etc.). This aided our understanding of the media trends surrounding these keywords and ideas.

While gathering the relevant news articles, we noticed a very particular trend during the year of 2015. In the initial months of the year the discourse surrounding migration and the economy was mild - the public seemed to be focused on other issues. However, by the fall of 2015 we noticed an increase in the number articles published on migration and economy. We attributed this phenomenon to the presence of three events which occurred in Malta during the end of 2015:

- The October 2015 Budget for the following year.
- The Valletta Summit on Migration.
- The CHOGM 2015 which amid the Syrian Refugee Crises had an impact on the discussion of Migration.

Through our analysis we found that the most common surrounding words for the term ‘migrant’ were:

Jobs	Irregular
Workers	Integration

- The term ‘workers’ was mostly used as collate to describe the word migrant in phrases such as ‘Migrant Worker’ in all of its occurrences.
- The term ‘jobs’ appeared for the first three times repeatedly in sentences ‘... fearing the loss of jobs to migrants’ in the same article in May, where it described a government initiative to address the fear of the loss of jobs to migrants. The other two occurrences were used to describe the type of jobs of migrants and the task of migrants of finding jobs respectively.
- The term ‘irregular’ occurred in three different articles used to describe illegal employment of migrants, exploitation of migrants and the flow of irregular migrants respectively.
- The term ‘integration’ was used in all occurrences in the discussion of the integration policy bill which is currently supposed to be drafted by the Maltese parliament.

The most common terms found around the term ‘economy’ or ‘economic’ were:

Informal	Growth
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- The term ‘informal’ mainly occurred in instances to describe the informal economy of Malta, in articles discussing migration and the economy.
- The term ‘growth’ was used mainly used in all the occurrences in the discussion of the Maltese economic growth and the relation of this growth to the employment sector.

The most common terms found surrounding the word ‘employment’ were:

Corporation	Full
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- The term ‘full’ was mainly used as collate to the term employment to describe full-time employment for migrants. All of these occurrences came from one article published in September.
- The term ‘corporation’ was used to describe the Employment Corporation in Malta. This stands to show that the ETC does enter the discussion of migration and employment in Malta – hence it does have a role.

We found no common trends surrounding the term ‘benefit’ or ‘benefits.’ Terms of positive or negative connotation such as ‘contributions’ or ‘registering’ or ‘reap’ occurred only once in the articles analysed.

With the above findings, we conclude that the media is generally reporting objectively within the realm of migration and how it relates to the economy. These media sources are not reporting in a positive nor negative form. Terms which were presented in the methodology section of this research paper did not occur more than once or twice in the entire collection of texts analysed. Although both *The Times of Malta* and *Malta Independent* are shown to have been objective by our standards, we recognize that this does not mean all of the media in Malta is objective, nor does it imply that biases do not exist in these two news sources at all. However, with regard to the contribution of migrants to the economy in Malta, these two sources shed

neither positive nor negative light on the topic. Through this research, however, we have found that with the exception of a news article announcing the World Bank Report that we use in this research and two articles regarding disproving “migrant myths,” there is very little quantitative information or research presented to the public through these two news sources regarding this topic. Therefore, while these two sources are not falling prey to migration myths, they have also provided very little with which the public can use to be convinced otherwise.

## QUANTITATIVE DATA FINDINGS

The main resource we used for this section was a report issued by the Central Bank on November 30, 2015 entitled “*Understanding the Macroeconomic Impact of Migration in Malta*.” This report provided us with economic data regarding migration in Malta between the years 2000 and 2014. As we have mentioned before, while we recognize our media data are from 2015 and our economic data only go up through 2014, we believe our data is appropriate as any extreme economic shift or change in 2014 would affect 2015 equally.

The data in the report use the word “migrant” and “immigrant” to mean “all non-Maltese nationals,” meaning that any foreign label in the results is a combination of both EU citizens and third-country nationals. The authors of the study acknowledge the beginning of the large influx of migrants to be in 2000, with a spike in 2004 with Malta’s accession into the EU. By 2014, it was estimated 15,600 EU citizens and 6,200 third country nationals in the Maltese workforce. Although these numbers seem incredibly high for a country claiming to be the smallest yet most densely populated in Europe, the author claims that the increase in working-age immigrants in Malta has actually aided the growth of new industries that would have been “bottlenecked by skills shortages.” In fact, the report claims that without the influx of immigrants, the working-age population would have decreased by 1% rather than rising by 3%. Of these working-age peoples, the authors estimate 7% of these are non-Maltese.

Malta, with the third lowest unemployment in the EU in 2015, has seen only small fluctuations in number of unemployed citizens according to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), and the 2014 National Employment Policy report claims the reason may be that the current unemployment system in Malta allows for indefinite unemployment benefits if a suitable occupation is not available. Even with this phenomenon and the increase in number of foreign workers, Maltese nationals saw a significant increase in employment between 2010 and 2014, almost double that of the previous period of four years.

The report revealed the statistics of Maltese and foreign workers that provide labour by sector in workforce. In 2014, the statistics show that foreign workers are pushed to either end of the workforce, taking jobs that either few Maltese workers are qualified for such as management, or jobs that few locals want, such as construction, machine operation, and sanitation. The report states that although there has been a significant increase and higher demand for non-Maltese workers in high-end occupations, the number of Maltese in these occupations has also increased by almost one-third. The author, however, notes that the rise in Maltese employment could also be due to the increase of Maltese female employees in the workforce, as the number nearly doubled between 2010 and 2014.

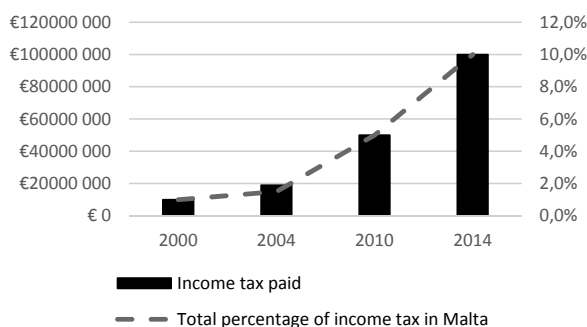
The report also revealed immigration and wage trends. There was no causal relationship that has yet been identified. The author concedes that although the drop in average wage between 2010 and 2014 occurred simultaneously with an increase in foreign workers, a similar trend in wage is seen between 2002 and 2006, with a significantly smaller number of foreign workers. There has not yet been evidence to prove these numbers are connected in any way, however the author concedes the correlation is hard to ignore. “There is evidence that in some sectors foreign employees may have acted as substitutes for local workers,

e.g. in construction and hotels and restaurants, but it is harder to decipher whether in the absence of foreign workers, firms would have been able to induce more Maltese workers.”

With regard to benefits, we were interested to see the net cost or gain migration has on the Maltese social welfare system. Although there is no information to be found regarding the number of unemployed non-Maltese nationals in the country, the data provided us with information that helps to dispel the rumour that illegal migrants receive special treatment from the welfare system. The data indicated that there is a significant difference between the compensation Maltese nationals and irregular migrants are given surrounding unemployment, with the maximum received by any irregular migrant around one-third of the minimum allotted to a single eligible Maltese citizen.

As previously stated this information does not cover all non-Maltese individuals, as there has been little to no research in Malta regarding this particular topic, nor were we able to find numerical research regarding the *number* of irregular migrants who necessitate government support while integrating into Maltese society. However, it does provide some perspective, not only regarding the “burden” of migrants on the host country, but also regarding the hardship irregular migrants face even after they have been accepted into a host country.

Comparatively, the Central Bank report provided information regarding migrants meaning all non-Maltese nationals contribute to the economy through income tax. The report also featured data that revealed an increase of this contribution from 2000 to 2014. About 10% of income tax and national insurance is paid by foreign workers, equalling around 100 million Euros by 2014. This number is proportional to the percentage of foreign workers in Malta by 2014.



**Figure 4. Income Tax Contribution of non-Maltese**  
Source: Central Bank of Malta and Maltese National Statistics Office.

Although we were unable to find any additional numerical data regarding how much migrants “receive” from the Maltese government, the information regarding irregular migrant welfare and unemployment benefits provides unequivocal evidence that they are not able to ‘take advantage of the system’. The rest of the statistics, however, showed us that not only are foreign workers not detrimental to the Maltese economy, nor are they taking jobs from the Maltese, but they have actually bolstered the Maltese workforce in a way Malta couldn’t have accomplished on its own.



## SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

### Is Media a Link to Public Opinion?

As mentioned in previous sections, this project is not designed to infer that the media is an accurate way to examine public opinion and knowledge on this particular subject or in general. To that end, in addition to our findings, when considering takeaways from public opinion surveys conducted by the EU and the Maltese Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties (MSDC). It can be said, that the Maltese do have negative perceptions of foreigners. However, when the average Maltese must compare immediate concerns facing the nation, many view immigration in general as a concern, yet, concern for the overall economy and employment is low in comparison (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2007).

In June 2015 the (MSDC) commissioned a survey on 'perceptions about third country nationals (TCNs) and immigration in Malta'. The survey mentions that "a section of the population remains lukewarm or hostile to the presence of foreigners, although some make a distinction between asylum seekers and richer foreigners". In addition, it adds that "attitudes toward foreigners tend to be selective and utilitarian, with most respondents viewing foreigners either as a source of investment, especially in property, or as an invisible army of labour which takes jobs which are not wanted by Maltese".

In regard to a perceived economic crisis on the job market, according to the Eurobarometer of 2015, 57% of Maltese respondents had a perceived feeling that the impact of the crisis on jobs has already reached its peak. In contrast, only 29% felt the worst is still to come. In addition, Immigration was considered the second most pressing issues facing the Maltese. However, only 4% of respondents considered unemployment a matter of utmost concern (EC, Eurobarometer, 2015).

### Inferences Regarding Discourse in Malta

There is a fear of invasion that plagues the Maltese historical memory. This fear of invasion can also be due to Malta's past history of protecting their Island against the Ottoman Empire during "The Great Siege" of 1565. Understanding the historical context of Malta's negative experience with a Muslim Empire, one can read into claims that "the Trojan Horse is brought into my home and I'm supposed to rejoice and welcome it with open arms thanking the gods for its arrival" (Vassallo, 2015). A Trojan Horse, according to Greek mythology, tells how the Greeks gained access to Troy by dedicating a huge wooden horse to Athena 'goddess of war' before 'deserting the war'. In the middle of the night, a few Greeks climbed down from the horse and opened the gates of Troy, thus permitting the Greek Army to seize the city. This could be interpreted as migrants using deception to gain entrance to Malta under the pretense of seeking protection only to reveal their true intent to 'invade'. In a historical context, the 'Trojan horse' metaphor categorizes all migrants as 'Muslims', without considering the possibility of 'Christian' migrants or refugees/asylum seekers.

The "Trojan Horse" metaphor has been used many times to reproach groups of people or technology of deceitfulness. The Merriam Webster online dictionary gives two "full definitions for Trojan Horse." The first defines Trojan horse as being "someone or something intended to defeat or subvert from within, usually by deceptive means, and the second definition is regarding computer programs that "conceal instructions which, when activated, perform illicit or malicious action".

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps one of the reasons the Maltese media in this study did not have a vast amount of coverage concerning migrants and the Maltese economy is because the economy is not perceived as a vital issue facing the country. It is curious, that the media does focus on migration as a broader issue, however more coverage is given to the EU level or other European countries rather than taking a look at Malta itself. The findings speak to the nature of the media environment. Although the study only focused on two outlets, the coverage was fairly objective in its reporting style. The media is not recognizing itself as a source of information in regard to shedding light on greater issues, instead it is merely a mechanism to report current events to the public. In other words, from a western perspective, this study does not consider the possibility for a media source that operates in an investigative manner. In the US for example there is a diverse media landscape that provides in-depth news coverage to the public. The expectation for the media to serve as a source of information on migrants and the economy might be one harboured by those who come from a society that offers a diverse media environment.

The media has an opportunity to help shape public opinion and perception. In the past year (2015), little coverage on immigrants and migrants featured any factual data the subject of employment and benefits. In addition, there was no media coverage that featured information that could have resulted in a well-informed article to the average reader. Limitations were found in the data available on migrants and immigrants that contribute to the Maltese economy. We recommend that the media should take greater care to properly distinguish the difference between migrants and immigrants amidst reports on events or politicians that are connected to them.

The data available on the Maltese economy and the contribution of migrants and immigrants is not exhaustive. For the purpose of this study and for future studies, it would be more useful if the detail on who exactly is being referred to as a non-Maltese national were provided. There is a plethora of sources that conclude that Malta benefits from the contribution of foreign workers, EU-nationals and third country nationals, however this data should be exhaustive in identifying their nationalities and what skill-set they contribute to. Detailed data tested against the findings of a media audit would illustrate the socio-economic complexities that are present. While journalists and citizens are able to be informed through traditional online media by way of letters to the editor and op-eds, it would be great for articles concerning issues that affect social perceptions of migrants to allow the public to be educated on the issues being discussed.

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