



# I focus

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## Inclusive societies, where everyone enjoys an acceptable standard of living

**I**nterviewed Dr Sue Vella, Senior Lecturer with the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, at the Faculty for Social Wellbeing.

### What are your research interests?

*I enjoy historical and comparative welfare state research. At the moment, I'm working on the management of poverty in Malta's colonial years, and the socio-political processes around the emergence of the Maltese welfare state. I've also recently worked on challenges to care policy and provision in a changing demographic and labour context, and what this means for what we call the mixed economy of welfare. Other recent research has focused on migrants' access to social security in Malta; on levels and predictors of couple relationship satisfaction in Malta, together with colleagues at the National Family Research Centre; and together with other colleagues at the University, on Europe-wide research on youth disadvantages in family formation; and on the impact of smart-phone technology on quality of life.*

### How would you define social wellbeing? And what would increase it?

*Social wellbeing is quite a contested concept. Some suggest that it can be measured by simply aggregating individual wellbeing, on measures such as physical or mental health or subjective happiness. Others define social wellbeing more in terms of various factors that they believe essential to it, making it a bit of an umbrella term. At the top of the list for most of us is the quality of our relationships, and how respectful, reciprocal, authentic and empathic they are. Civic norms such as trustworthiness, cooperation, compliance with the law and the avoidance of opportunism also matter. So too does the quality of institutions, and the ways in which power and resources are used and the ends to which they are put. Of course, income and opportunities matter too, and inclusive societies, where everyone enjoys an acceptable standard of living and can integrate and participate in society, tend to be more cohesive. So I guess, to come back to your question, I'd say that social wellbeing is about belonging and solidarity, about trust in institutions, and having the means and opportunity to develop one's capabilities and contribute to society in some way.*



### What are the challenges being faced in society?

*Until a couple of weeks ago, I'd probably have mentioned the demographic challenge to the sustainability of our health and pension systems, and the way it combines with labour market changes to affect the availability and affordability of care. I'd also have mentioned income adequacy, especially among groups with greater risk such as lone parents and older adults, and those in insecure and expensive private rentals. We need to understand persistent poverty better. We also need to continue efforts to raise overall skill levels and in particular, to improve the life chances of early school leavers and of children in families with low levels of human capital. I think social cohesion, too, has been quite seriously dented, and there is much that can be done all-round to strengthen levels of trust, belonging and solidarity across political and ethnic lines.*

*The Covid-19 epidemic, though, brings other challenges to the forefront. Even if its social and economic impacts are hard to quantify at this point, by all accounts they are likely to be severe, and even devastating for some. Apart from the human hardship of job losses, such as food, housing and utility costs, the fiscal and administrative impact of responding to them will be considerable. We also need to*

*organise a humane response to the predicament of those third country nationals who have contributed so much to Malta's recent growth and who, in the face of job losses, are not entitled to contributory benefits and have no other home to go to. The impact of many missed weeks or even months of schooling will be considerable, especially among families with low levels of human capital. How best to sustain our brave frontliners in health, but also in banks, food shops, postal and other essential services is a big question too. The crisis is also likely to exacerbate mental health difficulties where these exist, and to create intolerable levels of anxiety or loneliness among others. Seclusion is also likely to exacerbate stress in vulnerable families, and emotional regulation may become more difficult under such conditions, making emerging forms of support online or by telephone more important. Yet like every crisis, this one brings opportunities too. Examples of altruism and solidarity abound on social media and it's hard to remember a time when the contributions of each and every one of us had such a compelling link to the common good. I'll also take the opportunity to repeat an appeal for blood donations recently made by the Blood Transfusion Service which, as social policy's founding father Richard Titmuss put it back in*

*the 1950s, is the epitome of the 'gift relationship' – voluntary, anonymous, life-giving.*

### Why the need for people specialised in social policy and in social work? What opportunities are there?

*There are regular job openings for social workers, mainly in the public sector but also in voluntary organisations in many sectors. Graduates in social policy generally go on to work in administration and management, whether of services or projects, as well as research and journalism. I believe our graduates have a lot to contribute both on an administrative or research front and also working directly with service users, and have skills that may prove to be particularly useful over the challenging months to come. Social policy graduates can contribute to the good design and efficient management of benefits, services and projects, as well as their evaluation. Social workers have a unique skill set in supporting clients, helping to strengthen competencies, and linking them to wider services and benefits as needed.*

### What courses will you be offering this coming academic year?

*We've quite a wide range of courses on offer in both social policy and social work. In the social policy stream, we offer a*

*three-year undergraduate programme intended to provide a broad theoretical basis as well as applied skills in research, policy analysis, administration and project management. At post-graduate level, we offer a taught MA in social policy on a part-time, evening basis. In the social work stream, we also offer a four-year undergraduate programme which provides the knowledge, skills and values that students require to practice social work, while graduates from other related areas may join our taught Master of Social Work on a full- or part-time basis if they wish to qualify for practice in this area. Master degrees by research are also available for graduates wishing to conduct post-graduate research on a particular topic in either social policy or social work. Our courses have evolved continually as a result of ongoing discussions with stakeholders. One such example is the Certificate in Volunteering Studies, which came about following collaboration between our Faculty (for Social Wellbeing) and the Malta Council for Voluntary Organisations. We strongly believe in the personal and social value of volunteering, which has been amply demonstrated in these difficult weeks, and we wish to support voluntary organisations in their good work. We hope that the Certificate, to be offered in the evenings, will open for the first time in October 2020.*