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# Communications in Transportation Research

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## Editorial

### Active travel and sustainable transport



So far we have plenty of evidence that show how active travel, defined broadly here as walking and cycling, and encompassing multimodality with public transport and the use of a variety of micro-mobility options, affect positively the environment and public health, reduce car congestion in urban roads, and is the most effective solution towards decarbonisation. However, in many parts of the world and in many cities we still see a gap in the transport policies that prioritize active travel, with most policies still focusing on the car and its supporting infrastructures of more and wider roads, more parking and so on. Even the decarbonisation discourse is riddled with references to the electric, maybe shared, autonomous car as being the sustainable solution for the future. As researchers in the field of transport we owe it to this and future generations to continually persuade policy and decision makers that the future of sustainable transport lies primarily in active mobility.

Active mobility has received much attention also during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first few months and possibly, due to the mandatory lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed on communities and cities, several measures were implemented by local authorities to secure enough space in the road environment to practice safe physical social distancing, implement road closures and temporary pedestrianisation, and allow for the setting up of pop-up cycle lanes to support those walking and cycling, or simply enjoying their outdoor street environment when people were working from home. The images of streets full of people rather than cars was a sight to behold for many, in many different places around the world where the “car is king” and between parking and traffic movement, not much is left of the urban space to dedicate to people. Indeed the initial work with my colleagues Luis Guzman (Universidad de los Andes, Bogota) and Daniel Oviedo (UCL, London) on urban space distribution across different geographies has highlighted the need to re-think how our cities have to change, and how the safe infrastructure has to be built, to accommodate active mobility (Attard et al., 2021). Literature in this field is still trying to establish principles and the few works looking into this have raised a good number of questions for future researchers to investigate (Gössling et al., 2016; Nello-Deakin, 2019).

In this editorial I would like to raise a few issues and challenges which researchers might want to pursue, not only as part of their research work, but also as experts, advocates, consultants and responsible citizens within communities. The first issue to contend with is framing. In a world where the challenges of climate change mitigation and adaptation are considered critical for survival (literally in the case of small, disappearing island states in the Pacific Ocean!), we need to make sure the research is framed within a context – one which delivers, very clearly and effectively, on decarbonisation and resilience. It is also high time that research integrates aspects of equity and transport justice. Active travel, as a

sustainable, resilient and inclusive form of transport, can indeed be framed within the desirable future in large global north and global south cities, smaller and remote settlements and also islands of all shapes and sizes.

A second issue, more like a challenge, is how to make the research visible and impactful beyond the academic arenas and networks. Engaging with decision makers is easier when the networks are small, like in small island communities, however the challenges of communication remain evident and problematic for many. And despite the promise of social media broadening the opportunities for dissemination, I sometimes see academic work still being shared in echo chambers that exclude, rather than include decision and policy makers. Engagement with decision makers however is not the only goal of research dissemination. There is a growing need to integrate citizen science, engaging with bottom-up approaches and involving communities to learn more about their well-being, the potential of their cities to become more sustainable, resilient and inclusive. Recent work into walkability at the University of Malta has shed some light on the power of citizen engagement and its impact on research (Cañas et al., 2020). Fig. 1 shows map outputs of perceived walkability using citizen science (for more information visit [walkingmalta.com](http://walkingmalta.com)).

Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity is also an important challenge in the research on active travel. In our work on walkability we came across several fields of study working on walking including health, urban design, planning, transport and more (Cañas and Attard, 2021). A stronger focus on interdisciplinarity is needed to ensure we tackle the research gaps appropriately, and provide as much as possible, findings and solutions that deliver beyond the narrow focus of one discipline. This also reflects on efforts which are now decades old, on the need to integrate the fields of transport, health and environment (see for example, the UNECE and World Health Organisation Transport Health and Environment Pan-European Programme <https://thepep.unece.org/pep>).

With the two-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic being remembered at the time of writing of this editorial, one cannot ignore what has happened, how it happened and what lessons we can learn. We survived very strict lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, over several waves. All this has affected us in ways which I do not think anyone fully comprehends yet. In transport it has closed down airports, removed peak hour traffic and congestion, increased home deliveries, and increased walking and cycling at the local level, in many city neighbourhoods. The bold decisions by some cities to implement measures that prioritized people over cars still require further research. And as some measures are removed and some are kept, there is the need to monitor implementation, impact, benefits, disadvantages, citizen attitudes and needs, policy approaches, and much more. Among some circles

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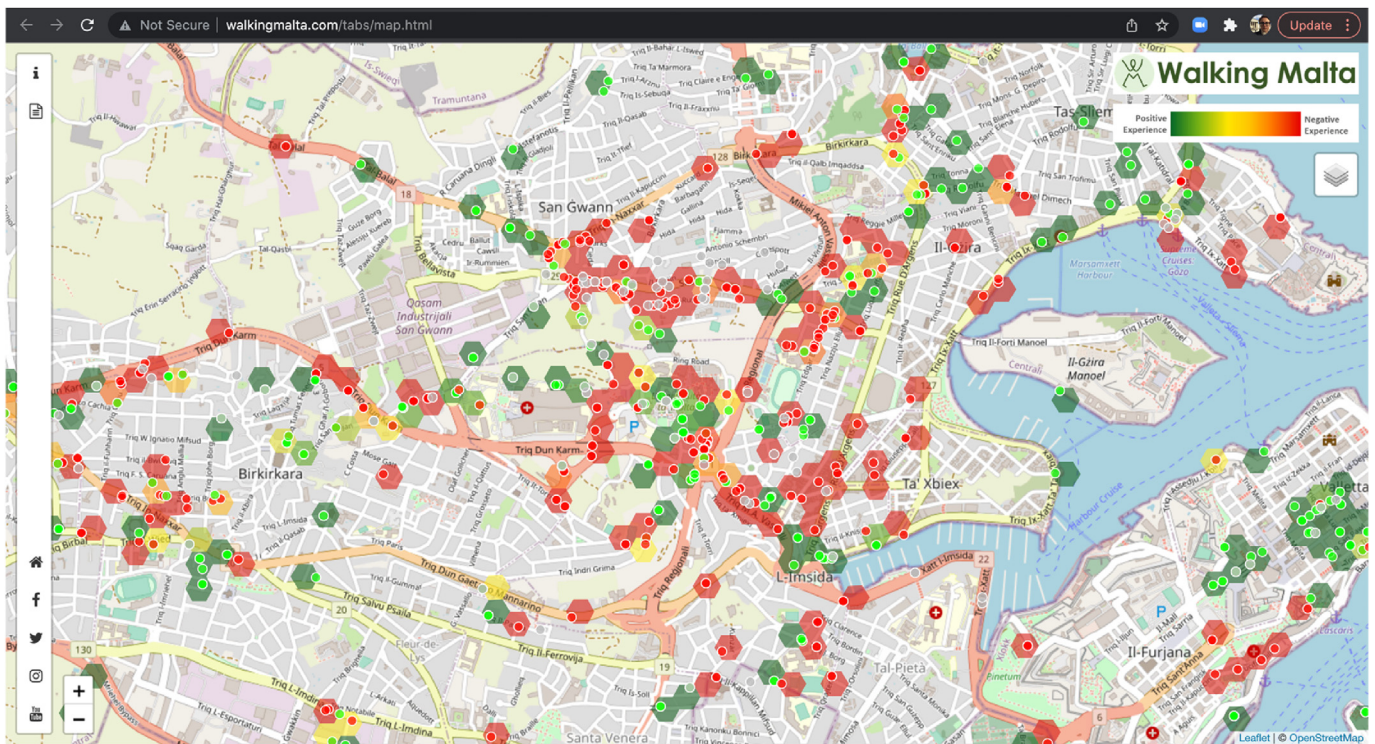


Fig. 1. WalkingMalta walkability map (<http://www.walkingmalta.com/tabs/map.html>).

it is evident that given the threat of climate change and the ambition to decarbonise quickly, a return to normality pre-COVID is not an option. This however is not ubiquitous and is not a common policy decision across countries or cities. Some cities are working hard to “go back to normal” whilst others are slowly transitioning. As researchers we have the opportunity and why not, the duty, to inform the possible futures which a new normal might bring to populations and cities. Following the COVID-19 pandemic I feel there is a strong opportunity for active travel, more than on other modes.

The research into active travel must be future-proof and must inform. It must aim to deliver on sustainability, resilience and inclusiveness. I encourage researchers to work in this growing field and work alongside other experts and academics working in related fields to ensure that a more comprehensive understanding is gathered and stronger and much more effective recommendations are made for communities and policy. This journal provides an excellent platform for such research and I look forward to reading it here.

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**Professor Maria Attard** is Head of Geography and Director of the Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development at the University of Malta. She is co-editor of Research in Transportation Business and Management, Associate Editor of Case Studies on Transport Policy and sits on various editorial boards. Between 2002 and 2008 she was a consultant to Malta’s government and helped develop the first white paper on transport policy (2004) and implement the 2006 Valletta Strategy including park-and-ride, pedestrianisation and road pricing (2007). She subsequently supported the planning of the 2011 public transport reform. She sits on the Steering Committee of the WCTRS and is a Cluster co-chair for NECTAR.

Maria Attard  
 Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development University of  
 Malta, Msida, MSD2080, Malta  
 E-mail address: [maria.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:maria.attard@um.edu.mt).