

# A Caring Professional Continuum: Home Economics Working Through Families

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## Abstract

*This think-piece paper tenders a new construct for home economics called the caring professional continuum, which is grounded in the education, prevention, and development approach to practice along with working through families to enhance the human condition. It originated from a 2021 email exchange between the authors arising from a response to a Facebook query “Why do you think that Home Economists are sometimes given the label ‘caring professionals?’” Building blocks to the think-piece also include a caring profession, and a helping versus caring professional (trust, empathy, humanistic, and human values). The paper is book ended with a practice addendum recounting Maltese pre-professional home economists’ engagement with these ideas.*

**KEYWORDS:** HOME ECONOMICS; CARING PROFESSION; CARING PROFESSIONAL CONTINUUM; EDUCATION, PREVENTION, AND DEVELOPMENT; WORKING THROUGH FAMILIES

## Introduction

In winter 2021, Suzanne Piscopo (Malta) posted a call to home economists on Facebook via HEiA (Home Economists in Action) wherein she asked practitioners “Why do you think that Home Economists are sometimes given the label ‘caring professionals?’” (see Figure 1).

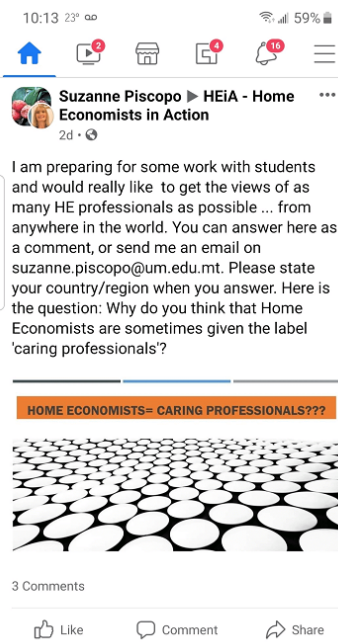


Figure 1 HEiA Facebook Query

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I emailed her the following comment from Canada:

I don't think others label us this way. We gave ourselves this label. If you ask any hard-core home economist why she became one, she will likely tell you she 'wanted to help people.' But we do not 'take care' of people; rather, we 'have a care' for them. Respectively, this means that we do not assume responsibility for them; rather, home economists value families and individuals and think they are important. We have a concern for their well-being and welfare (personal communication, Sue L. T. McGregor, February 13, 2021).

Suzanne subsequently emailed me this response and query:

Yes—We do not 'take care of' people directly, but we care for people through the guidance and education we give or the research we do to inform policy or programmes. This is an interesting discussion. Where does education for prevention lie on a continuum of care? Do you feel like writing a paper together about this? (personal communication, Suzanne Piscopo, February 13, 2021).

This think-piece emerged from this exchange as a way to explore the idea of "What constitutes a home economics caring professional?" Think-piece papers are deemed "legitimate and important forms of [scholarly] discourse" (Kennedy, 2007, p. 139). They serve as valid "tools for contributing to the cumulative improvement of theoretical knowledge" (McGregor, 2018, p. 470). They reflect conceptually advanced but still evolving views on a topic. Think-piece authors hope to challenge current thinking leading to provocative dialogue and discourse that prompt intellectual innovations and augment best and next practice (McGregor, 2018).

## Caring Professional

The phrase *caring professional* comprises two constructs—care and professional. Each is discussed before distinguishing between a helping and a caring professional. This discourse paves the way for introducing the topic of this think-piece—a caring professional continuum per Suzanne's query "Where does education for prevention lie on a continuum of care?"

### Care

*Care* is Old English *caru*, "concern, serious mental attention" (Harper, n.d.-a). At issue herein is whether one is caring *for* or *about* someone. The choice of proposition matters. *For* refers to in favour of, working on behalf of, or to benefit someone. *About* refers to being the subject of concern (Anderson, 2014). If someone is in a caring relationship (i.e., care for), they manage a connection between *the carer* and *the cared for* where the former is responsible for the latter. They directly provide (or arrange the provision of) what is necessary for *the cared for's* protection, development, and welfare. This relationship depends on trust and monitoring the impact of one's efforts (Noddings, 1996).

Some home economists may be in personal, caring relationships with loved ones wherein they take care of them. But, as professionals, if home economists have a care *about* someone, they are concerned about them but not directly responsible *for* them. Having a care about someone means valuing them and thinking they are important. They matter. It means having a concern for their well-being and welfare (Frank, 2018; van Roon, n.d.).

### Professional

*Profession* is Latin *professionem*, "a solemn, public declaration in response to a calling" (Harper, n.d.-d). A calling is "a strong urge toward a particular way of life or career; a vocation" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). A vocation is a strong feeling of suitability for a particular career, occupation, or profession (Anderson, 2014). A profession (like home economics) has distinct characteristics compared to an occupation. A profession requires people to attain university accreditation in a complex and unique body of knowledge that it calls its own. It has a monopoly on this knowledge base, which is a systematic body of principles, theories, concepts, constructs, and competencies derived from evidence-based scholarship and practice. Having mastered this body of knowledge, a profession holds an esteemed position in society and is entitled to a voice in public affairs (e.g.,

policy and issues related to the good of society and humanity) (Brown, 1965; Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2005).

Compared to amateurs (non-professionals), professionals are motivated by a deep sense of responsibility *to* society and humanity, but they are not responsible *for* them. This social end serves as a beacon and guide. Professionals appreciate that they must adhere to enforced standards of practice and often codes of conduct or ethics. Self-interest takes a back seat to familial and societal (humanity's) interests. Professionals always maintain their integrity knowing they will be held accountable otherwise. Accepting that the public deserves and expects high levels of expertise, professionals engage in lifelong learning to remain relevant, current, and legitimate (Chatelain, 2004; De Marco, 1997; Houle, 1980; McGregor, 2005; Stratton & Mitstifer, 2003a, 2003b).

In short, a *professional* is someone who has an impressive competence in a particular activity, discipline, or career path to which they have been called (Anderson, 2014). The home economics professional's "primary orientation is on the realities of living [and] the well-being of [individuals and] families" (Spitze, 1966, pp. 62, 63). The home economics profession provides services intended to benefit people in their daily lives and "provides benefits for mankind [sic]" (Kieren et al., 1984, p. 118). Home economics professionals fully appreciate that people face "problems which may not have a solution in their lifetime" (Kieren et al., 1984, p. 118), yet they fully accept the broad principle of social responsibility for humanizing society over generations (East, 1979; Kieren et al., 1984).

### Helping versus Caring Professional

This section distinguishes between a helping and a caring professional asserting that they are related but different.

#### *Helping professional*

Kieren et al. (1984) characterized home economics as a helping profession. *Help* is Old English *helpe*, "assistance, succour in times of hardship and distress" (Harper, n.d.-c). Helping someone makes it easier for that person to do something. It can also improve a situation or problem (Anderson, 2014). Kieren et al. (1984) envisioned home economists as "professionals dedicated to the betterment of the human condition [which requires] a helping component" (p. ix).

In 1993, the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) acknowledged that "the profession takes leadership in ... enhancing the human condition" (p. 1). In 2010, McGregor continued along this trajectory, explaining that "humanity's present condition ... reflects the totality of the actions humans have taken to date leading to humanity's current state of existence" (p. 14). The present-day human condition is dually characterized by (a) suffering, war, oppression, poverty, ignorance, and disconnectedness and (b) hope, passion, respect, forgiveness, love, care, and stewardship (McGregor, 2010).

In addition to bettering the human condition, home economists "are also concerned with helping to humanize society" (Kieren et al., 1984, p. 118). *Humanizing* means making life more understandable and easier to relate to and appreciate (Vocabulary.com, n.d.). In that spirit, after conceptualizing home economists as helpers and individuals and families as helpees, Kieren et al. (1984) tendered a detailed discussion of *the helping process* (Chapter 4). They further asserted that home economists can best serve individuals and families by *helping* them *problem solve* rather than simply providing them with specific problem solutions. Problem solving using this helping process would entail mutual responsibility for thinking through, clarifying, questioning, and supporting any problem-solving actions undertaken (Kieren et al., 1984).

#### *Caring professional*

In subtle contrast, caring professionals care about people (i.e., are concerned about, interested in, and pay attention to) with *one* possible supportive action being helping them with a task or improving their situation. Respecting the etymological root of the word *profession* (Harper, n.d.-d), Noddings (1996) professed that *caring professionals* are *called* to their work. To wit—home economics *is* a calling.

### *Trust*

Noddings (1996) posited that this calling as a caring professional depends on trust (i.e., the firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of something or someone). She said that caring professionals would know that an atmosphere of trust better ensures that educating and helping others, learning from that process, even life itself, all fare better. Building, encouraging, and nurturing this trust entails dialogue with people about both routine issues and larger questions about *the good life* or lack thereof. Caring professionals would encourage people to always “ask how, why, and on what grounds” (Noddings, 1996, p. 171) rather than defer and acquiesce to an expert.

### *Empathy*

Caring professionals would also be able to connect with people in an empathetic and dynamic manner that embraces a humanistic approach (van der Westhuizen et al., 2020). Let’s unpack this assertion. If home economists can empathize, they can understand how someone else is feeling from the latter’s frame of reference. With that understanding and shared feeling, home economists can appreciate that many factors enter into decision making, and that people under duress often struggle with rational and logical decisions—people can benefit from another perspective (Bellet & Maloney, 1991; Dietrich, 2010), in this case the home economists’ perspective.

Empathy differs from sympathy with the latter involving feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortunes (Bellet & Maloney, 1991; Dietrich, 2010). Sympathy is basically cognitive in nature with people distancing themselves from the person in distress, while empathy is emotive and involves an emotional connection between people (Miller, 2021). Empathy comprises three parts. (a) Cognitive empathy involves imagining oneself in another’s position and what it must be like. (b) Emotive empathy entails standing together (shoulder to shoulder) with the other person and feeling what they are experiencing. It is almost as if one catches the other’s emotions (i.e., emotional contagion). (c) Empathic action (i.e., an empathic presence) involves “actually sitting in silence, not doing anything. [Instead of saying] ‘Don’t just stand there, do something’ [empathetic people would say] ‘Don’t just do something, stand there’” (Miller, 2021, para. 8). As a caution, if people stop at cognitive empathy, they can readily slip into sympathy (Miller, 2021).

### *Humanistic*

A humanistic approach “emphasizes the personal worth of the individual, the centrality of human values, and the creative, active nature of human beings. The approach is optimistic and focuses on the noble human capacity to overcome hardship, pain and despair” (McLeod, 2015, para. 10). It assumes that people are inherently good and have the built-in ability to better themselves, their situation, and the world. Its main assumption is that people have free will. Using their personal agency, people make choices in life that have consequences (McLeod, 2015).

As caring professionals, home economists would hone in on this human ability for people to both assume responsibility for their lives and take responsible action. Home economics embraces “humanistic views” (Farias, 2012, p. 89). As caring professionals, they “are encouraged to acquire critical perceptions about social, economic, cultural, political and environmental phenomena which affect individuals, families” (Farias, 2012, p. 89). To help people kick start their personal agency (McLeod, 2015), home economists “ought to identify problems, potentialities and interests and motivate sustainable actions which ... promote improvement in life-quality of families” (Farias, 2012, p. 89). A humanistic vision of home economics practice “would emphasize the dignity and worth of human beings, empowering them to be competent, self-respecting, autonomous people exhibiting efficaciousness in the face of [adversity]” (McGregor, 2019a, p. 45).

### *Human values*

Regarding the humanistic approach and human values (McLeod, 2015), Nolen and Clawson (1992), speaking for home economists, believed that “values form the vital core of humankind’s existence. [They are not] merely statements of preference” (p. 6). Rather, values underpin the bases for human action. A profession concerned with delivering “dynamic human service which can benefit individuals and families” (Kieren et al., 1984, p. 120) must respect the role of human values. These are enduring normative (should, ought to) beliefs that guide human actions including how to behave, what attitudes to hold, and which mental processes to employ (Racko, 2019). Human values “serve the

interests of society and guide the selection, evaluation and justification of human actions” (Racko, 2019, p. 35).

Also speaking for home economists, Bubolz (1979) “believe[d] that the conditions of human existence can provide a starting base for a valid source of values regarding the kind of social character and society desired” (p. 181). She further believed that home economics starts both from the problems humans are experiencing everyday in their home and family life and the value systems and valued ends that they bring to the table. Valued ends are desired outcomes or states of affair that are in the interest of humans and larger society (rather than self-interest). They are mutually determined with individuals and families instead of by home economists in isolation and then given to people (called given ends) (Brown, 1980; Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor & Gentzler, 2009).

## Caring Professional Continuum

Suzanne had posed the question “Where does education for prevention lie on a continuum of care?” This query prompted us to explore the notion of a continuum, which is Latin *continuus*, “uninterrupted” (Harper, n.d.-b). Anderson (2014) defined it as a continuous (uninterrupted) sequence in which adjacent elements are not noticeably different from each other, but the extremes are quite distinct. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary similarly explained that a *continuum* is a coherent whole comprising a collection, sequence, or progression of elements that vary by very small degrees (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). There are two distinct polar ends with something in the middle. An example would be someone’s motives for volunteering lying somewhere between feel-good/self-serving and altruistic.

In the medical field, a continuum of care pertains to a full range of services that can be tailored to patients’ current, evolving, and future needs. A comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated continuum of care is assumed to be better than a fragmented, ad hoc (for this specific purpose) approach. The continuum of care concept connotes the principle of continuity or uninterrupted service as things progress or evolve. Discontinuity (i.e., interruptions, gaps, or intervals in service) can be detrimental to people’s well-being, quality of life, and their development. An imbalanced service level is also damaging in that insufficient attention is given to balancing aspects of service and practice relative to what people need (Bickman, 1996; Evashwick, 1989; Kerber et al., 2007).

## Education, Prevention, and Development

Although difficult to attribute to any one person in the profession, we posit that home economics inadvertently developed its own caring professional continuum. It constitutes education, prevention, and development instead of a therapeutic approach that involves facts and information, intervention, redress, and remedial measures to mitigate a crisis or maintain the status quo (akin to social work’s approach) (Arcus & Thomas, 1993; Kieren et al., 1984; Tummala, 1995).

### *Education*

First, education is any process, formal or informal, which shapes people’s potential as they mature by providing intellectual, moral, and social instruction. Ideally, this education will help people find their own power (empowerment) to apply new information, insights, and knowledge to help themselves. This self-help involves reasoned and justifiable actions (Arcus & Thomas, 1993; Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012; Tummala, 1995). Home economists focus heavily on education for living (Kieren et al., 1984; Tummala, 1995). They ardently believe that knowledge is power. With education, people can gain the ability to make informed, responsible life choices for the good of themselves and humanity (Tummala, 1995). They would learn how “to think in terms of ‘forever’” (Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012, p. 229).

### *Prevention*

Second, by forestalling crises and the need for coping actions, prevention hinders, impedes, and prohibits an undesirable event or situation (state of affairs) from occurring in the first place or from progressing to the point of an emergency (Tummala, 1995). Prevention helps people carve out a space to engage in enriching relationships, personal reflection, a critical analysis of society, and social change instead of perpetually putting out fires. With sensitization to environmental factors impacting individuals and family’s well-being, needs, and functioning, home economists can “identify and

prevent potential risk factors which might increase the vulnerability of people” (Tummala, 1995, p. 63).

### Development

Third, development refers to steady improvement and progression from a simple to a more complex state as opposed to stagnation, regression, and stymied growth (Anderson, 2014). A development approach to home economics practice involves a focus on evolution and progress and improving the range and critique of choices available for people (Arcus & Thomas, 1993; Tummala, 1995). Tummala (1995) expanded development by adding that home economists must be aware of and influence national and social developmental activities and policies that impact people’s lives. McGregor (2019b) concurred, making a strong case for home economics’ role in national development plans.

In short, home economists as caring professionals would (a) ensure the acquisition of skills and modes of thinking that contribute to healthy homes, societies, and the human condition (education); (b) instill a preventive approach to daily living; and (c) identify and respect a myriad of life choices informed by reason leading to human growth and improvement (development) (see Tummala, 1995). Respecting the definition of a continuum, the polar opposites of this caring professional continuum could be (a) integrated, comprehensive (whole), coordinated service versus (b) fragmented, incomplete (fractional), ad hoc service. Degrees of education, prevention, and development would be employed along different points of the continuum (see Figure 2). The principle of balanced service involving varying degrees of education, prevention, and development would be paramount.

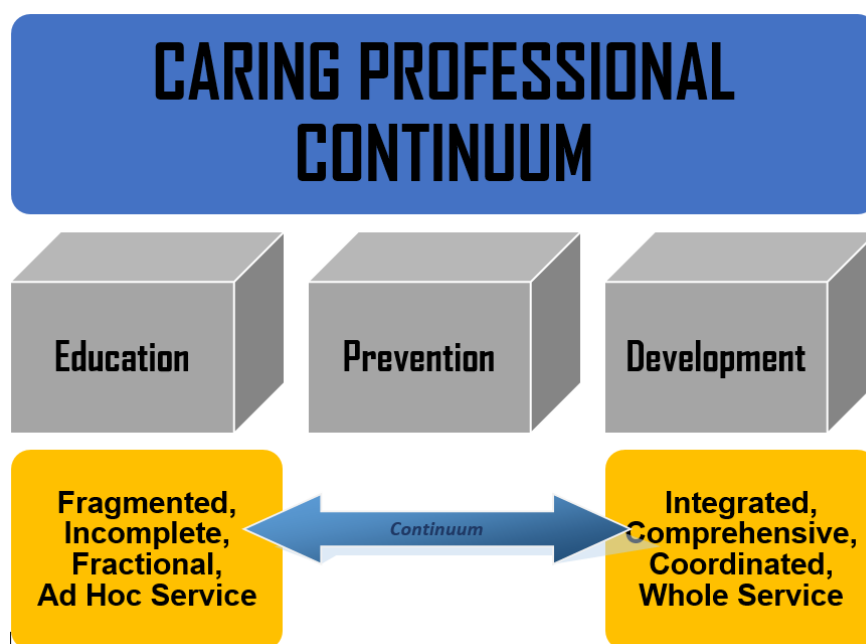


Figure 2 Caring Professional Continuum

### Working Through Families

Per the tenets of a think-piece, as food for thought, we posit that home economists employing a caring professional continuum (see Figure 2) would *shape the human condition* by ensuring resilient, resourceful, and autonomous individuals and families. This is a larger call to action than optimizing individuals and families’ well-being. We embrace East’s (1979) radical suggestion that home and family are but a means to an end by which home economists nurture human development for the good of humanity. East (1979) referred to the home as a matrix, which is an environment in which something develops (Anderson, 2014). For East (1979), the home (i.e., the means) is the “molding force” (p. 141) for shaping human development. Regarding the ends, “the ultimate goal is to make life successfully better for each following generation” (p. 141) by working *through* the home for the good of humankind.

This framing is radical in that it departs from tradition or accepted mainstream wisdom about how home economists view individuals and families. For over a century, we have expressed the mantra—*our mission is to optimize individuals and families' well-being and quality of life*. But we have normally assumed that the latter are the reason we do our work—the valued end. Framing individuals and families as a *means to an end* poses the risk of narrowly construing them as a tool to be manipulated. A means to an end is a thing that is not valued or important in itself but is useful in achieving an aim (Anderson, 2014). Fortunately, this is not what East (1979) meant. Rather, she and others view families as a key social institution that must be supported and strengthened with home economics being *especially* adept at this task (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2009; Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012; Tatano, 2014).

“In effect, [East] proposed that home economics does its work *through* home and family” (McGregor, 2019c, p. 11). Home and family become the means to a highly altruistic end—an improved human condition. By association, home economics would be “focused on the home in order to improve humanity” (East, 1979, p. 141). Home economists would help families and individuals within the home environment become human agents—home economists work *through* them to improve the human condition. Brown and Paolucci (1979) called families “an agent of transformation [and concurred that home economists must help families] regain control of [morality, political action, economics, and social actions] to direct them toward the common good” (p. 35). The nature of home economics services is thus shaped by “insights from critical reflection about human needs and the human condition” (Brown & Paolucci, 1979, p. 23).

Embracing this radical approach would entail a four-pronged strategy. Home economists would “think rationally with power, richness, and clarity” (East, 1979, p. 141). First, this means applying rational thought to their work through the home. Second, from a power perspective, they would become comfortable with ambiguities (i.e., be skeptical and evaluative), perceive connections and relationships, and seek alternatives using intellectual prowess. Third, richness in practice would come from compassion, empathy, sensitivities, and awareness. Fourth, clarity would arise from posing philosophical questions about the meaning of life (East, 1979). In an interesting twist, Piscopo and Mugliett (2012) actually framed home economics as “a means to an end [claiming that our role is to] build capacity for individuals and families to realize their potential for better lives” (p. 231).

Home economists so inspired would draw upon their own knowledge and insights and integrate them with each individual’s and family’s network and lived experiences (Piscopo & Mugliett, 2012). These experiences accrue as people learn to cope with change, adapt to change, and engage in social action to effect change that makes the human condition better for everyone (Arcus & Thomas, 1993; Brown & Paolucci, 1979; Kieren et al., 1984). This is called the system of three actions approach with action meaning a way to *think* about something before acting: technical (instrumental), interpretive (communicative), and critical (emancipatory) action. Home economists are tasked with determining what combination of these three actions is best for the current dilemma (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2007).

## Conclusions

If, as Suzanne suggested, home economists are educating for prevention on a continuum of care, what would they be trying to prevent or keep from happening? What would they hope to develop and educate about? We propose that the answer is *anything* that would compromise people’s well-being, welfare, wellness, and quality of everyday life in ways that threaten the human condition, the common good, and humanizing society. It would be *anything* that threatens or undermines the influence and role of families as a primary social institution as it pertains to bettering the human condition—humanity’s current state of being.

As caring professionals, home economists would educate people about how to both (a) protect and enhance these aspects of their everyday life and (b) develop and mature as responsible humans. Home economists would do this because they *have a care* about humanity as it is lived out *through* the home and family. By way of affirmation, in her recent keynote address at the Caribbean home economics conference, O’Neil (2021) asserted that “we build the world through our homes [with] home economists acting as a stabilizing force in the world.” We offer this think-piece as a way to stimulate the profession’s thinking about a caring professional continuum (education, prevention, and development) focused on bettering the human condition by working through home and family.

## Practice Addendum


To illustrate our extended thinking about the merit of a caring professional continuum and a discourse around caring *for* or caring *about*, Suzanne prepared a practice addendum. An addendum is an extra item added at the end of a text that serves to clarify and extend (maybe amend or nullify) the ideas contained in the original document. In all cases, the addendum becomes a binding part of the original text (Kagan, 2020). We created the neologism *practice addendum* as way to frame accounts of real-life engagement with new ideas, in this case a caring professional continuum predicated on caring *for* or caring *about* as experienced by Maltese preprofessional home economists. We hope you find the attached practice addendum meaningful and inspiring and that it triggers provocative thinking—the intent of a think-piece.

## Author biographies

NO BIOS PROVIDED

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## A Narrative from Malta

Suzanne Piscopo

The University of Malta’s (UM) BSc (Hons) Home Economics (HE) course—Home Economists as Caring Professionals—was taught for the first time February to May 2021. As I was planning the course in January-February 2021, I was bound by the course description that had been developed close to three years earlier as per UM regulations (see Box 1).

**Box 1 Home Economists as Caring Professionals—Study Unit Aims**

This study unit aims to extend the students’ understanding of the role of Home Economists as caring professionals who work to promote the wellbeing of individuals at different stages of the lifecycle, of different ability and of different life circumstances. With a special focus on vulnerable individuals and families, it helps sensitise students to the various needs of these households and describes the work of state and non-state agencies and organisations in offering services and incentives to enhance their quality of life. The study unit also outlines basic principles for working effectively and ethically with vulnerable individuals and families.

Source: <https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/studyunit/HPN3019>

Three years ago, I had already envisaged this course as having a reflective and applied orientation, wherein final-year students would be able to consolidate their understandings about HE as a caring profession. However, as I developed the actual framework, structure, and sessions for the course this year, I felt a need to move away from my own preconceptions and explore instead what other seasoned or recently qualified Home Economists felt about this concept. To that end, my mid-February 2021 informal survey via three Facebook pages yielded responses from Home Economists engaged in different positions and hailing from different countries (International Federation of Home Economics [IFHE], Home Economists in Action [HEiA], and Teachers of Home Economics). Figure 1 showcases the main themes that emerged in response to the question on Home Economists as caring professionals.

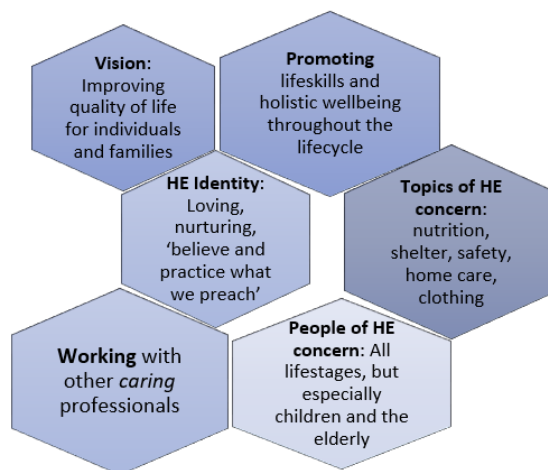


Figure 1 Key Emergent Themes from Social Media Survey February 12-18, 2021

From this set of responses, and Sue McGregor’s critical-reflective reply to my HEiA social media post (personal communication, February 13, 2021), I set forth with a slightly revised vision for the course that (a) not only informed the orientation I had originally taken but also (b) spurred me to allow for a certain flexibility so that students’ reactions, as the initial lectures were delivered, could further help mould the course content as it unfolded.

In the first lecture, students were given space to share their own perceptions of *care* in general. With respect to defining care, they focused mainly on helping and supporting others and keeping them safe. The *others* were both people in general and the elderly and people with disabilities. According to the students, *care* was shown by both giving something tangible, such as food, and exhibiting more intangible behaviours. Examples included listening, making yourself available, paying attention, asking about feelings or needs, and showing affection. They said that care was provided by various professionals including home help carers, nurses, therapists, and social workers. Listed separately were educators/teachers and then family members and friends.

This first discussion illustrated both the students' strong focus on (a) professional care services and (b) the socio-emotional aspect of wellbeing that can be provided by different people in one's life. At the end of the first Lecture, students were left with a teaser to ponder for the next lecture prompted by Sue McGregor's and my email exchange of opinions. I asked "What is your thinking on 'caring for' as opposed to 'caring about'?" I reminded them that since its origins as a profession, HE has shown a global concern with home, family, and community life and has strived to *serve* families (i.e., to contribute to their well-being and help them meet their needs).

In the second lecture, I asked students what aspects of care they associated with HE (see Table 1). Their focus was squarely on the applied aspect—the knowledge and skills they had that could help individuals and families have a better-quality life. The knowledge they referred to included primarily nutrition and healthy diets, followed closely by safety, hygiene, and protection of the general environment. Of note is the immediate identification of themselves as individuals able to pass on skills related to choosing healthy foods, meal planning, and cooking. Then there were aspects of self-care and care of the home with an interesting extension to protection of the natural environment. These comments indicated that their perception of care was no longer being limited to actions that impacted inside the home but extended to those impacting outside the home. Finally, there was a strong reference to "happy" relationships. When asked to elaborate, students described relationships that facilitated democratic decision making, exhibited a harmonious atmosphere in the home, and were rich with physical and emotional demonstration of affection.

Table 1 Aspects of Care That Students Associated With Home Economics

Aspect of Care	How many chose this? (N = 10)
Nutritious food and diet	7
Safety	5
Cleanliness and hygiene	5
Protecting the natural environment	5
Happy relationships	4
Reducing disease risk	2
Designing aesthetically pleasing homes	0

I utilised this discussion to provoke them to think about what was missing in the list (Table 1) that could aid individuals and families to improve their quality of life and promote holistic wellbeing. Upon reflection, students further added topics such as budgeting one's or the household's income; designing functional, efficient, and comfortable spaces; planning for and buying a useful and pleasing wardrobe; and caring for clothes, linens, and soft furnishings. This exercise led to a discussion about "Who would benefit the most from the knowledge and skills that Home Economists could provide?" At this juncture, I also had them express themselves on both *caring for* and *caring about* and did so by bringing in the ideas of (a) humans as part of the ecosystem and (b) how, whilst working to improve the human condition inside the home, or as part of everyday living practices, Home Economists also work to improve the human condition outside the home.

This broader focus inevitably led me to borrow Sue McGregor's (2010) *prevention, education and development* triad and encourage the students to place Home Economists' caring role in such a framework (see Figure 2). I also reminded them of a fundamental approach to practice adopted within Home Economics: the system of actions approach whereby Home Economists identify and

utilise judiciously integrated technical, interpretive, and critical actions (i.e., ways of thinking) to improve the human condition on an individual, family, and community level. To this end, I quoted Sue McGregor explaining that “we approach people experiencing problems and work with them to determine which combination of coping, adapting, and affecting change is appropriate for them given their current situation and future inclinations and possibilities” (2010, p. 29).

Figure 2 Education, Prevention, and Development (adapted from McGregor, 2010)

Home Economists work with families to:	
<b>EDUCATE</b>	Ensure the acquisition of skills and modes of thinking essential for functioning in society
<b>PREVENT</b>	Instil a preventative approach to living day-to-day forestalling and thwarting undesirable events
<b>DEVELOP</b>	Focus on human development and evolution and improvement of the range and critique of choices available for everyday life

By this time, it was evident that the students were ready to expand their perspective on *care* and see their broader role in human development; in particular, they were expressing an interest in how caring for and caring about are very much linked to a number of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). They were also ready to consider their potential role locally where their knowledge and skills could be utilised in different settings and scenarios. At the same time, I urged them to realise that addressing and solving the complex problems of everyday living requires a better understanding of their own self and what they could and should (not) bring to discussions on solutions when working with individuals and families. I also highlighted the frequent need to work with other professionals and practitioners so that designed solutions could be the best possible to meet needs articulated by individuals, families, and communities.

To this end, I sought to enrich the their stance on Home Economists as caring professionals through facilitating introspective reflection and analysis and exposing them to various realities of individuals and families in contemporary Maltese society. As stated earlier, the concept of working with people to prevent problems was something they were fairly familiar with, but it needed qualification and grounding. With this in mind, I tried to integrate several aspects of professional practice into the course from then on:

- a) the value of going more deeply into the causes of problems
- b) the recognition of their own values and how these inform perceptions, judgements, and priorities when it comes to listening to, addressing and working with others
- c) the sensitivity to people’s needs, fears, doubts, and actions
- d) the empathic stance
- e) the purpose and quality of care *services*, and
- f) the need for working in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams.

I achieved this *digging deeper* primarily by inviting a variety of guest speakers to (a) strengthen the students’ theoretical understanding and self-identification and (b) help them see the application of frameworks and principles to case studies. Guest speakers included academics (e.g., sociologists, psychologists) and practitioners (e.g., social workers, community outreach workers). Given the upsurged focus in Malta on vulnerable groups, I purposefully included guest speakers who could talk about people suffering poverty, substance abusers, landed immigrants, people with various disabilities, and the different state and non-governmental organisation-run programs that foster self-esteem, personal development, and social inclusion. During and after each guest lecture, the students were challenged to reflect on how what they had heard influenced their perceptions of, attitudes toward, and possible future actions as Home Economists.

In the final lecture, students discussed any personal change they had experienced from the first lecture to the last with respect to their perceptions of nine *care*-related themes that emerged from the different foci of the invited speakers: values, sensitivity, empowerment, physical needs, social and emotional needs, poverty, communication, collaboration, and *care services*. Their responses showed evidence of both their personal and professional growth and their appreciation of how their knowledge and skills as future professional Home Economists could be harnessed to benefit others. I ended the class with a quote from Hall et al. (2019) on how “engaging with everyday life requires

interdisciplinary knowledge to resolve the many complex problems that we encounter on a daily basis. It requires both a pragmatic and integrative approach” (p. 13).

I used this last-class discussion of care-related themes and this quote as a springboard for the students to come up with their own course-related projects for assessment purposes. Their final proposals as preprofessional Home Economists reflect how their vision of care (*for* and *about*) evolved profoundly during the course (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3** Students’ Self-Designed, Care-Oriented Course Assessment Proposals

Student group 1	A proposal for designing a life-skills course for prisoners coming to the end of their sentence preparing them for re-entry into society
Student group 2	A proposal for organising a <i>repair café</i> in a local community bringing together youths and senior citizens for a workshop and sharing of skills
Student group 3	A proposal for a community of <i>tiny houses</i> , fashioned around sustainability principles, which can offer low-cost housing (for sale or to rent) for people who <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) become homeless</li> <li>b) require a home till they are more financially secure</li> <li>c) wish to downsize, or</li> <li>d) want to live in a sustainable manner embracing inclusivity (e.g., environment-friendly, community resource sharing).</li> </ol>

This first run of this course has been a journey for both me (as designer, coordinator, and co-lecturer) and the students. The concept of care is continuously evolving. Is it caring *for* or caring *about*? Is it a continuum, or is it a cycle? I would argue that one does not exclude the other; but the certainty is that there *is* scope for Home Economists to play a strong role in the promotion, delivery, and fostering of *care* at different levels of society. I will end with a response from the February 2021 social media survey. It was made by a newly qualified Maltese HE teacher (used with permission). I feel that it encapsulates well the caring identity of Home Economists and augurs well for the future of the profession *if* our young graduates adopt this vision:

Home Economists are not anthropocentric. The world does not revolve around us. We approach life as collectivists and not as individualists. Being a caring professional is an ingrained attribute in all Home Economists as our mission is to be socially, economically, environmentally, politically, anthropologically and emotionally ethical and sustainable in all aspects of life. We believe in responsible living within communities where people support the growth of one another. And therefore, we have a big purpose in this world! (Yakof Debono, personal communication, February 11, 2021).

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