



**Wednesday, 20 May 2026**

## **SYMPOSIUM**

**“Martial Arts for Community Well-being and Health”**



Jointly organized by Vrije Universiteit Brussel, UNICA,  
and University of Rome “Foro Italico”

Hosted by Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

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### Introduction

Martial arts are widely practised around the world and increasingly recognised for their potential to contribute to **physical health, mental well-being, and social development**. At the same time, questions remain regarding **safety, regulation, and the governance of martial arts practices and competitions**. This symposium will bring together **researchers, practitioners, and policy stakeholders** to explore how martial arts can contribute to healthier and more inclusive communities.

The programme will feature **keynote lectures, thematic sessions, and panel discussions** addressing topics such as:

- The role of martial arts in **community well-being and social development**
- **Health and safety challenges** in martial arts practice and competition
- **Policy and governance frameworks** supporting safe and responsible martial arts participation.

The symposium will include keynote contributions by **Alex Channon (University of Brighton, UK)**, holder of the **2026 Willy Calewaert Chair**, whose research focuses on the social and health dimensions of martial arts.

The event aims to foster **interdisciplinary dialogue between academia, sport organisations, policymakers, and the martial arts community**, and to strengthen collaboration between universities engaged in research and education related to martial arts, sport, and health.

### Target Audience

Local and international martial community, academics and city officers involved in community wellbeing, sport and health related academics and officers, students.

### Registration

Participation is open but registration is mandatory.  
Participants are kindly invited to **register [here](#)**.

### Information & Contact

Please check the **[event webpage](#)** for regular updates.  
For any queries, please contact the UNICA Secretariat at **[office@unica-network.eu](mailto:office@unica-network.eu)**.

## Programme (as of 27 March 2026)

**Venue:** Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) Main Campus, U-Residence - [Generaal Jacqueslaan 271](#), 1050 Elsene, Brussels, Belgium

09:30-10:00	<b>Doors open and registration</b>
10:00-10:30	<p><b>Welcome addresses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jan Danckaert, Rector, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</li> <li>• Massimo Sacchetti, Rector, University of Rome "Foro Italico"</li> <li>• Luciano Saso, UNICA Secretary General</li> </ul>
10:30-11:00	<p><b>Keynote Lecture "Developing and promoting good health through martial arts: Cutting with a double-edged sword"</b></p> <p>by <b>Alex Channon</b>, University of Brighton, Willy Calewaert Chair Holder 2026</p> <p><i>This lecture will critically appraise the notion that martial arts are health-enhancing activities. Exploring the positive outcomes that can be associated with martial arts, it will advocate martial arts as vehicles for positive mental, physical, and social health outcomes, providing some theoretical explanations for martial arts' potentially unique benefits in these regards. The lecture will also point towards some important limitations and drawbacks to this, discussing issues of accessibility and inclusion, physical health risks, and pseudoscientific discourses evident within some martial arts and combat sports communities. The lecture will draw on the chair holder's recent empirical research comparing mental health outcomes of martial arts with functional fitness training for military veterans.</i></p>
11:00-11:30	Coffee break
11:30-13:00	<p><b>Session 1   Community well-being and inclusion in martial arts</b></p> <p><b>Moderator: Hebe Schailée</b>, Associate Professor at Sport &amp; Society, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</p> <p><b>Introductory talk "Martial arts for personal and community development"</b>, by <b>Marc Theeboom</b>, Professor, Chairman of the Research Group "Sport and Society", Vrije Universiteit Brussel &amp; <b>Hebe Schailée</b>, Associate Professor at Sport &amp; Society, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</p> <p><b>Panel discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Tina Bellemans</b>, Associate lector, Windesheim University of Applied Sciences</li> <li>• <b>Emanuele Isidori</b>, Deputy Rector for Internationalization, University of Rome "Foro Italico"</li> <li>• <b>Nicole Maussier</b>, University of Rome "Foro Italico"</li> <li>• <b>Zoë Parys</b>, Team Antwerp Piranhas</li> </ul>
13:00-14:00	<b>Lunch &amp; optional visit to the Centre for Martial Arts and Science (CEMAS)</b>

14:00-15:30	<b>Session 2   Health challenges in martial arts competitions</b>
	<p><b>Moderator: Paul Wylleman</b>, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</p> <p><b>Introductory talk “Interdisciplinary perspectives on martial arts research”</b>, by <b>Paul Wylleman &amp; Bart Roelands</b> (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)</p> <p><b>Panel discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Olav Spahl</b>, Belgian Olympic &amp; Interfederal Committee</li> <li>• <b>Luk Buyse</b>, Brussels Human Performance LAB</li> <li>• <b>Tijl Lindekens</b>, Flemish Judo Federation, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</li> </ul>
15:30-16:00	Coffee break
16:00-17:30	<b>Session 3   Developing a health policy in martial arts</b>
	<p><b>Moderator: Marc Theeboom</b>, Professor, Chairman of the Research Group “Sport and Society”, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</p> <p><b>Introduction on “Public Policy and Governance of martial arts”</b>, by <b>Marc Theeboom</b>, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</p> <p><b>Panel discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Fran Vanderstukken</b>, Martial Arts Platform Flanders</li> <li>• <b>Anastasiya Khomutova</b>, University of Brighton</li> <li>• <b>Wouter Schols</b>, Dutch Institute for Martial Arts and Society</li> </ul>
17:30-18:30	<b>Closing plenary lecture “Martial arts studies and the evolving discourse of ‘martiality’</b> by <b>Alex Channon</b> , University of Brighton, Willy Calewaert Chair Holder 2026
	<p><i>The lecture will offer a concise outline of the concept of “martiality”, defined here as the special qualities and properties of martial arts that (among other things) might mark them out as worthy of dedicated study. It will then take an interactive and participatory approach, inviting the audience to engage critically in assessing the purpose and orientation of the field. It will invite discussion over what kinds of questions martial arts studies should address, and what kinds of audiences and collaborators its researchers should aim to work with, to best develop this emerging academic field.</i></p>
18:30-20:00	<b>Networking reception</b>