

**Organisational Learning in the Welsh Government:
An Exploratory Analysis and Wider Implications**

by

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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For my Mum and Dad

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ABSTRACT

It has been recognised that organisational learning (OL) possesses considerable potential for developing workers and, through them, organisations. Although its relevance to the public sector has been acknowledged, a relatively small amount of empirical work has been undertaken. Where it has been, emphasis on learning embedded in daily practices has been lacking. This study fills a significant gap by providing a holistic and empirically-based exploration of OL within the public sector based on three diverse case studies in the Welsh Government.

This study illustrates how OL practices in the Welsh Government emerged from mediations between individuals and six structures – namely physical, accountability, development, management intervention, workplace social and work task-based. OL is shown to be a locally formulated and pluralist phenomenon, based on the capacities of individuals involved and the highly nuanced dynamics created by and among the six structures. A new framework for the comprehensive investigation and analysis of OL emerges from the analysis.

Some key findings from the study are that learning involving identifying and assessing new ways of doing things was neither practised nor required in all areas, that engagement in change during the undertaking of day-to-day work activities was a stimulant for learning, that different work tasks presented different possibilities for making and remedying mistakes, that the absence of a target-driven environment was an important enabler for staff to pursue off-the-job learning, that different work tasks presented varying opportunities for engaging with people, that engagement with people tended to happen only when staff felt that it would result in them being able to perform their roles more effectively, that inter-OL was not generally part of working life and that efforts to capture knowledge were generally not made unless there was a clear purpose or value seen for doing so.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Considerable interest has arisen during the last two decades in how learning in organisations can be used as a vehicle to develop workers and through them organisations. This has been discussed using the labels of ‘organisational learning’ (OL) and the ‘learning organisation’, with the former being seen as the means and the latter being seen as the end.

The private sector has been the focus for the vast majority of those working in the field, but there has been a view that OL is equally important and relevant to the public sector (e.g. Denton, 1998; Finger and Burgin Brand, 1999; Boyett and Currie, 2001; Vince and Saleem, 2004; Downe, 2010). However, it is clear that many discussing OL within a public sector context have done so either in a very general way (e.g. LaPalombara, 2001a) or in specific settings (e.g. Vince and Saleem, 2004) often without recognition of relevant dynamics and the diversity which exists. There has been a lack of empirical studies undertaken in a public sector context and, in particular, there has been a lack of research within the UK civil service context which seeks to investigate OL in a holistic way.

At the conceptual level, existing literature illustrates the multi-disciplinary nature of OL which makes the creation of a comprehensive theory of OL an unrealistic aspiration (Easterby-Smith, 1997). At the process level, existing literature recognises a range of interconnected factors affecting OL and the improbability of developing a model suitable for general application. Moreover, relevant literature suggests that OL has the potential to help public sector organisations respond to pressures they are under to change and argues that some features of public sector organisations have the potential to facilitate OL while others have the potential to inhibit it. However, many contributors have not reflected the contemporary UK public sector context and those who have illustrate the lack of emphasis on learning embedded in daily practices which is the bedrock of OL.

An in-depth empirical investigation of OL in the UK civil service context is particularly beneficial at this time. It is needed to examine some of the broader assertions about OL’s relevance and applicability to the public sector made within

existing literature so that a much deeper understanding of the prospects for OL in this context is established. The development of a holistic appreciation of the relevant interplays gained from empirical evidence gathered using a methodology capable of surfacing and providing the basis for in-depth analysis would aid academic understanding considerably. In fulfilling this overriding academic purpose, in the light of the potential benefits OL can bring to the UK civil service - in which by far the largest internal financial investment made is in its people and when pressures to maximise the effectiveness of human resources in the second decade of the twenty-first century are arguably greater than they have been for a generation in the face of a significant deficit in the UK's economy - there is considerable practical benefit in developing a better appreciation of the issues faced when seeking to develop OL within this context.

As illustrated by the focus given to the National Audit Office's (2009) work, which culminated in its report titled 'Helping Government Learn', there has been keenness among UK civil service leaders to stimulate OL - but efforts have tended to be focused on specific initiatives or events rather than the mainstreaming of practices in the context of enormous diversity. This study investigates OL by undertaking empirical qualitative-based studies within three very different areas of the Welsh Government in order to gain insights into how a wide range of dynamics existing across the UK civil service impact upon OL. The study takes an inductive case study approach to maximise the potential for surfacing the fullest possible understanding of relevant dynamics at play against a backdrop of confusion about OL as a concept and limited insight into its application within a diverse UK civil service context.

The Welsh Government was chosen as the research setting for two important reasons. Firstly, as a devolved administration within the UK, it was comprised of a wide range of functions. This allowed for the selection of specific case study settings embodying the diverse characteristics which needed to be understood in order for this study to provide insights into the prospects for OL within the UK civil service in the fullest possible way within the scope of the work. Secondly, as the researcher was employed by the Welsh Government for the duration of the research, ease of access was enhanced both in terms of obtaining authorisation to undertake the research and in

terms of the practicalities of undertaking the research while also undertaking a full-time job role.

To assess the prospects for OL in the context of the UK public sector, the research aimed to answer the following four questions with reference to the Welsh Government-based empirical investigation:

1. In what form does any OL occur in the UK civil service?
2. What impact does the diversity of work tasks in the UK civil service have on OL?
3. How do factors unique to the UK public sector impact upon OL?
4. What possibilities are there for enhancing OL practices in the UK public sector?

The remainder of this introductory chapter provides an overview of the thesis to prepare the reader for what is to come and to provide an insight into the journey which was undertaken in order to answer the research questions. To start with, it is important to understand what characterises OL and how others have understood its application within the public sector context so that this thesis could build on that evidence base. This led to relevant literature being reviewed and discussed in chapters 2, 3 and 4.

To develop an awareness of the context in which the notion of OL has been developed, literature is reviewed in Chapter 2 which provides an appreciation of the profound philosophical debates underpinning learning generally and illustrates that various social science disciplines aid understanding of OL. It also became apparent that OL's perceived prospects for delivering enhanced competitive advantage and performance improvements explain why considerable interest has developed in it. Moreover, it emerges in Chapter 2 that organisational analyses have illustrated the centrality of information to the functioning of organisations and some explanations surfaced for why managers are a receptive audience for discourses around knowledge and learning. Learning and organising are shown to not be straightforward concepts in themselves and their sometimes opposing characteristics cause difficulties when they are brought together. Of the perspectives on learning developed in the field of psychology, it emerges that OL might be conceived as being a combination of cognitive and social processes. Some clarity about the type of learning required has

been brought by way of the concepts of single and double-loop learning, but some particularly difficult practicalities associated with the concept of learning which arise in an organisational context are also outlined. A debate about whether OL is simply the sum of what individuals learn within organisations, or whether there is something more to it, is included along with issues arising from an organisation's structure. Overall, it is concluded that the way in which people learn has been considered for centuries and that there are still many unresolved debates in this area. It is against this backdrop that progress is made to consider OL.

Chapter 3 focuses on a number of inter-connected characteristics or factors highlighted in existing literature which influence OL. These include individuals, groups, leadership, culture and the role of external organisations. It is shown that existing literature demonstrates that the creation of effective OL is dependent upon the willingness and ability of individuals and leaders to practice what is required - and upon a wide variety of factors at the group, organisation and societal levels. Writers have suggested that individuals' effectiveness as learners in the workplace will be influenced by multiple factors and how individuals interact in groups or teams has been shown to be very important. Also, while many have perhaps had overly high expectations of leaders, it is apparent that leaders at all levels can influence OL. As OL depends on social interactions, the importance of cultural issues recognised in the literature are discussed - and it is recognised that the strong embeddedness and intangibility of cultural factors result in them presenting some of the greatest difficulties. It is concluded that the complexity of the OL landscape results in the development of a route map or model not being possible.

Chapter 4 focuses specifically on the public sector considerations associated with OL arising from the literature. It is explained that the literature makes clear that the public sector continues to be under considerable pressure to change and that OL has the potential to facilitate that change. A critical analysis of the contributions leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to consider a range of factors unique to the public sector in order to develop workable approaches to OL. Existing literature describes public sector organisations as being bureaucratic, large and dispersed with often vague or contradictory aims. Also, the degree of freedom open to workers in public sector organisations is suggested to be limited by communications between Ministers

and public sector workers being one-way only. On the other hand, some public sector characteristics – such as the much lower level of competition and elements of the political environment - are highlighted as features which can aid learning. It is identified that some of the relatively few scholars who have written about OL - or something closely related to it - in the public sector made a contribution in advance of recent reforms in the UK, while others based their accounts on the USA context which has limited read across to the contemporary UK context. However, the limited empirical work investigating learning initiatives and practice in the public sector is shown to provide some useful insights. The impression conveyed by these contributions is that significant attention has been given to hard content-focused initiatives, rather than softer process-focused learning. It is apparent that an element of process-focused learning has been a feature of some initiatives to encourage learning among local authorities, but this has tended to be within the context of organised events. It is also clear that professional groups within the public sector wield considerable power and that their co-operation with change advocated by management cannot be assumed. Overall, it is apparent that the impacts on OL of the multiple complexities associated with the contemporary UK public sector have not been explored.

Chapter 5 outlines the methodology adopted for the empirical research which follows. This chapter explains that the philosophical approach of critical realism underpinned the investigation because it accords with the researcher's belief that social outcomes are shaped by both social structures and human agents which should not be conflated. Archer's (2003) notion of the 'internal conversation' is argued to be the preferred basis for understanding how interactions between structures and agents are mediated. The chapter then goes on to explain the research design and steps undertaken to gather data. A case study research strategy is identified as being most suitable for investigating context-specific complexity which characterises OL and the rationale for selecting the three areas of the Welsh Government chosen for the main phase of the research is provided. Then, a justification for the use of qualitative interviews and some documentary analysis as data collection methods is outlined, along with a step by step description of how these methods were applied. This is followed by an outline of the quality issues considered and a defence of the robustness of the research, before reflexivity and ethical considerations are discussed.

Chapter 6 aims to provide an insight into the context that shaped the experiences of staff working in the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government context has a number of unique features because, as a central government administration in the UK, it is a relatively young organisation with its roots in the much older UK civil service which it remained part of. The chapter is split into two parts. Part 1 provides an overview of the UK civil service, the devolution process and the Welsh Government civil service. It is explained that, while gaining an appreciation of the UK civil service is a key step towards understanding the Welsh Government's civil service, it does not provide the full picture. This is because the process of devolving a range of governmental function and law making powers to Wales, which were previously exercised at a UK level, had a profound impact on the Welsh Government's civil service. After detailing the devolutionary process, the Welsh Government civil service is described as it existed in 2011 which provides the best possible insight into how it was comprised when the data for the main phase of the empirical research were gathered. Although it only became the name for the organisation partway through this research, for consistency the term 'Welsh Government' is used throughout this thesis - except when describing the organisation's development in Part 1 of Chapter 6 or where other terms were used to describe the organisation by interviewees in quotes included in Part 2 of Chapter 6, and in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

In Part 2 of Chapter 6, specific influences on learning are the focus. The various initiatives and documents which covered learning matters are reviewed - showing that numerous organisation-wide strategies and prescribed practices were in place, and that various public sector reform programmes recognised the importance of effective learning. Finally, the perspectives on learning among eight organisation-wide learning influencers are presented which emerged from interviews carried out during a preliminary phase of the study. These perspectives provide some interesting insights into how the individuals conceptualised learning, the learning stimulants they recognised, the learning practices they had or were influencing, the successes they recognised, the challenges they thought existed, the impacts of accountability and scrutiny on learning they identified, and the learning which they explained had taken place from external sources. These insights informed the focus for the main phase of the study.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 present the findings of the three case study areas of the Welsh Government in which the empirical research was undertaken. These are described in this thesis as 'Rural' (an area responsible for administering the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy Single Payment Scheme), 'Programmes' (an area responsible for handling National Assembly business, legislation management, constitutional affairs and policy support), and 'Legal' (an area responsible for providing legal advice internally). Each chapter is dedicated to one of the case studies and each is structured in the same way. A brief introduction of the case setting and an explanation of the characteristics of the staff interviewed are provided first. Then, what was established from those interviews is discussed in four broad areas in which the data could be assembled logically in order to understand the details of each case and develop a framework which allowed for the empirical data to be compared and contrasted with existing literature. The four areas are 'working environment', 'change and staff involvement', the 'approach to learning and support available to staff', and 'management interventions and accountability'. The presentation of the analysis of a small number of documents is incorporated into the discussions where relevant. Throughout, the emerging findings are analysed with a view to understanding their significance in relation to the OL process. The findings which emerged from these three cases show that, while there were some similarities, the factors that impact upon OL can vary considerably even among different parts of the same public sector organisation.

Chapter 10 provides an overall analysis of the findings which emerged from the three case studies and is underpinned by three aims. These are (1) to compare and contrast the data emerging from the three case studies, (2) to explain the findings with reference to the interviewees as agents in the context of key structures and (3) to evaluate how the findings relate to existing literature. The main body of the chapter commences with an outline of the analytical framework deployed which has critical realism at its heart, and draws upon Archer's (2003) notion of an 'internal conversation' to consider the mediation of structures and agents. Consideration of internal conversations are informed by Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) work concerning temporal agentic orientations and Giddens' (1979) conceptualisation of power. During the analysis itself, attention turns to matters relevant to OL associated

with agents before the six key structures which emerged. The structures are (1) physical, (2) accountability, (3) development, (4) management intervention, (5) workplace social and (6) work task-based which are considered one by one. Through considering how individuals interacted with them, understanding of the facilitators and barriers to OL is developed.

The analysis demonstrates that there were key differences among the groups of individuals in each case and among the features of the structures prevalent in each case which impacted significantly on OL processes. More specifically, it illustrates that learning involving identifying and assessing new ways of doing things was neither practised nor required in all of the case study areas, but that double-loop learning was prevalent in some areas. The analysis also shows that engagement in change during the undertaking of day-to-day work activities was a stimulant for learning, that different work tasks presented different possibilities for making and remedying mistakes, that the absence of a target-driven environment was an important enabler for staff to pursue off-the-job learning, that different work tasks presented varying opportunities for engaging with people outside of immediate team environments, that engagement with people tended to happen only when staff felt that it would result in them being able to perform their roles more effectively, that inter-OL was not generally part of working life and that efforts to capture knowledge did not tend to be made unless there was a clear purpose or value seen in doing so. Overall, the context for OL in the Welsh Government is shown to be localised and manifested from individuals' engagements with a number of relevant structures in a pluralist context underpinned by a number of key organisational tensions.

Having undertaken this overall analysis in Chapter 10, Chapter 11 provides some overall concluding observations in relation to each of the four research questions underpinning the study. The theoretical, empirical and policy and practice implications of the study are then considered. Finally, the study's contributions and limitations are set out, as well as suggested areas for future research. In terms of the contributions of the study, it has been demonstrated how a critical realist-based research methodology can be used to investigate OL and how this can lead to a fuller and deeper understanding of OL practices in a specific context. More specifically, it is explained that the study makes a significant contribution to literature by providing

an empirically-based understanding of what and how OL practices occur in a public sector context. This is delivered through the clarification of six structures shaping OL practices and the relationships among them, the illustration of how agents and structural features differ among varying contexts and through the uncovering of key organisational tensions underpinning the OL process. It is suggested that those working in the field can now benefit from a better informed understanding of the existence and relevance of diversity in the public sector, and how pertinent factors prevalent in public sector organisations can actually impact upon OL. Consequently, it is explained that the study provides a deeper appreciation of the relevance of OL to the public sector and the possibilities for enhancing beneficial practices taking account of existing realities.

CHAPTER 2 – BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Introduction

In order to develop an awareness of the context in which the notion of OL has been developed, a range of literature was reviewed to provide an appreciation of the profound philosophical debates underpinning learning generally and to determine what various social science disciplines – including history, sociology, psychology and political science – can contribute to aid understanding of OL. This is followed by a review of factors which have been said to have provided the impetus for OL, an outline of why learning in organisations is of high importance and the significance of the different approaches taken by two distinct categories of contributors in the field. Lastly, the key concepts of learning and organising are examined with a particular focus on the consequences of their co-existence.

Broad context of learning

The way in which human beings can and do learn, and thus acquire knowledge, is something which has intrigued mankind for centuries and generated very considerable philosophical debate which is still on-going. In the seventeenth century, Descartes – along with Spinoza, Leibniz and others – established the rationalist perspective on the generation of human knowledge (Phemister, 2006). These seventeenth-century philosophers believed that reason alone can provide knowledge of the existence and nature of things – that is, some of our knowledge of the world is in us in the form of innate ideas (Collinson and Plant, 2006). However, this was challenged by the empiricist view developed by Hume, Locke and Berkley in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They asserted that knowledge of the world is based upon and derived from sense experience and claim that nothing is in the mind which was not first in the senses (ibid). This challenge resulted in the establishment of what Bertrand Russell called one of the great historic controversies in philosophy concerning the relation of our knowledge, ideas and thought in general to experience on the one hand and reason on the other (Woolhouse, 1988).

While Cottingham (1988) points out that in fact the philosophical history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries forms a complex pattern of constantly overlapping and criss-crossing influences and counter-influences, these utterly profound and competing notions of knowledge creation perhaps go some way towards explaining why mankind has always found it difficult to determine how best to educate itself and to explain why human beings display the behaviours which they do. The related philosophical debate about whether determinism or indeterminism drives human behaviour, which has also raged for an eternity, and on which many of the philosophers already mentioned and the existentialists - most notably Jean-Paul Sartre - have had much to say has done little to develop clarity. The key question in this debate is whether humans start from a 'clean sheet' when they are born, or whether genetic make-up determines one's destiny in life.

Although these philosophical debates do not provide clarity about the process through which human beings develop knowledge, they do aid understanding. The fact that they have been ongoing during the course of many centuries demonstrates the complexity of the notion of human knowledge creation and the credibility of competing standpoints from which any analysis of the notion can begin. It seems that recognising this complexity is the first thing to do in any study of human learning and knowledge-creation.

Positioning organisational learning within the social sciences field

Some writers in the OL field have sought to draw upon insights from some major social science disciplines – including history, sociology, psychology and political science. In terms of history, as Fear (2001) describes, the telling of any history creates knowledge about the past but not necessarily relevant or correct knowledge which gives rise to immensely complicated questions about memory, knowledge and power. Linking this to OL leads to the question of what exactly is being remembered and for what reason if an organisational memory legitimises a process of learning or unlearning (ibid). Care needs to be taken not to place too much emphasis on the past when dealing with unprecedented challenges which might well require unprecedented solutions as history can help explain a current situation but does not necessarily determine the future.

Turning to sociology, Gherardi and Nicolini (2001) explain how sociologists approach learning as something produced and reproduced in the social relations of individuals when they participate in society. From a sociological perspective, OL is seen as an open conversation and this conversation can be contributed to through the sociological concepts of participation and reflexivity. The concept of participation directs attention to the fact that learning is not an activity distinct from other activities, but a part of becoming a member of an organisation, whereas the concept of reflexivity relates to a particular moment of separation between the knowing subject and the object of its knowledge (ibid). Gherardi and Nicolini (2001) suggest that reflexivity directs organisational analysis to the processes of knowledge institutionalisation. Conceptualising learning as a social process has been a valuable contribution from sociology and, as will be discussed later, has been described in more specific terms within the context of social learning theory. What sociologists are not able to help with is addressing the crucial challenge for OL of enabling learning within complex organisational environments as these contexts have not been the focus of their work.

Moreover, it is clear that psychology has been responsible for developing clarity in terms of how learning can be understood. As Maiser et al (2001) note, the phenomena of learning and memory have been a scholarly focus in the psychology field since its inception. The perspectives on learning developed in the psychology field are considered later within a discussion focused on understanding the concept of learning within the OL process. As Maier et al (2001) explain, learning processes hitherto investigated in psychology can give clues about which factors could be salient in OL if individual learning is regarded as a basis for OL.

In relation to political science, it is apparent that the dominant judgement among political scientists has been that extant theories about OL are of limited relevance to their discipline because they argue that organisations of interest to them differ significantly from those in the private sector (LaPalombara, 2001b). LaPalombara (2001a) suggests that the failure of political scientists to pay more attention to OL and of OL specialists to extend their inquiries into the public/political sphere is

unfortunate because a general theory of OL is unlikely to emerge until what is claimed to be known is shown to be the case (or not) in the public/political sphere.

Development of organisational learning

As it is evident that people have for a long time been interested in understanding the process of human learning and have recognised that learning does not emerge through one process only, it is not surprising that scholars have sought to understand more about learning within workplaces. Cyert and March (1963) and Cangelosi and Dill (1965) made the first references to OL but literature and ideas which are older have been drawn upon within the literature.

Writers offer explanations for the development of interest in OL which explain the engagement of those working in the management science discipline. At a general level, Rosenstiel and Koch (2001) note that for several decades many industrial societies have been witnessing a shift in the socioeconomic values of the population in general which involves the interfaces between the organisation and its environment through which the manifestations of value change enter the organisation or can be perceived by it. They go on to point out that in the socioeconomic area, regard for conventions and authority has declined and the value of individualism and self-development has risen. Organisations have discovered and emancipated their relevant reference groups and are trying to open themselves to a broadened range of interests which they perceive in their environment (*ibid*) and the LO has been established as a normative vision focused on skills in creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993). While these explanations sound credible, later discussions show that environmental influences might not be quite so direct.

In more specific terms, Argyris (1992) argued that the better organisations are at learning, the more likely they will be able to detect and correct errors. Bell (1973) and Machlup (1980) suggest that knowledge is a key organisational resource and Denton (1998) goes some way to explaining why by identifying a number of driving forces or antecedents which have made the concept of OL popular. These include increases in the importance of labour as a factor of production, the importance of

knowledge as a source of competitive advantage, the pace of change in the environment, dissatisfaction with the traditional command-and-control management paradigm, the competitive nature of global business and demands by customers.

It follows that the LO can be viewed as a vehicle to gain or maintain competitive advantage and Teare and Dealtry (1998), suggest that an organisation's capacity to learn needs to excel the rate of change imposed on it. Crossan et al (1999) argue that OL can be conceived as a principal means of achieving the strategic renewal of an enterprise, and Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) suggest that failure to learn new things almost inevitably results in failure to perform over the long term. It is very clear, however, that OL needs to be developed in the correct way if these positive outcomes are to be realised. Delbridge et al (2006) illustrate how learning initiatives in Chaparral Steel and BP had delivered benefits for those organisations, but did not in Rover where they were used by senior management as a public relations story.

Taking an alternative and more evolutionary historical perspective, Scarborough and Swan (2003) suggest that the emergence of the notion of the LO can be readily linked to the acceptance of a world-view of hegemonic ideology which sees knowledge and learning as the defining characteristics of a new epoch. Stehr (1994) points out that this is reflected in the spread of a variety of treaties dealing with the Post-Industrial Era, the Information Age or the Knowledge Society.

Burns and Stalker's (1961) description of the basic functioning of organisations helps us understand why learning and knowledge have the potential to enhance performance. They explain that organisations are comprised of many people who are simultaneously engaged in great numbers of activities. All these activities are connected, and indeed interdependent, but they are not all directly connected at any one moment. Each activity is performed in response to information received, each involves altering, rearranging or recomposing information or things and each ends with the transmission of the altered information or thing to somebody else. Based on this analysis, it seems that every individual actor could apply learning to the activities they undertake in order to enhance performance. Nonaka et al (2001) insist that an organisation is not a mere information-processing machine, but an entity which creates information through action and interaction. They explain that information is a

flow of messages, whereas knowledge anchored in the beliefs and commitment of its holder is created by that flow of information. Thus, information provides a point of view for interpreting events or objects and is a necessary medium or material for eliciting and constructing knowledge (ibid).

Focusing on changes in the functioning of organisations which have taken place over the last twenty years, Scarbrough and Swan (2003) suggest that a key element of the change which has helped make managers a more receptive audience for discourses around knowledge and learning is the challenge to the professional model - which involved concentrating expertise within the narrow silos of functional and disciplinary specialisations - and the spread of network organisations. Some of the changes which have brought professional bureaucracy under pressure are initiatives including business process re-engineering (BPR), total quality management (TQM) and just-in-time (JIT), the rise of inter-disciplinary project-based networking and - more generally - the outsourcing of professional work in areas of R&D and IT (Willcocks and Lacity, 1998). These developments have emphasised the assimilation of specialised knowledge within the business process through the codification of knowledge in IT systems (BPR), incorporation of specialist functions within mainstream tasks (TQM) and a move from hierarchical to horizontal systems of control (JIT, lean production). Knowledge which could not be metabolised within the business process was to be externalised through market-based outsourcing arrangements (Whittington, 1991).

When considering the usefulness of writers' contributions in the field concerned with learning in organisations, the dichotomy which Tsang (1997) identifies between two main streams of theorising is important. The first is prescriptive writings on the LO which are concerned with how organisations should learn and the second is descriptive writings on OL which focus on how organisations do learn. This review is concerned mainly with the OL literature because, as Tsang (1997) also points out, prescriptive writers usually portray only one model of the LO which is supposed to be universally applicable just like laws of natural sciences. Whilst recognising that some focusing on the LO acknowledged the complexities surrounding the concept, like Burgoyne (1995) who stressed the aspirational nature of the concept, clearly there is a need for the LO literature to be read with a healthy dose of scepticism. Senge's

(1990) book was the major watershed which attracted enormous interest in the LO between companies and consultants (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2003) and could, therefore, be said to epitomise writings of the prescriptive type in the LO arena. However, what Senge (1990) advocates in terms of what needs to be achieved does enable us to understand what outcomes OL is ultimately aspiring to achieve and, in turn, to assess the likely challenges of achieving those outcomes which is one of Senge's (1990) failings in his overly optimistic work. Despite much of the prescriptive work around the LO concept being criticised for its utopian outlook, it did not prevent Griffey (1998) arguing that the LO should be thought of as the lowest of a three-stage conceptual hierarchy of learning-wisdom-enlightenment – thereby suggesting that there are higher levels to be aspired to.

Learning and organising

While it is apparent that learning has the potential to enhance the contribution of workers, the relationship between learning and organising is inherently uncomfortable. Weick and Westley (1996) explain why by pointing out that organising and learning are essentially antithetical processes which means the phrase OL qualifies as an oxymoron. This is because to learn is to disorganise and increase variety, whereas organise is to forget and reduce variety. They suggest that the reluctance to grapple with this antithesis has led to derivative ideas and unrealised potential, but their failure to consider the extent to which different organisational models can facilitate learning does perhaps bring into question the validity of their general claims.

To understand this tension more fully, it is necessary to examine the concepts of learning and organising more closely. DeFillippi and Ornstein (2003) identify five dominant theoretical perspectives on learning in psychology. They describe firstly the biological perspective which seeks to explain human behaviour as the result of physiology and anatomy; secondly the learning perspective which posits that all (or at least most) human behaviour happens as the result of learning as described through the notion of behaviourism and social theory; thirdly the cognitive perspective which seeks to explain people by understanding their thinking, reasoning and memory; fourthly the sociocultural perspective which assumes that we cannot fully understand

human behaviour until we appreciate everything about people's social, cultural and sociocultural environment; and fifthly the psychodynamic perspective which is predicated on assumptions which emphasise unconscious intrapsychic dynamics, fixed development stages of mental growth and a symbolic reality based on the belief that much present behaviour is rooted in past unresolved experience.

Out of the differences among these perspectives, it seems that the most significant one in terms of how the process of OL might be understood is the extent to which OL is conceived as a combination of cognitive and social processes. This is, however, one of the unresolved issues within the literature (Easterby-Smith et al, 2000). As Starbuck and Hedberg (2001) argue, cognitive and behavioural learning occur in combinations which are difficult to disentangle and perhaps this mutual entanglement is why theories of learning are filled with ironic contradictions. They go on to explain that extreme advocates of behavioural learning have asserted that cognition plays an unimportant role in behavioural change, whereas extreme advocates of cognitive learning have asserted that all behavioural change follows cognitive dictates.

The OL literature based upon individual learning theory views learning as being about changing cognitive structures but the acknowledged problem is the individual-organisation dissociation (Elkjaer, 2003). In social learning theory, individuals' minds and actions are regarded as related to their participation in social processes formed by culture and history which means that knowing is always an integral part of broader changes of being which can be traced to learners' participation in social worlds, communities of practice and activity systems (ibid). Elkjaer (2003) goes on to point out that John Dewey's concepts of inquiry, reflection and experience are a way to bridge the conceptual gap between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of learning. In his analysis, the organisational member and the organisation are weaved together in a social world in which acting and thinking goes on as a continuous process (ibid).

While it is difficult to conceive of OL without a strong social dimension, Maier et al (2001) outline some important implications of the concepts and theories of individual learning for OL. These are: learning is not always intentional; individuals learn from models; previous knowledge is always important and sometimes hazardous; learning

results from making causal inferences; and learning is motivated behaviour. This leads to it being possible to view OL as a two-way process which involves individuals learning from the organisation and the organisation learning from individuals. However, organisations do not automatically learn when individuals within them have learnt something (Mabey et al, 1998). DiBella (2003) suggests that much as individuals learn in different ways so do organisations and that, to some extent, these differences are a function of the diverse environments within which they operate. He suggests that learning differences also occur as a result of differences in history, culture, size and age and that a complex organisation is bound to support numerous learning practices which represent different learning styles.

In an attempt to clarify the type of learning required in the OL process, Argyris and Schon (1978) developed the concepts of single and double-loop learning which have become very important in the field. The former involves the detection and correction of error within a given set of governing variables and the latter involves changing the governing variables themselves (ibid). Single-loop learning is linked to incremental change, where an organisation tries out new methods and tactics and attempts to make continuous adjustments and adaptations, and double-loop learning is associated with radical change which might involve a major change in strategic direction – possibly linked to the replacement of senior personnel and wholesale revisions of systems (Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999).

However learning occurs, there are some particularly difficult realities associated with the concept which arise in an organisational context. These include the common necessity for the learner to make mistakes during the learning process as only through these errors can the person understand associations and principles (Frese and Brodbeck, 1989; Strike and Posner, 1985) and these errors can lead to inferior performance (Maier et al, 2001). Also, learning does not necessarily lead to improvements in performance (Domjan and Burkhard, 1982; Hall, 1989) as results of learning processes are not the only determinants of individual behaviours and performance (Campbell, 1990) and intentional learning - the purpose of which is to achieve an improvement in performance or efficiency - is a linkage which cannot be assumed (Maier et al, 2001). Also, learning only has the potential to lead to better performance when knowledge obtained is accurate and if the problems of putting the

lessons learnt into practice can be overcome (Tsang, 1997). One key limitation of exploiting past knowledge is that it can be useful only to the point when environments remain stable (Bhatt, 2000). It is, therefore, not surprising that – as Bapuji and Crossan (2004) note – empirical research has progressed past the question of whether learning automatically leads to improved performance to focus on when and why learning leads to improved performance.

Easterby-Smith et al (2004) stress the importance of the obverse side of learning within the context of OL. This stems from Hedberg's (1981) idea of unlearning and the related notion of organisational forgetting which is discussed by Blackler et al (1999) and Holan and Phillips (2003). These counter-intuitive threads which have run through the field of OL for many years reminds us that the inability to forget may become a major hindrance to learning – so more may be less (Easterby-Smith et al, 2004). Therefore, it is important to be aware that individuals may learn and improve themselves, but this may not benefit the organisation and lead to service improvement (Downe, 2010). Such negative effects of OL demonstrate that the indiscriminate promotion of learning within organisations should not be advocated.

There has been a debate about whether OL is simply the sum of what individuals learn within organisations, or whether there is something more to it (Easterby-Smith et al, 2000). March and Olsen (1975) and Simon (1991) argue that we should avoid the reification of attributing human characteristics such as thought and learning to inanimate objects such as organisations, whereas Garret (1987) argues that only a small number of people have significant influence over strategic decisions.

Brown (1998) argues that organisations must have some sort of memory capability in order to learn anything at all. Hedberg (1981) forwards the view that collective learning actually becomes independent of individuals as organisations have cognitive systems and memories. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) explain how individual knowledge can become organisational knowledge by differentiating between tacit and explicit knowledge. They suggest that tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in an individual's action and experience - as well as in the ideals, values or emotions he or she embraces. This, they suggest, can be contrasted with explicit knowledge which is something formal and systematic that can be expressed in words and numbers and

easily communicated and shared in the form of hard data. For tacit knowledge to be communicated and shared within the organisation, it has to be converted into words or numbers that anyone can understand and it is precisely during the time this conversion takes place – from tacit to explicit and back again into tacit - that organisational knowledge is created (ibid).

Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) work has, however, been the focus of some criticism. Polanyi (1962) first drew a distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge and insisted on the personal character of knowledge. Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) argue that his work has not really been engaged with and that, if Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) had engaged with it, they would have not claimed that tacit knowledge is something which can be converted into explicit knowledge. Rather Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) assert that knowledge is the individual capability members of an organisation have developed to draw distinctions - within a domain of action - based on an appreciation of context or theory, or both.

As already mentioned, DiBella (2003) suggests that organisations learn in different ways. However, in addition to these differences being a function of diverse environments, it seems that an organisation's structure can affect its functioning in ways which might facilitate or inhibit its ability to learn. Argyris (1987) argues that, too often, organisation structures inhibit learning rather than facilitating it and Salaman (2001) argues that organisational boundaries become informational barriers.

Weick and Westley (1996) draw a distinction between adhocracies and bureaucracies. They note that the former are good at adapting to changing environments and innovating in response to environmental demands, while the latter are dedicated to efficiency and associated with qualities designed to repress or forget confusing or contradictory qualities. Weick and Westley (1996) go on to point out that adhocracies seem to be the recommended form to achieve creativity or original thinking, whereas bureaucracies are dedicated to efficiencies which involves reaping the benefits of learning curves. March (1991) suggested that both forms learn but that the learning is of a different order as adhocracies explore, whereas bureaucracies exploit. Along similar lines, Burns and Stalker (1961) draw a distinction between mechanistic and organic management systems. They explain that the former is characterised by

hierarchical structures of communication and knowledge of actualities being located at the top of the hierarchy, whereas the latter is characterised by knowledge being located anywhere in the network and a lateral direction of communication through the organisation which involves communication between people of different ranks resembling consultation rather than command.

Weick and Westley (1996) suggest that the challenge is not to choose adhocracies and bureaucracies, but to strike a balance which is important because it is evident that either form – taken to its extreme – results in a paralysed organisation which is unable to learn or to act. Burns and Stalker (1961) also recognise that the mechanistic and organic forms represent a polarity, not a dichotomy. Salaman (2001) suggests that the structuring of organisations defines boundaries and levels which generates systematically sectional priorities. These, in turn, generate differentiated priorities and interests – politics (ibid). A way of going some way towards overcoming barriers created by organisation structures is to develop communities of practice which, as Plaskoff (2003), notes have become key components in an OL toolkit.

While it is credible to suggest that organisation structures might influence the extent to which contexts are conducive or not to learning, it is also important to recognise that in the vast majority of settings, there is scope for individuals to behave in a range of ways. Argyris and Schon (1974) make a critical distinction between ‘espoused theory’, which represents what people or organisations say about their behaviour, and theories in use which are implicit in that behaviour. According to this approach, one can understand OL only by examining the ways in which individual and interpersonal inquiry are linked to organisational patterns of both action and learning which are characteristics of subunits and the organisation as a whole (Friedman, 2001). DiBella (2003) asserts that it is highly unlikely that knowledge will be transferred across functional or project boundaries within an organisation if subunits learn in different ways.

Szulanski and Cappetta (2003) argue that, in general, all transfers of knowledge require some effort and it is beginning to be accepted that those transfers requiring more effort might actually be the norm rather than the exception. Wisdom about possible difficulties have gradually formed with reasons cited including motivational

barriers, interdivisional jealousy, lack of incentives, lack of confidence, insufficient priority, lack of buy-in, a heavy inclination to re-invent the wheel, refusal of recipients to do exactly what they are told, resistance to change, lack of commitment and turf protection (ibid). Rather than associating the difficulties with the actions of individuals, Elmes and Kassouf (1995) identified that the strongest issue preventing organisations learning as well as they might is the pressure which workers are under to meet aggressive deadlines as this prevents workers from having the time to reflect on what they are doing or to communicate effectively with their colleagues. It is necessary to examine a number of key factors to gain an understanding of why these difficulties might be commonplace.

Summary and conclusion

The literature discussed in this chapter has shown that the way in which people learn has been the subject of debate for centuries. It is clear that the major social science disciplines of history, sociology, psychology and political science have the potential to aid understanding of learning and - in the case of political science - organisations as well. It is also apparent that the development of the OL notion can be seen as evolutionary but its perceived prospects for delivering enhanced competitive advantage seem to provide a more adequate explanation for the considerable interest which has developed in it.

Organisational analyses have illustrated the centrality of information to the functioning of organisations and it is apparent that challenges to the professional organisation model have helped make managers a more receptive audience for discourses around knowledge and learning. Learning and organising are not straightforward concepts in themselves and their sometimes opposing characteristics cause difficulties when they are brought together. This is because, in perhaps overly stark terms, learning is disorganised and highly varied whereas organising leads to forgetting and reduced variety.

Out of the differences among the perspectives on learning in psychology, the most significant one in terms of how the process of OL might be understood is the extent to which OL might be conceived as a combination of cognitive and social processes and

this has been recognised as an unresolved issue in the OL literature. Some clarity about the type of learning required has been brought by way of the concepts of single and double-loop learning. However learning occurs, it is apparent that there are some particularly difficult realities associated with the concept which arise in an organisational context – including the need for learners to make mistakes, and the absence of a clear link between learning and enhanced performance. The question of whether OL is simply the sum of what individuals learn within organisations, or whether there is something more to it, has also caused much debate. There have been attempts to explain how individual knowledge can become organisational knowledge but these explanations have faced criticism. Some have suggested that an organisation's structure can facilitate or inhibit learning. The overall landscape has resulted in an acceptance that it is normal for the transfer of knowledge to be challenging.

CHAPTER 3 – INFLUENCES ON ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND HOW THEY INTERACT

Introduction

The literature highlights a plethora of inter-connected characteristics or factors which influence OL. These have over many years been discussed either singularly or in various combinations, rather than in a holistic way. Given the number of characteristics or factors which have been associated with OL and the volume of literature which exists, it is not possible here to provide an in-depth analysis and critique of all contributions but an attempt has been made to surface the key areas on which there has been a focus and to provide insight into where discussions have reached in relation to each. The key areas identified from existing literature were individuals, groups, leadership and culture. The chapter ends with a consideration of what existing literature suggests about the possibility of making all the links necessary to develop a holistic OL theory or model for realising OL.

Individuals

While OL might be more than the sum of individual learning, any analysis of OL cannot ignore the importance of the role of individuals. As Friedman (2001) puts it, the behaviour of individuals is necessary but not sufficient for OL. He goes on to suggest that the attributes of proactive but reflective, high aspirations but realistic about limitations, critical but committed and independent but very co-operative with others are characteristics for agents of OL. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) offer a profile for knowledge practitioners as front-line employees and line managers who accumulate, generate and update tacit and explicit knowledge. They suggest that they need to possess high intellectual standards, a strong sense of commitment to recreating the world according to their own perspective, a wide variety of expertise both inside and outside the organisation, skills in communicating with customers and colleagues, and an openness to carrying on candid discussions and debates with others.

The complexities surrounding individual learning and the various perspectives which can be applied when analysing how it occurs have already been discussed. While Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) description of the individual behaviours which are needed to support OL are helpful, they place a high expectation on individuals and appear to not recognise the full range of complexities associated with realising them. There is an inference that all workers can act in the required way which might be overly optimistic. March and Olsen (1988) suggest that rational processing of information is limited by the cognitive capacity of individuals which results in only a portion of the information available to any organisation being likely to be used in practice. An important point is also made by Streufert and Nogami (1989) who contend that differences in levels of training, intelligence and experience may not offer an adequate explanation for why some people continue to do well while others, who have been successful, fail when they are transferred to another job or given different tasks.

Hayes and Allinson (1998) suggest that people's ability to recognise the new kinds of response required in new or changing situations explains this contention. They argue that a person's cognitive style is key in determining how someone approaches work which they define as a person's preferred way of gathering, processing and evaluating information. Hayes and Allinson (1998) suggest that cognitive style influences how people scan their environment for information, how they organise and interpret this information, and how they integrate their interpretations into the mental model and subjective theories which guide their action. Therefore, it is possible that people will learn and perform best in those situations where the information processing requirements of the situation match their cognitive style or preferred approach to processing information (ibid). Also, cognitive style influences the kinds of information that an individual attends to and how this information is interpreted and understood, and how this understanding is used to guide behaviour (ibid).

However, Zollo and Winter (2003) see the task which is attempting to be learnt or the operating routine of interest as the key influences on the effectiveness of learning mechanisms. The three dimension which they consider to be important are the frequency of the task (how often it gets triggered and executed), the degree of heterogeneity (how novel the task appears each time) and the degree of causal

ambiguity in the action-performance links (how easy it is to derive clear indications of what should and should not be done in the execution of the task).

It is also important to acknowledge the reality which Burns and Stalker (1961) describe which is that in every organised working community – except those for which religious zeal, political enthusiasm, or some other dedication of self identifies the personal ends of its members with those they believe to be pursued by the others or by their leader – individuals seek to realise other purposes than those they recognise as the organisation's.

Groups

It is clear that individual learning is itself a complex phenomenon, but achieving it is just the first thing to be done in the process of OL. The significance which work groups have in organisations means that knowledge acquisition by individuals is an indispensable, yet usually insufficient, component of OL (Maier et al, 2001). The group or team level is of special interest as a gateway to OL (Pawlowsky, 2001). While the capacity of groups to store knowledge seems to be superior to that of individuals (Clark and Stephenson, 1989; Hartwick et al, 1982), it is necessary to consider the type of task and the degree to which task performance is standardised or formalised in order to ascertain the significance of the knowledge possessed by individual members of an organisation or group (Maier et al, 2001). This argument suggests that knowledge sharing is more useful in some contexts than others which brings into question the universal benefits of OL which most scholars tend to recognise. It seems that an open mindedness towards learning from all sources is one of the key benefits of OL so a suggestion that learning might be of limited use where task types are not similar seems inappropriate.

Drawing on Argyris' notion of 'defensive routines', Senge (1990) usefully explains the importance of dialogue within teams - the objective of which is not for individuals to win an argument but for a group to explore conflict and difficult issues from many points of view. While Senge's (1990) suggestion that discussion does usually involve individual's trying to succeed in ensuring that their own viewpoint prevails is something which many people could not agree with as a general assertion, his central

point that it is not the absence of defensiveness which characterises learning teams but the way defensiveness is faced is a valuable contribution. When considering the process of OL, it seems logical to view team learning as a bridge between individual learning and OL (Denton, 1998) and Oswick et al (2000) shows how this can happen in practice by investigating a situation where a team used dialogue in an academic setting to consider an issue and generate knowledge and understanding.

Leadership

Coopey (1995) identifies confusion within the prescriptive literature about where the control boundary between management and other employees might be drawn and argues that the boundaries are unlikely to be moved anything like as far as implied in the more utopian prescriptions for the development of LOs (e.g. Senge, 1990; Denton, 1998; Sadler, 2001). Also, these writers have very high expectations of what leaders can achieve and seem to be guided by strong unitarist assumptions. Because unitarism does not reflect the reality of organisations' functioning, the LO is always likely to be normative rather than descriptive. McHugh et al (1998) provide an insight into why leaders should not overestimate their influence within the development of a LO because to have fully open learning requires that it is the people involved in the learning process that transform the organisation. In addition, if superiors' goals do not reflect the needs and problems of employees appropriately, motivational problems may arise (Woods et al, 1998) which would be counter-productive in an endeavour to achieve the goals of a LO.

To aid understanding of how leaders might be guided to facilitate OL, the approach advocated by Child and Heavens (2001) is useful. They explain that, although it is the role of senior management to ensure that its organisation has an appropriate sense of long-term direction, OL also requires a degree of cognitive and behavioural initiatives on the part of organisational members who are in close touch with relevant events and developments. They suggest that the challenge for leadership in facilitating OL lies, therefore, in maintaining a judicious combination of both control – in the form of guidance and resources – and the autonomy required to motivate knowledge generators and encourage the free flow of information. Jankowicz (2000) argues that leaders need to empower individuals to speak about the organisation as

well as to speak in the organisation. Weber and Berthoin Antal (2001) emphasise the importance of leaders taking account of the various dimensions of time on OL processes to help the amount of time needed for OL processes to be assessed, reduce frustrations or exaggerated expectations and create conditions necessary for shaping the processes of OL.

Leaders' ability to make a positive contribution in this area also depends on a high level of subjectivity and individual perceptions. As Edmondson and Woolley (2003) point out, the dilemmas faced by individual employees as a consequence of OL interventions are extremely difficult to cope with if subordinates believe that managers cannot be counted upon to provide help or if the interpersonal climate in a work unit is characterised by fear of being rejected for making a mistake. Snell (2001) goes further by asserting that leaders will fail in a LO unless they humbly admit their human shortcomings and mistakes, and aim to be virtuous. These latter points are clearly associated with wider cultural issues which are discussed later in this chapter but it seems that leaders have the ability to influence the climate/culture. Based on a case study they undertook in a multinational manufacturing company in the consumer electronics industry and other work, Edmondson and Woolley (2003) explain that psychological safety reduces defensiveness and enables change. They found that psychological safety varies in striking ways across groups within the same organisation and that OL interventions are influenced by interpersonal perceptions among people working closely together, particularly in a manager-subordinate relationship.

In relation to boards of directors, while by performing their tasks they can facilitate or limit OL, it is traditionally assumed that top management keeps boards passive in corporate development and OL (Tainio et al (2001). Tainio et al (2001) suggest that a participatory type of board tends to have the potential to facilitate OL, but clearly there should be no assumption that boards are or can be an actor which has real influence on the process of OL.

Culture

So, if leaders' ability to themselves practice behaviours conducive to OL and influence the behaviours of others are limited, what else does the literature illustrate as influencing factors? The answer is organisational culture.

Organisational culture refers to the pattern of beliefs, values and learned ways of coping with experience that have developed during the course of an organisation's history, and which tends to be manifested in its material arrangements and in the behaviours of its members. (Brown, 1998. p. 9).

Brown (1998) suggests that the relationship between culture and learning is one of reciprocal interdependence. Weick and Westley (1996) go further by arguing that organisational learning is best understood in terms of organisational culture. A number of writers seek to describe the culture to which organisations should aspire. Pedler et al (1991) suggest that a learning organisation culture is about learning from experience and not about allocating blame and punishment, Brown (1998) suggests that the culture should encourage trial-and-error and behaviours associated with an increased capacity for OL and Reid and Barrington (1999) suggest that a learning culture will reflect new philosophical assumptions that accept change rather than those which accepted the possibility and order in the workplace. Likierman (1993) is clear that the culture cannot be rigid as this results in a danger of what gets measured getting done which is not desirable within a LO.

Similar problems as those discussed above with the propositions offered by many of the prescriptive writers are also apparent in relation to the cultural dimension. Mayo and Lank (1995) assert that a learning culture has to be championed by a senior manager and embedded in the organisation's strategy, structure, system and norms but this seems to overlook the considerable scope which organisational members normally have to exhibit various subtle behaviours of the kind which have the potential to support or inhibit OL. Senge (1990) argues that a daunting form of resistance is cynicism which he suggests is nothing more than frustrated idealism possessed by people converting ideals into expectations.

A more helpful starting point is the basic advice offered by Mabey et al (1998) which is that an organisation seeking to change its collective behaviour must be ready to discuss what has determined its collective behaviour, and Kline and Saunders (1993) who advise that it is critical when assessing a learning culture to focus on the diagnosis rather than on the cures. It would follow that focusing on causes of cultural difficulties is most important which is recognised by some of the prescriptive writers, but for which one needs to refer to other literature in order to understand the complexities and challenges involved. In particular, the significant influences which power and politics have on people's behaviours inside organisations needs to be acknowledged. The extensive literature in these fields cannot be considered in any comprehensive way here, but it is important to establish a working appreciation of some key contributions.

Clegg et al (2006) point out that business organisations are some of the least democratic institutions because of their attachment to hierarchy as an organising principle which leads to power not being distributed equally and important decisions being taken by small groups of people. They suggest that this can result in power being contested in 'soft authoritarian organisations', and shaped by political opportunities and threats, so deciphering the influences which frame individuals' decisions to contest is important. Similarly, Giddens (1979) recognises that organisations constrain actions as he argues that power is determined by the relationship between an institution's structure and its systematic aspects which consist of regular social practices.

The impact of power, or lack of power, can be seen as the underlying stimulus for political behaviour within organisations. Giddens (1979) also recognises that power is intrinsically related to human agency and asserts that the existence of a 'could have done otherwise' situation is a necessary element of actual power, but makes the point that the notion of power has no connection with intention or will. Moreover, Giddens (1979) suggests that power relations are always two-way, even if the power of one party in a relationship is minimal in comparison to the other party.

With this informative and relevant conceptualisation of power in mind, the relevance of it is clear but what are the prospects for influencing its impact on the OL process?

Pfeffer (1981) suggests that the extent of political activity can be reduced by creating slack resources to reduce competition for them, establishing a set of decision-makers, creating homogeneity in respect of attitudes and skill level and reducing the importance of decisions. However, these suggestions seem to assume that an organisation's purpose can be redefined to that of reducing internal political activity and appears to insufficiently recognise the reality facing the vast majority of organisations which is largely the need to undertake its activities and to search for the best way of doing so within the context of that reality.

Focussing on the political environment which is likely to facilitate OL, Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) explain that an open form of politics works to protect difference and variety to stimulate organisational members to question performance feedback more persistently and to challenge each other to experiment with new alternatives. Providing an insight into how this might be achieved, Fulop and Rifkin (1997) suggest that a learning space comes into existence when participants are able to accept that no view is authoritative or true, when managers have no claim to a privileged vantage point and ideas such as wrong-doing are contested. In this context, they envisage that trusting relationships can flourish and that people will lose their fear of revealing themselves to others and are more prepared to move from entrenched positions.

Creating a space of this kind is, however, not easy to achieve. Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) recognise that pressures come from many sources. They point out that junior managers are motivated by a need to avoid being exposed as failures, and the CEO and other directors are anxious that any shortcomings are not exposed to shareholders and would-be corporate predators. These and other pressures lead to employees' accounts being censored and sanitised which – potentially - acts to stunt the growth of identities and to preclude opportunities to learn about colleagues, themselves and the organisation (ibid). Coopey (1995) argues that limitations in the amount of information being made widely available are inevitable.

Where there are just the minimum amounts of desirable characteristics required for good and orderly organisation, Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) believe that a dynamic balance needs to be achieved. They advocate that one balance is between consensus

and dissensus such that there is scope for un-regimented action and conflicting perceptions which challenge existing assumptions without leading to open warfare, and another balance is between contentment and discontentment so that people are committed to the organisation but not sufficiently strongly to dissuade them from complaining and disagreeing and prompting un-programmed processes for monitoring errors. According to Argyris and Schon (1996), conflict offers opportunities for engaging in learning and Rothman and Friedman (2001) argue that there needs to be a fundamental change in the attitudes of organisational members to conflict. If Pondy (1967) is correct to assert that organisational members tend to value conflict negatively and to engage in it only where there is no escape from the relationship or where the costs of not resolving conflict are excessive, this would not be easy to achieve. However, it seems more credible to take the view that attitudes towards conflict will depend on a number of factors – including the nature of the conflict, the personalities involved and wider cultural features.

A political perspective widens our understanding of the processes which constitute learning in organisations (Knights and McCabe, 1998). Also, our understanding of the learning process can be widened by an understanding of how emotions impact on learning. Emotions are not only triggered by eliciting events but are also shaped by the larger organisational context, such as power and communications structures and organisation culture (Scherer and Tran, 2001). Viewed in this way, emotions have similar origins to politics and are consequently associated with the same complexities.

Emotion has been relegated to the margins of concern in the OL literature, or simply not mentioned (Fineman, 2003), and the discovery of emotion as an important factor in organisational processes is more recent (Scherer and Tran, 2001). As Scherer and Tran (2001) identify, the complex effects of different types of emotion make it difficult to establish simple recipes specifying the type of emotion and emotional climate which is optimal for OL. Fineman (2003) suggests that theories of OL require emotionalising to take account of the way work meaning is formed. A starting point is to recognise, as Vince and Saleem (2004) do, that individuals and groups continually manage and organise themselves on the basis of their emotional response to organisational issues as well as on the basis of avoiding emotion.

Vince and Saleem's (2004) assertion that emotions account for everything organisations do and how they do it emerges from empirical work but does have a number of limitations. They do recognise that emotions are inevitably part of broader power relations and politics within an organisation and that OL should be seen as a wider social and political process but it seems that they view emotion as a variable which - within the context of the significance of other variables stressed within wider literature - has an excessive impact on OL. However, it would appear to be clear that people are more likely to absorb knowledge from those they trust (Gambetta, 1988) and - therefore - that OL is more likely to occur where there is trust, and there is a willingness to take risks and an acceptance that mistakes can be made (Downe, 2010).

Currie and Kerrin (2004) demonstrate that any view that broader organisational issues of power and culture do not impact on employees' willingness to share knowledge is misguided. In the case of a global pharmaceutical company which they investigated where the Knowledge Management Team held a rather harmonious view of community and assumed that knowledge can be codified to the extent that it is reduced to storage in databases accessible to anyone in the company, they found - as Hull (2000), MacKinlay (2002) and Newell et al (2001) did - that technical fixes to knowledge management hardened existing practices and routines rather than opening up new directions.

Moreover, Kieser et al (2001) describe how behavioural theories of the firm - as represented by March and his collaborators over the past four decades - portray organisations as target-orientated and rule-orientated systems which adapt incrementally to past experience. They suggest that, according to the rule based view of OL, the major challenge organisations have to cope with in order to learn is the monitoring of the rule system for identifying which rules must be altered and in which ways they are to be altered

As Child and Heavens (2001) observe, given that OL is a socially constructed process, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to the relevance of how organisations are socially constituted in terms of different groups and their identities. Child and Rodrigues (2003) point out that the social identity of groups is vested in the systems and bodies of knowledge which they perceive they own and that members of

those groups attribute symbolic value to that knowledge and regard themselves as having a right to arbitrate over this value. Martin (1992) notes that the main challenge to management stems from the likelihood that individuals may be more inclined to identify with particular groups than with the organisation itself. This assertion is supported by the empirical work undertaken by Currie et al (2007) which is discussed later.

Child and Rodrigues (2003) explain that the identity of the groups in an organisation will be party to, and manifest in, their existing practices – thus legitimising them as acceptable conventions – and changes in practice implicit in a policy of promoting OL may therefore be perceived as a threat to social identity. They sum up the challenge for management as being to resolve the tension between heterogeneity, which reflects the different yet complimentary competencies and knowledge sets required to feed a constructive learning process, and homogeneity, which is required to unify diverse individuals and groups around shared goal-directed activity in a manner which is conducive to OL.

How it all links up

There are numerous models available in the prescriptive LO literature (Senge, 1990; Pedler et al, 1991; Kline and Saunders, 1993; Jones and Hendry, 1994) but, as Tsang (1997) notes, writers of the LO are on the whole unaware of the cultural constraints of their theories. While not prescribing a model themselves, Snyder and Cummings' (1998) work is an example of the problematic assumptions held by writers in the prescriptive field. Describing matters inhibiting OL as OL disorders, they view these factors as ailments which can be cured if measures are put in place to treat them. It has also been shown elsewhere that prescriptive writers tend to have unrealistic expectations of leaders.

The number of factors which must be considered in any rigorous analysis of OL makes the possibility of developing a model which has wide applicability unfeasible. Easterby-Smith (1997) argues that the creation of a comprehensive theory of OL is an unrealistic aspiration because the bulk of the literature can be best understood from a number of disciplinary perspectives which each have a distinct ontological view; the

LO literature has an action orientation geared towards creating an ideal type whereas the OL literature is analytic without necessarily focusing on changing processes; and ontologies represented by different disciplines lead to confusion in the research agenda with regard to important topics, appropriate methods and contributions. Despite this context some, including Lahteenmaki et al (2001), have asserted that there is an urgent need for a holistic model of OL.

As Pawlowsky et al (2001) explain, the use of individual tools depend not only on the characteristics of the tool but also to a high degree on the culture of the organisation, the maturity of organisational members, leadership style and the organisation's structural features. The above discussion shows that this list of dependencies could be added to considerably. Pawlowsky et al (2001) have described what they consider to be the phases of the learning process which include identification of knowledge, the generation/creation of knowledge, the diffusion of knowledge, the integration and modification of knowledge (in terms of how knowledge is stored, modified and renewed) and action where the focus is on the behavioural consequences of learning.

Berthoin Antal et al (2001) advocate that the most effective approach to developing OL is to focus first and foremost on ensuring that the organisation does not suffer from a quantitative or qualitative lack of leadership because they suggest that it is the resource which can most readily be increased and that it is only through the exercise of leadership that barriers embedded in the culture and structure of an organisation can be overcome. This seems to be sound advice, although it is clear that there are limits to what can be expected from leaders.

Summary and conclusion

This discussion of the influences on OL shows that existing literature recognises that the creation of effective OL is dependent upon the willingness and ability of individuals and leaders to practice what is required - and upon a wide variety of factors at the group, organisation and societal levels.

Writers have argued that individuals' effectiveness as learners in the workplace will be influenced by intellectual capacity, commitment, ability to communicate,

willingness to question, cognitive style and the nature of the task or operating routine of interest. How individuals interact in groups or teams has been widely recognised as highly important because learning at this level can be seen as a bridge between individual and organisational learning. Leaders are seen as a key facilitator of OL but many writers place high expectations on them and describe the role they need to play in a way which leaves the boundary between management and other employees unclear. The literature suggests that leaders need to share information openly and empower staff to speak freely, while providing support and developing trust. It is apparent in the literature that influencing OL is a job for leaders at all levels and that it is certainly not something which can be left to boards of directors as remote entities.

As OL depends on social interactions, cultural issues are highly important and it is clear that it is very difficult to realise OL if the political and emotional climate in a workplace is not conducive to it. In particular, it seems that trust among colleagues can facilitate learning while the likelihood of blame can be an inhibitor. It has been advocated that learning spaces need to be created in organisations where participants are able to accept that no view is authoritative or true, where managers have no claim to a privileged vantage point and ideas such as wrong-doing are contested. The difficulties of creating such spaces are recognised – not least because of managers' unwillingness to risk credibility or authority and the inevitability the information flow being limited. Moreover, it has been pointed out that many employees would wish to avoid any conflict which would subsequently prevent them from disagreeing or questioning and people's emotions influence behaviour.

The strong embeddedness and intangibility of these factors would seem to result in them presenting some of the greatest difficulties. The literature has shown that the complexity of the landscape which needs to be crossed if the destination of OL is to be reached means that an adequate route map based on a model for overcoming challenges is not, and cannot be made, available. Therefore, this chapter – having dealt with a wide range of factors in a fairly brisk way – provided an important foundation for the empirical work reported later in this thesis by surfacing key complexities and by providing an initial focus for primary data collection.

CHAPTER 4 – ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING IN A PUBLIC SECTOR CONTEXT

Introduction

Having considered what OL is and the influences on it as a general notion, this chapter focuses specifically on the public sector considerations which it is important to do in the light of the overwhelming private sector focus among the vast majority of writers in the field. The relevance of OL to the public sector is firstly considered and then the focus turns to how factors arising in different ways in the public sector have the potential to impact on any attempt to realise OL. This is followed by an examination of some public sector learning initiatives and practices by drawing from the limited range of empirical work which has considered OL, or closely related matters, within the UK public sector.

Relevance of organisational learning to the public sector

Many of the explanations for the impetus underpinning OL seem to relate to the private sector and, as Reynolds and Ablett (1998) note, many initiatives have been seen as a route to becoming a LO or indeed synonymous with it. This brings into question whether political scientists and OL specialists have been right to undertake only limited inquiries in the public/political sphere. The literature would suggest not.

Boyett and Currie (2001) explain that the UK public sector policy changes of the 1980s and 1990s were based on the overriding assumption that business organisations are the most efficient and effective means of meeting customer demand. They go on to note that it was advocated that operating environments should be developed where market disciplines prevailed and where business practices, in particular the pivotal role of management, could be wholeheartedly embraced. Pettigrew et al (1992) argue that, since the mid 1980s, difficulties within the public sector have been caused by over mechanistic transfers of concepts from the private sector to the public sector and Boyett and Currie (2001) suggest that the problem may not be of generic transfer per se but of generic transfer of highly prescriptive, formalistic managerial ideas and

practices. These points demonstrate the importance of considering how the characteristics of the public sector are likely to facilitate or hinder OL.

Popper and Lipshitz (2000) suggest that much of the empirical evidence regarding OL comes from organisational settings characterised by factors such as a high level of environmental uncertainty, costly potential errors, a high level of professionalism and a strong leadership commitment. If these are the extent of the conditions needed to achieve OL, then the possibilities for public sector organisations would seem to be high – as is the need to create and share organisational knowledge due to the substantial reforms to which they have been subjected (Rashman et al, 2009). Finger and Burgin Brand (1999) point out that having been used to stability and protection, public sector organisations are particularly challenged to adapt to a new and rapidly evolving context brought about by economic globalisation which means they must develop their capacity to analyse this new context, to adapt to it and to transform themselves accordingly and – therefore - need to become LOs. Anyone involved in their transformation has to pay particular attention to the organisational context and to their mainly political environment (ibid).

Downe (2010) suggests that public organisations' slowness to change might be a reason why they need to make more use of the concept of OL. The National Audit Office (2009) highlights that many problems with projects, programmes and policy implementation could have been avoided if lessons had been learnt from the past and point to examples where learning had brought success. It sees the four elements of the leadership of learning, people's expertise, information management infrastructure and the exploitation of existing processes as key to learning, and outlines ways in which public sector organisations have been building learning into day-to-day activities.

While evidence from the private and public sector shows that OL can bring the benefits of cost reduction in the delivery of public services (Levin and Sanger, 1994) and increased effectiveness of goal attainment (LaPalombara, 2001a), LaPalombara (2001a) reminds us that government policies involve things which happen (or do not happen) to human beings and that this leads to considerations of expediency and efficiency often taking a backseat to normative ideas about goal achievement. This

leads to the question of what government should learn and not learn (Etheredge, 1981). LaPalombara (2001a) argues that learning things about goal-setting or policy implementation which may be rational or efficient but that are palpably unfeasible politically is a waste of resources and will result in irreversible political problems. This suggests making a move towards OL in public sector organisations would be likely to be even more complex than Finger and Burgin Brand (1999) envisage. Moreover, if public sector organisations can develop OL it is very hard to determine whether it has taken place. Rashman et al (2009) argue that there is a lack of evidence to support or refute a link between OL and performance. Where it is possible to explain a link between OL and improvement, hitherto, the evidence has been positive but often inconclusive (Downe, 2010). However, OL is associated with public service improvement (Ashworth et al, 2010).

Impact of public sector context on organisational learning

LaPalombara (2001b) argues that as long as the differences between public/political sector organisations and those in the private sector go unrecognised – or are denied – required intellectual cross fertilisation will be unrealised. However, differences can be perceived in overly stark ways. Common (2004) asserts that in the public sector OL is concerned with applying new knowledge to policy making or being innovative when implementing policy, but this overlooks the fact that large swathes of the public sector's activities are not focused on policy making or policy implementation. Importantly, Moynihan and Pandey (2006) argue that new public management reform enthusiasts will do well to be cognisant of real limits (and perhaps facilitators) placed by organisational and political realities and to think of reforms in a broader context.

The significance of organisational structure for OL has already been discussed and Deutsch (1963) shows how the internal structure of public/political organisations, and the persons named to occupy roles within them, can facilitate or impede OL. For historical reasons, public sector organisations are generally more bureaucratic than private sector organisations which results in them constituting a particular challenge for people who want to put the concept of the LO into practice (Finger and Burgin Brand, 1999). However, any resultant rigidity, - as Downe (2010) found - has allowed for informal constructs such as networks to be used to facilitate the transfer of

knowledge from one organisation to another. That said, many teams and communities of practice do not work in the public sector as envisaged in literature focused on the private sector (Rashman et al, 2009). Also, although not a unique characteristic of public sector organisations, many are large and dispersed so Wildavsky's (1964) findings - which show how individuals and organisations located far from the decisional centre or at different hierarchical levels can frustrate or derail goal attainment - are significant.

A significant issue of concern to OL is what might be conceived as an organisation within the public sector. Some public sector organisations have sections or regions which have a large degree of autonomy, while others are highly centralised. Whatever view is taken about what constitutes an organisational unit for the purpose of OL, there should be many opportunities within the public sector for embracing inter-OL – particularly where the main focus is on co-operation rather than competition – because, as Rashman et al (2009) explain, low levels of competition may facilitate strong network ties. Hartley and Allison (2002), and Rashman and Radnor (2005), note the importance to learning in the public sector of being able to make comparisons with other similar organisations but - as Rashman et al (2009) point out - there is a very limited amount of literature on inter-OL. The demise of quasi-markets within public sector service delivery during the first decade of the twenty-first century should have helped to promote co-operation, but an enthusiasm for applying market forces to the public sector has experienced something of a renaissance (mostly in England) since a new UK Government was established in 2010.

Many public sector organisations also have long histories. Allison (1971) found that leaders in the public sector pay a lot of attention to history and this kind of learning actually becomes the basis for subsequent decisions. As has been noted elsewhere, learning from history can be a positive or negative practice within the context of OL and it is highly likely that the mindset of leaders in the UK public sector will have shifted to some extent as a result of the reform during the last three decades.

Another dimension of organisations operating in the public/political sphere - which differentiates them from those in the private sphere - is that the policies they make or

administer are often quite vague, diffuse and contradictory (Levin and Sanger, 1994). Abrahamsson (1977) found that it is not unusual for public sector organisations to have no goals at all and Panebianco (1988) suggested that goals developed can appear to be quite irrational. Also, LaPalombara (2001a) notes that government mandates may not be known to many of the people who make up the organisation designated to carry them through. While in the light of the strong emphasis on business planning which has emerged in the public sector during more recent years there must be some doubt about the extent to which Abrahamsson's (1977) work has contemporary relevance, this scene does demonstrate how misguided Senge (1990) and others are to assume that all organisations' visions and the actions of their members can be strongly connected in a straightforward way. It is a cause for concern that assumptions of this kind have been followed by those undertaking empirical research in the public sector – an example being Vince and Saleem (2004) who asserted that organisation is built from values and mission statements when examining the impact of caution and blame on OL in a UK local authority.

It has also come through in the literature discussed elsewhere that organisational members will be able to practice effective OL when they have scope to think creatively and implement alternatives approaches and ideas. However, because of multiple accountability of a formal and informal nature (Cohen and Axelrod, 1984), not only are the formal chains of command multiple and complex but informal influences and pressures often limit the degree of freedom open to a person in public/political organisations (LaPalombara, 2001a). Significantly, the mission of public/political organisations, their membership, the resources provided for operation, the rewards and punishment for good or bad behaviour and often the survival of the organisation itself are all matters which typically lie outside the organisation (ibid). More moderately, Hartley and Skelcher (2008) suggest that the management of public services is often distinct because of a complex policy and political environment operating under the control of politicians with a high degree of scrutiny and accountability. While some of this might be true, it is an exaggeration as many public sector organisations will have scope to decide on – for example - how administrative budgets are used and on the detail of HR policies.

The impact of this multiple accountability is, however, more far reaching than in relation to autonomy. This leads public sector officials, especially those occupying government office, to pay attention to many constituencies – all of which are more or less ready to apply sanctions if their wishes or advice are not followed (LaPalombara, 2001a). This results in the vaunted autonomy of the executive branch being much more limited than one supposes (Levin and Sanger, 1994). As LaPalombara (2001a) explains, what the executive does in all democratic systems is subject to oversight by legislatures and challenges in the courts and public/political organisations are far more porous than private firms are as they are permeated by organised outside interest groups determined to pull them in different policy directions. Above all, public sector organisations in democracies are subject to the influence of political parties and members of governmental organisations defy political parties at considerable risk (ibid). However, based on a limited empirical study in the UK civil service, Smith and Taylor (2000) suggest that the impact of accountability on OL is overstated in the literature and Bovens (2010) recognises the potential accountability mechanisms have for inducing learning.

Hedberg (1981) and Rose (1993) suggest that if benefits of OL can reach optimal levels in the public/political sector, learning activities must be more self consciously pursued than they were at the time of their writing. However, there seem to be a number of obstacles which would lead to some reticence among public sector workers that this advice should be embraced. LaPalombara (2001a) suggests that action by public/political organisations tends to be reactive, not proactive, and prophylactic rather than innovative with the view that ideas are a threat to the delicate equilibrium between internal and external forces which few people wish to risk destabilising. This might lead public sector organisations to favour knowledge exploitation rather than exploration (Crossan and Berdrow, 2003; Levinthal and March, 1993) because it is considered to be tried and tested and, therefore, less risky (Rashman et al, 2009). However, as Rashman et al (2009) recognise, political processes have the potential to facilitate learning as well if – for example – they reveal underlying problems, stimulate the need for achieving political consensus and/or institutionalise changes.

Dunleavy (1995) argues that policy making and implementation in the UK happens very quickly against a background of strong media systems and in a culture of

adversarial politics. In the light of this context, Gilson et al (2009) argue that in the UK organisational unlearning can be quickly converted into a prominent policy crisis which acts as a powerful stimuli for OL in central government. The key point is that no theory of OL will be complete without an understanding of the political dynamics within an organisation (ibid).

Furubo (1994) concluded that single-loop learning far outpaces double-loop learning in the public sector. Double-loop learning is impeded in the public sector, even more than it is in the private sector, because politics infuses everything that is done and because of the formal separation of policy making and implementation - as for example between legislative and administrative bodies (LaPalombara, 2001a). While laws are only made by legislatures, LaPalombara (2001a) exaggerates the effect of this because government departments responsible for implementing policies usually develop them and are closely involved in the legislature's scrutiny of proposals. He also suggests that a problem mushrooms in the public/political sector when a policy change of a double-loop type is indicated but, surely, this depends on the nature of the change and the context in which it is being proposed. Common (2004) also contends that single loop learning is preferred in the public sector because questioning why things are done, which is a key element of double loop learning, happens in the political sphere. However, this seems not to recognise that ministers who he would seem to accept do the questioning are – certainly within the UK - supported and advised by civil servants who make up a significant part of the public sector.

LaPalombara (2001a) makes some points which are important considerations when considering OL within the context of ministerial-led central government departments and local authorities which are accountable to elected representatives. Some of the issues to which he refers have been exacerbated in the UK in recent years as a result of the commencement of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 as any internal considerations of ideas for change and analysis of them could potentially be released into the public domain. On the other hand he points out that because policies enacted are temporary and contested in their implementation every step of the way both inside and outside of government, managers of public/political organisations engage – in a similar way to organisations in the private sector (Rist, 1994) - in predictable types of

environmental scanning and learning. This seems to have the potential to be beneficial to the process of OL.

Focusing on the USA context, LaPalombara (2001a) does not acknowledge that many public sector organisations in the UK do have a greater degree of autonomy from political control – for example, agencies of government departments and the National Health Service. Even within ministerial-led government departments, it would have been appropriate for LaPalombara (2001a) to have made a distinction between the autonomy which exists to formulate policies which apply externally – which ministers will take a close interest in – and internal management and administrative matters. Furthermore, LaPalombara (2001a) suggests that communication between ministers and staff is one-way only and does not seem to envisage any possibility of staff presenting proposals for change to ministers and securing their agreement for implementation.

After undertaking a survey in USA state government health and human service agencies, Moynihan and Pandey (2006) found that the support of elected officials is likely to result in reforms being more successful and it is important to acknowledge that conflict between officials and ministers might not exist. Also, the established practice in the UK civil service of staff preparing formal submissions for ministers - and copying them to all relevant colleagues - which set out a range of options and their analysis of those options in order for a decision to be made goes some way towards making frequent attempts to make tacit knowledge explicit for others to absorb as advocated by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

Also, Corley and Gioia (2003) argue that OL is intimately bound up with organisational identity which – as Albert and Whetten (1985), Gioia (1998) and Stimpert et al (1998) explain - involves perceptions or implicit theories shared by organisation members about ‘who we are as an organisation’. Therefore, it might be that the ethos which is often suggested exists among public sector workers to work for the good of society at large – rather than for the good of specific individual or organisational interests - could have the potential to facilitate OL.

Some of the key differences between public sector organisations have already been mentioned and it is important to acknowledge the significant diversity within the public/political sector as a whole. This diversity exists within, as well as between, organisations which is illustrated by Foster and Hoggett (1999) who found significant variations in management practices and cultures in different offices of the Benefits Agency.

Darr and Kurtzburg (2000) point out that extant literature shows that learning occurred primarily between similar public sector organisations which accords with Downe et al's (2004) view that in public services there is a preference for learning from similarly sized organisations facing similar issues. Although these points relate to inter-OL, rather than OL within organisations, it appears that a consensus has emerged – which is supported by what arose from the various learning initiatives and practices outlined in the next section of this chapter - that the barriers to OL in the public sector described by Bundred (2006) are prevalent. These are organisational and professional boundaries, a lack of trust between professionals, cultural tensions, and a lack of awareness of the best practice from other parts of the public sector and the private sector. In addition, Vince (2000) asserts that a blame culture in the public sector impairs OL. However, as Rashman et al (2009) suggest, further research is needed to better understand the factors which influence the nature and extent of OL in the public sector. In the light of the volume and complexity of factors which appear to have the potential to influence OL, Rashman et al's (2009) suggestion that increased attention to the external and internal organisational contexts would lead to an increased potential for understanding specific situated practice and its transferability to other sectors is important. Sensibly, they also suggest that the differences between organisational sectors require conceptualisation and research.

Nature and success of public sector learning initiatives and practices

Betts and Holden (2003) suggest that one response to the 'modernising agenda' of the late 1990s in the UK has been to demonstrate an increasing commitment to OL as a vehicle through which public sector organisations might better achieve goals of reform but note that formal learning in delivered programmes at all levels is still the more usual form for achieving this. Betts and Holden (2003) combined qualitative

and quantitative methods to evaluate the contribution to OL of 'Investors in Management' and 'Employee-Led Development' initiatives implemented in a UK local authority. They found that these initiatives suited their existing cultural and political paradigm which reflected their current awareness of learning, but the approaches lacked a vision of how learning might be made to work for the organisation. Indeed, it seems that the local authority used an initiative which could be shaped around its existing operations rather than seeking to change and shape its operations in line with conditions conducive to OL.

Through an in-depth qualitative study, Bell et al (2002) evaluated the validity of the claim that the UK 'Investors in People' (IiP) initiative is a tool which managers can apply towards developing a LO. As Bell et al (2002) note, IiP continues to be a central part of the British government's workplace learning agenda but implementing it as an initiative to enable OL involves negotiating a central paradox which is the tension between the hard content-focused nature of the IiP framework and the softer process-focused nature of much workplace learning. They found that it was difficult to relate the practices associated with the IiP standard to the development of OL because of the focus on controlling learning in line with an organisation's interests rather than making facilities for self development available, not utilising soft learning which takes place within a framework of social participation and a reliance on formal policies and procedures. Bell et al (2002) ultimately concluded that the institutionalisation of practice through the IiP framework has the potential to inhibit OL.

Downe et al (2004) combined quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the extent of inter-OL and change in local authorities through the English Beacon Council Scheme which is an initiative designed to promote the sharing of good practice, inter-OL and change in local government through representatives attending organised events. Downe et al's (2004) findings resulted in them concluding that the events were a successful means of achieving the aims of the scheme but their study draws out a number of issues which are considered to affect local government's ability to take advantage of learning opportunities involving inter-OL. Geographical location, local socio-economic factors and political orientation were significant factors for local authorities when identifying others from which to learn – the preference being for

similarity but they found that some organisations did pursue learning from dissimilarity. Their results show that the strongest barriers to learning and change in local authorities were workload pressures (personal and organisational), financial constraints and transferability.

Along similar lines - using participant observation, documentary analysis and questionnaires - Hartley and Allison (2002) examined the learning reported within the Better Value Development Programme (BVDP) network of local authorities in the UK as they started implementing changes to address central government's agenda of modernisation and continuous improvement – particularly Best Value. In this forum Hartley and Allison (2002) identified that the sharing of better practice and the development of new ideas and concepts about implementing Best Value were taking place through a number of mechanisms including workshop presentations, discussions, informal networking, participant's reflections, interaction with the Director of the development programme, reading and dissemination of workshop reports and transfer of practice discussed at workshops into participating organisations. Hartley and Allison (2002) argue that comparison with other organisations in the sector is an important element of learning in public sector organisations. They also observe that simply engaging in social interactions and sharing experiences is not sufficient as experiences have to be subjected to challenge, reflection and comparisons if the lessons arising from those experiences are to be converted from tacit to explicit knowledge.

In addition to these empirical investigations of the effectiveness and limitations of initiatives which have been seen by some as having the potential to support learning in the local government arena, there have been a number of studies focusing on the UK National Health Service (NHS). Taking a qualitative approach, Currie et al (2007) evaluate the introduction of the National Reporting and Learning System and its impact in the area of operating theatres within a university teaching hospital. They argue that, in the case of the NHS, the antagonism felt by professionals towards management is likely to exacerbate reluctance to openly share knowledge and that disparate knowledge domains and cultures are likely to induce political behaviours so that staff members in pursuit of self-interest are unwilling as well as unable to share knowledge across boundaries.

In relation to incident reporting as a method of sharing knowledge, Currie et al (2007) found that knowledge sharing was restricted by a common mistrust of the other. In line with Hudson and Henwood's (2002) suggestion that different occupational communities appear ill-equipped to cope with the challenges of working across professional boundaries, Currie et al (2007) identify that they are able to reinforce their professional identities and status through hoarding information or keeping in collegial settings. Currie et al (2007) conclude that the more politicised context of the NHS, with its dominant core of doctors who wield considerable power based upon their expert knowledge, exacerbates the problems around knowledge – including political and cultural considerations – and renders the generic transfer of management models and ideas from the private sector ineffective.

Also focusing on NHS quality improvement initiatives, Bate and Robert (2002) note variations in the rate at which NHS organisations learn and consider the effectiveness of Collaboratives which is a mechanism designed to close the gap between the best available knowledge in healthcare and everyday practice in the NHS. They find that Collaboratives might be more effective if there was a greater emphasis on spreading knowledge as opposed to merely information. Bate and Robert (2002) recognise that a social network is needed to pass tacit knowledge from one person or place to another, but do not refer to the cultural and political barriers which Currie et al (2007) discuss and advocate the use of techniques which have worked successfully in the private sector. The picture Currie et al (2007) present of an organisation being diverse and consisting of competing groups and interests does not, as Downe (2010) points out, apply to the local government sector and Dopson (2006) explains that the difficulty of transferring knowledge across boundaries in the health sector is something which has grown up over time. Also, the context described by Currie et al (2007) is in contrast to a general assertion made by Thornton (2002) that shared interests have a positive effect on learning. Moreover, Darr and Kurtzburg (2000) suggest that the conditions for learning within an organisational field should be most propitious since organisations within a field are subject to the same set of institutional pressures and operate using the same institutional logic.

Currie and Suhomlinova (2006) examined the impact of both organisational and professional boundaries on knowledge sharing within the context of the UK NHS using qualitative methods within a case study of an academic health centre which encompasses a university medical school and a host of NHS organisations. Currie and Suhomlinova (2006) argue that institutional theory seems to be a particularly suitable perspective for integration into research on learning and found that to a significant extent institutions define what counts as knowledge, shape the interests of actors to share (or hoard) it, and create (as well as have the potential to remove) boundaries which impede knowledge sharing. They suggest that policy aspirations towards the development of the NHS as a LO are not synchronised with existing power arrangements as a professional logic of specialisation and hierarchy is dominant. This leads Currie and Suhomlinova (2006) to conclude that the powerful professional associations to which most doctors belong may more effectively drive necessary changes in the behaviours of their members to promote knowledge sharing than management can and they advocate the development of policies which take into account the institutional realities in the field. Overall, Rashman et al's (2009) observation that there has been little research on learning and knowledge transfer in the non-profit sectors is true but some examples have emerged in recent years.

Summary and conclusion

It is clear from the literature that the public sector continues to be under considerable pressure to change and that OL has the potential to facilitate that change. However, rather than seeking to implement prescriptive ideas or making a transfer of practice which has been successful in the private sector to the public sector, it is necessary to consider a range of factors unique to the public sector (and specific organisations or groups of organisations in the public sector) in order to develop workable approaches. That said, some have gone too far and exaggerated the impact of important characteristics prevalent in the public sector.

Existing literature illustrates that public sector organisations are generally more bureaucratic than private sector organisations, many public sector organisations are large and dispersed which brings into question what might constitute an organisational unit for the purpose of OL, there should be many opportunities for

inter-OL in the public sector, many public sector organisations have a long history, and policies which the public sector is asked to develop or administer are often vague or contradictory. Also, the degree of freedom open to workers in public sector organisation is limited by multiple accountability and they are influenced by political parties – although some literature seems to wrongly assume that communications between ministers and public sector workers is one-way only. On the other hand, some public sector factors – such as the much lower level of competition and elements of the political environment – have been seen as features which can aid learning. The impact of the plethora of factors which have the potential to affect learning, either adversely or positively, has been under-researched.

Some of the relatively few scholars who have written about OL, or something closely related to it, in the public sector tend to have made a contribution before recent reforms in the UK would have impacted or have based their views on the USA context which has limited read across to the contemporary UK context. Therefore, while some of the issues these writers touch upon have brought relevant factors into focus, many assertions made by them are questionable. Those writers who have taken account of relevant contemporary factors tend to accept the general view that OL should be promoted in the public sector, but recognise the difficulty of knowing that it has taken place and certainly of demonstrating the delivery of tangible improvements.

Although limited in number, the empirical work which has been done to investigate learning initiatives and practice in the public sector does provide some useful insights. The impression conveyed by these contributions is that there has been a significant focus on hard content-focused initiatives, rather softer process-focused learning. It is apparent that an element of process-focused learning has been a feature of some initiatives to encourage learning among local authorities but this has tended to be within the context of organised events. It is also clear that professional groups within the NHS wield considerable power and that their co-operation with change advocated by management cannot be assumed.

CHAPTER 5 – METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes why the philosophical approach of critical realism underpinned the empirical investigation and why the researcher considered other philosophical positions to be less adequate. The research design and steps undertaken to gather data are then explained. This includes an explanation for the adoption of a case study research strategy and for the selection of the three areas of the Welsh Government which were focused on, a justification for the use of qualitative interviews and documentary analysis as data collection methods, and a step by step description of how these methods were applied. This is followed by an outline of the quality issues considered and a defence of the research's robustness, before the reflexivity and ethical considerations are discussed and an explanation given for how issues in these areas were addressed.

Philosophical approach

In the search for an ontology which had the potential to provide strong explanations, critical realism was considered to establish a framework which enables social phenomena to be understood as well as mankind is able to. The researcher believes that social phenomena are influenced by things which mankind, either individually or collectively, cannot understand fully but which efforts can be made to know more about in order to maximise understanding. As Benton and Craib (2001) note, realists are committed to the existence of a real world acting independently of our knowledge or beliefs about it but that this world is in principle knowable and open to being changed on the basis of knowledge. Although it is believed that there is a world independent of our identification of it, Ackroyd (2004) recognises that obtaining access to it is not straightforward and he makes the point that it is impossible for us to gain access to the world in a way which is not mediated by our conceptions

A key feature of the critical realist perspective - as described by Bhaskar as one of the most influential writers in the field - is that social structures and human agents are ontologically distinct (Benton and Craib, 2001) so a central issue in critical realism is

the active role of the human agent, but this is with reference to their interaction with an independent external reality which can constrain or facilitate human action (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). The researcher considers it to be inevitable that social outcomes are shaped by both social structures and human agents, and views the distinct focus on each - and the concern for the way in which each interacts with the other - to be a particularly important strength of critical realist thinking.

The ways in which social structures and human agents can be inappropriately conflated are illustrated by Archer (1995) who identifies three forms of structure and agency conflation – downward, upward and central. Downward conflation adopts an ontological position which reifies structure and takes it as the focus for social research by seeing structure as the determinant for people’s behaviour. Upward conflation is associated with methodological individualism where structure is viewed as little more than the outcome of the beliefs and actions of individuals who make up present day society. Archer (1995) argues that structuralism and methodological individualism are both guilty of epiphenomenalism as structuralism marginalises the individual while methodological individualism marginalises structure. The undesirable consequences of these outcomes are highlighted by Thursfield and Hamblett (2004) who observe that both ontological positions present an incomplete and partial view of society in that they attend to only one stream of reality. Central conflation gives equal weight to structure and agency and, according to Giddens (1994), the two are mutually constituted – that is they form two elements of one whole. However, quite rightly in the researcher’s view, Archer (1995) argued that structure and agency are radically different entities possessing different emergent properties and countered Giddens’ (1994) argument that structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activities. Archer (1995) did this by asserting Bhaskar’s (1979) argument that the existence of social structures in reality depends on their inappropriate conceptualisation as there may be a causal relationship between the mistaken beliefs of agents and the continuance of social structures.

For realists, society and institutions continue to exist only because agents reproduce and possibly transform structures in their social actions (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). Every action performed requires the pre-existence of some social structures

which agents draw upon (ibid) which the researcher concurs with based on his observations of people in organisations considering sources of power and conventions when dealing with matters, and the enhanced challenge they face when in uncharted territories. In this context, it follows that the task of researchers within the tradition of critical realism is to uncover the structures of social relations in order to understand why we then have the policies and practices that we do (May, 2001). For critical realism, any analysis should include both the unobservable structures and subjectively experienced social phenomena (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). This leads to the realist view of social science accounting for the sense people have of being constrained or enabled by their circumstances in terms of the structures in which they are located (Ackroyd, 2004).

In this way, critical realism argues that the task of social research is not simply to collect observations on the social world but to explain these within theoretical frameworks which examine the underlying mechanisms which inform people's actions and prevent their choices from reaching fruition (ibid). In doing so, it is important to be aware that generative mechanisms may lie dormant for a while or they may be counteracted by opposing mechanisms – thus cancelling each other out and leading to no events (Tsoukas, 2000). Ackroyd (2004) suggests that causal processes are chains of connected events in which the capacities of objects are activated sequentially so, if this is the case, a dormant generative mechanism mid-way along a chain would result in generative mechanisms further along that chain being unable to produce events.

Bhaskar's categorical distinction between human action and social structure is based on a belief that the properties of the latter are fundamentally different from the former to the extent that they pre-exist the social activities through which they are reproduced or transformed (Reed, 2000). As Reed (2000) points out, critical realism insists that agency possesses its own causal powers which are revealed in its mediated interplay with structure but, despite this insistence, there has been debate about how those who have claimed to work in the framework of critical realism have ensured that analyses have focused on both structure and agency. Contu and Willmott (2005) assert that critical realists privilege structure and marginalise agency. This is a criticism which critical realist researchers need to avoid being rightfully accused of by ensuring that

they focus sufficiently on the thought processes of individual agents to understand how actions emerge from mediations between agents and structures.

Bhaskar calls the manner in which we delve into apparent regularities so as to postulate underlying powers ‘retroduction’ and for him the objective of critical realist science is to dig deeper to identify causal powers which lie behind mediated empirical patterns (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Johnson and Duberley (2000) recognise the key question of how we can ever know whether the intransitive essences constructed by scientists are mere fictions of their imagination or are real non-empirical structures or generative mechanisms. In a very sensible way Johnson and Duberley (2000) suggest that a pragmatic critical realist position asserts that there is a transcendental reality beyond our discursive productions so, while the truth may well be out there, we may never know it in an absolute sense because we lack the necessary cognitive and linguistic means of apprehending it.

Archer (2003) sees the ‘internal conversation’ as the missing link between structure and agency. She asserts that, against a background of agents knowing what they care about most and what they seek to realise, agents are capable of having an ‘internal conversation’ to deliberate about themselves in their social circumstances before exercising personal power. According to Archer (1995), the internal conversation can consist of questioning and answering, and musing, before one makes up their mind which results in agents evaluating the same situation differently and responding in varying ways. This researcher considers this form of internal conversation to be a sound basis for analysing the actions of individuals.

When considering the nature and consequences of internal conversations, Archer’s (2003) recognition that no structure can enable or constrain in the absence of anything else is acknowledged. It follows that the potential for structures to constrain or enable agents depends upon agents’ personal relationship with them and, crucially, it is important to recognise that the internal conversation is a ‘personal emergent property’ (ibid). Archer (2003) goes on to explain that all individuals are trying to establish a ‘modus vivendi’ where their concerns are always taken into account and – importantly – points out that all people have multiple concerns in respect of their wellbeing, competence and self-worth. Archer (2003) observes that an individual evolves during

his/her life course and is shaped by social background, life-chances, personal inspection of his/her own morphogenesis and – finally – application of personal powers to pursue replication or transformation. This results in the past self influencing the present self and the present self influencing the future self (ibid) which impacts upon the nature of the ‘modus vivendi’ any individual is trying to establish.

Also, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) exposed the relevance of actors’ temporal agentic orientations as an important factor in the mediation of interplay between agency and structure. Building on their work, Dorado (2005) outlines that routine behaviours are common where a focus on the past prevails, that sensemaking behaviours are likely when a focus on the present exists and that strategic behaviours emerge when a focus on the future is prevalent. Importantly, however, Dorado (2005) points out that these temporal states are not independent of each other which results in an element of routine behaviours always being apparent.

Turning to how critical realism might be applied within the specific context of organisation studies, critical realists see organisations as consisting of relational structures into which people enter and – through their activities - reproduce or transform them (Reed, 2000). They also have emergent properties which bind participants who have different amounts of room for manoeuvre (Ackroyd, 2004). Organisational forms are considered to be structures because they are enduring institutional properties which are irreducible to the activities of contemporary agents (Reed, 2000). Against this background, Reed (2000) very logically argues that realist explanation and critique in organisation analysis is likely to be advanced more positively through in-depth analysis of the multiple mechanisms and tendencies which reproduce or transform particular organisational forms and the outcomes they produce for social actors.

While holding the view that applying a critical realist approach is most appropriate when investigating social phenomena generally, the researcher considered that the literature reviewed in chapters 2, 3 and 4 illuminates a number of features of OL which made applying critical realism within the context of this particular study particularly beneficial. The existing literature demonstrates that OL can be conceived

as a combination of cognitive and social processes, that OL has a dependency on the willingness and ability of individuals to practice what is required, and that OL is influenced by practices at the group, organisation and societal levels. It is evident that these features are often strongly embedded and intangible, and the researcher believed that critical realism was the most suitable framework for investigating these key individual and structural-based issues.

The researcher recognised that critical realism might be conceptualised as an ontological position towards the centre of a positivism-constructionism continuum. The researcher recognised that, resting at one end of the continuum, positivism owes much to what is thought of as scientific research (Robson, 1993). Its key attributes are an acceptance of the empirical account of the natural sciences, a valuing of science as the highest or even the only genuine form of knowledge, the view that scientific methods can and should be extended to the study of human life, and that social problems and conflicts can be identified and resolved on the basis of expert knowledge offered by social scientists (Benton and Craib, 2001). Significantly, positivism is based on the belief that people are the product of their environment and are which makes it possible for people's behaviour to be predicted through reference to environmental factors (May, 2001).

While the researcher believes that the environment in which people exist impacts on their beliefs and actions, he considered positivism's disregard for the importance of people as actors in influencing actual outcomes to be unsatisfactory in the endeavour to develop understanding. This was a very important reason why the researcher found critical realism to provide a far more adequate framework than positivism for undertaking empirical research. As Thomas (2004) notes, realism assumes that there is an outside world which exists independently of our knowledge but - unlike positivism - it recognises that understanding or knowing requires interpretation. Further, positivism is characterised by the pursuit of objectivity and the production of wide-ranging laws of human behaviour which are true and precise (May, 2001). Given the researcher's belief that human behaviour is the outcome of complex interactions between individuals and their environments in specific contexts, he considered this claim to be illusionary.

Turning to the assumptions underpinning the traditions at the opposite end of the continuum - fundamentally contrasting with positivist beliefs - interpretivism holds that human beings possess self-consciousness and that human behaviour is unpredictable (Benton and Craib, 2001) which the researcher agreed with. May (2001) points out that this position leads to a concentration on subjectivity where the focus is on the meanings people give to their environment, rather than the environment itself, and an understanding that we cannot know this independently of people's interpretation of it. It followed that for the researcher the problem with constructionism is not with what it was concerned with (i.e. the meanings people give to their environment), but with what it fails to also be concerned with (i.e. the environment itself). This is the additional feature of critical realist thinking which, for the researcher, makes it more adequate than constructionism as a framework for undertaking empirical research. As Thomas (2004) recognises, realism shares with constructionism the idea that the world is not inherently meaningful but is made meaningful by our interpretation of it but - unlike constructionism - realism assumes that there is an outside world existing independently of our knowledge of it.

Just as it has been shown that critical realism has practical consequences for how research is undertaken in practice, the researcher recognised that positivism and constructionism also have practical consequences which can be contrasted with each other. In the constructionist tradition, researchers are engaged in processes of construction where observation of behaviour is considered to be insufficient for understanding and predicting human behaviour (Thomas, 2004). Constructionism is associated with, among others, the epistemological framework of interpretivism (Thomas, 2004) and can be associated with the process of induction which rejects the belief of the deductive approach taken by positivists, which is that stimulus causes response, in favour of a belief that stimulus causes a response which is based on experience and interpretation (Gill and Johnson, 1997).

It followed for the researcher – as has already been intimated - that it was only a critical realist approach which could adequately allow for the investigation of the individual, group, organisation and societal influences which are clearly such important factors for OL. For this reason, it seemed to provide a necessarily stratified epistemological approach and this observation enabled the researcher to apply a

critical realist approach with the satisfaction of believing that the characteristics which make it credible as a general framework for investigating social phenomena retained their credibility within the context of this study.

Research strategy

Ontological commitments will feed into the ways in which research questions are formulated and research is carried out (Bryman and Bell, 2003) but an alignment with a philosophical position is not a blueprint for a research strategy (Mason, 2002), and may be seen as the ‘bridge’ between activities at the conceptual and empirical levels (Ghuri and Gronhaug, 2005).

In the light of this general position, it is not surprising that Thomas (2004) points out that one difficulty with the contemporary state of realism in management studies is that relatively little guidance is given on the implications of the epistemology for the conduct of research. However, as May (2001) recognises, one task of researchers within the tradition is to uncover the structures of social relations in order to understand why we have the policies and practices that we do.

As outlined in Chapter 1 the questions guiding this study were:

1. In what form does any OL occur in the UK civil service?
2. What impact does the diversity of work tasks in the UK civil service have on OL?
3. How do factors unique to the UK public sector impact upon OL?
4. What possibilities are there for enhancing OL practices in the UK public sector?

All of these questions are concerned with what occurs, or could occur, in specific contexts. It followed that the research strategy adopted needed to be capable of investigating context-specific complexity caused by interactions between and within individuals, groups, the organisation and wider society. The research strategy most capable of doing this was a case study approach because, as Stake (1995) points out, case study research is concerned with the complexity and nature of the particular case in question. Moreover, because a case study entails detailed investigation of a

complex entity or process, it can generate theoretical insights that are closely grounded in real experience (Thomas, 2004).

From the literature reviewed, it was apparent that little research on OL had been undertaken within the UK civil service. As the Welsh Government undertook a wide range of central government activities, it was considered to provide a suitable research setting for gathering rich data which had the potential to provide insights relating to a range of central government activities. The researcher formed the view that the potential for a case study approach to investigate the degree of complexity necessary would be enhanced by considering three specific areas of the organisation which were influenced by particular characteristics which - based on the literature reviewed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 - would be likely to influence the way in which learning takes place.

It was recognised that the Welsh Government's activities were diverse and could be categorised in many different ways. The researcher was keen to take a strategic approach to selecting areas to focus on with the aim, through sampling, of producing a relevant range of contexts and phenomena which would make strategic and possibly cross contextual comparisons possible in order to build well founded arguments (Mason, 2002). Mason (2002) points out that in some forms of qualitative research investigation is likely to be complex, nuanced, situated and contextual. This was considered to be the case in relation to the phenomena under investigation in this study so it was thought that sampling across a range of contexts would increase the chances of being able to use data generated to understand how things work in specific contexts and how things work differently or similarly in other relevant contexts (Mason, 2002).

It was identified that the most relevant features to be concerned with were the operation of established administrative processes, the development of new high profile arrangements and professional support. Identifying these features as the most relevant to ensure focus on emerged from considering the factors which are identified within existing literature as having key influences on OL. It was thought that the operation of established administrative processes would provide insights in relation to the impact of bureaucratic process, relative stability, non-political scrutiny and a focus

on customer service provision. It was thought that the activity of developing new high profile arrangements would provide insights in relation to how learning occurs in an environment where new issues are being faced on a day-to-day basis which is of significant interest to ministers and politicians more widely. Lastly, it was thought that professional support activities would provide insights in relation to the impact on OL of the functioning of professional groups.

It followed that it was considered appropriate to identify three areas of the Welsh Government which each displayed one set of these features and to adopt these as separate case study settings. The area chosen which operated established administrative processes was the Rural Division, the area chosen which developed new high profile arrangements was the Scrutiny Division and Constitutional Division with the Programmes Department, and the area chosen providing professional support was the Legal Department. The case study areas had different names within the Welsh Government, but these descriptors have been used in this thesis to simplify terminology. The areas are from hereon referred to as 'Rural', 'Programmes' and 'Legal'.

The possibility of examining more than one case within the context of a case study strategy is recognised widely (Robson, 1993; Yin, 1994; Thomas, 2004; Stake, 2003). Stake (2003) suggests that collective cases are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding and possibly better theorising about a larger collection of cases. This wider benefit was recognised as being relevant to this study because the findings from the three cases were thought to collectively provide an understanding of learning practices in areas undertaking activities which are typically instrumental to the functioning of central government within the UK and public administration more generally. Taken separately, the areas operating established administrative processes and providing professional support have important characteristics which are also shared by administrators and professional groups respectively in numerous settings outside of the public sector. The view that instrumental case studies of this kind can be undertaken to provide insights or to redraw generalisations is supported by Stake (2003) who also suggests that cases are of secondary interest as they play a supportive role to facilitate our understanding of something else.

Saunders et al (2000) and Bryman and Bell (2003) also suggest that the possibility for case study researchers to claim a degree of theoretical generalisability can be facilitated by the use of collective case studies, but Thomas (2004) highlights that some critics of case studies argue that they are inherently flawed because it is impossible to generalise from them. It seems that there is an important distinction to be drawn between obtaining insights (including theoretical insights) to facilitate our understanding of something else and generalising more broadly. It was recognised that in case study research the search for particularity competes with the search for generalisability as what should be said about a single case is quite different from what should be said about all cases (Stake, 2003).

As theory was considered during the process of selecting cases, it was thought that there would be a resultant increased likelihood of being able to analyse the findings within the context of existing theoretical propositions to establish whether or not findings were supportive or dismissive of those propositions. In turn, it was considered that this would enable a greater degree of theoretical generalisability to be claimed where it could be shown that there were at least no examples of opposing findings in similar contexts.

Research methods: Justification for use

Bryman (1988b) argues that generating good research requires the selection of methods with consideration for the research problems posed. While agreeing with this, the researcher felt that it was important to firstly consider what his chosen philosophical approach of critical realism might mean for the choice of research methods.

Despite being grounded in rigorous philosophical principles, realist methodology does not countenance the methodological imperialism of the scientific and interpretative paradigms (Thursfield and Hamblett, 2004). Thus, methods must be appropriate to the nature of the object we study and the purpose and expectation of our inquiry (ibid). It is also important to recognise that the variety of possible objects of study in social science stretches beyond the scope of a single model of research (Sayer, 1992).

In general, realism does not support one or other particular kind of research technique exclusively, but allows researchers to be selective (Ackroyd, 2004). However, as has been described, a central issue in critical realism is the active role of the human agent – but this is with reference to their interaction with an independent external reality which can constrain or facilitate their actions. It follows that, within a critical realist framework, research methods used need to uncover observable structures and subjectively experienced social phenomena. While considering the suitability of a range of possible methods, the distinction which Gill and Johnson (1997) make between nomothetic and ideographic methods was useful. The former aim to provide explanation via analysis of causal relationships and explanation by covering laws (etic), and the latter aim to provide explanation of subjective meaning systems and explanations of understanding (emic) (ibid). The researcher formed the view that ideographic methods were more suitable for fulfilling the aims of the study because of their potential for uncovering and understanding social processes and interactions. The researcher noted that this choice was consistent with many realist researchers who prefer qualitative techniques (Ackroyd, 2004).

The ideographic method of qualitative interviews, combined with an element of documentary analysis, was considered to be most appropriate for investigating the phenomena most important to the study. This was because qualitative interviews allow for understanding to develop of relevant structures and agents, and how they are mediated to shape behaviour. Documents allow for an understanding of structures to be gained in ‘official’ terms. A fuller explanation for the selection and use of these two methods is provided below.

While making this selection, the researcher was conscious that his selection of methods was not necessarily consistent with those chosen by the majority of previous researchers in the OL field. Bapuji and Crossan (2004) reviewed 55 papers which were published in the OL field between 1990 and 2002 and which were based on empirical studies. Of these, they point out that 43 used quantitative research methods, 10 used qualitative methods and 2 used both. Bapuji and Crossan (2004) explain that the research which aimed to develop understanding of the learning phenomenon itself tended to use qualitative methods – or a mixture of quantitative and qualitative

methods – to get closer to the phenomenon. This highlighted to the researcher that his choice of methods was more consistent with those whose research had pursued similar aims to his and this was seen as a further insight into what little empirical work of a similar type had been undertaken.

Qualitative interviews

Given the researcher's recognition that learning is a complex process emerging from mediations between agents and structures, qualitative interviews were considered to be a method having the potential to enable the researcher to identify and understand what facilitates and inhibits the learning process. When wishing to carry out qualitative interviews, researchers have a choice between a semi-structured and unstructured approach. May (2001) suggests that we can characterise interviews along a quantitative-qualitative dimension where an unstructured approach would be more purely qualitative.

Mason (2002) suggests that qualitative interviews may be used by researchers who believe that the construction of social explanation and arguments lays emphasis on depth, nuance and roundedness in data. While this might seem to be a justification for the use of the method which would be provided by those working in the social constructionist tradition, human agents are ontologically distinct in the critical realist account so it was important that they were of central concern in this study and the depth and nuance provided was recognised – with the correct framing of questions – to have the potential to uncover understanding with reference to the structural influences shaping individuals' actions and understandings. It followed that the depth of understanding which could be gained from qualitative interviews was seen as essential to understanding how properties emerging from agents and structures are mediated. As Thomas (2004) points out, critical realists do not assume that the outside world can be known directly without any interpretation on the knower's part as they share with constructionists the idea that the world is not inherently meaningful but is made meaningful through our interpretation of it.

Also, as the research was to focus on specific areas of the Welsh Government in which social processes affecting learning operate situationally, it was recognised that

situationally-focused questions would need to be asked in these circumstances which qualitative interviews allowed for (Mason, 2002). Although qualitative interviews have the potential to provide rich and highly illuminating material, it was acknowledged that the lack of standardisation raises concerns about reliability (Robson, 1993) but it was also identified that qualitative interviews allow for steps to be taken when questioning to achieve the same frame of reference between the questioner and questioned, thereby ameliorating problems with the way in which respondents answer questions in surveys (Thomas, 2004).

As it was important within this research to compare the data generated from one case study with that generated from the other case studies, a semi-structured approach was favoured over a completely unstructured approach. Semi-structured interviews allow people to answer more on their own terms than standardised interviews, but still provide a greater structure for comparability over that of an unfocused interview (May, 2001). Also, qualitative interviewing is heavily consuming of skills, time and effort in the analysis of the products – as well as in the planning and conducting phases (Mason, 2002) - which resulted in an element of structure being beneficial for these reasons as well.

While Mason (2002) suggests that qualitative interviews tend to direct the researcher's gaze away from visual, spatial and observational social worlds, Robson (2003) highlights the benefit of non-verbal cues possibly providing rich and highly illuminating material during interviews. It seemed to the researcher that the conclusion which could be drawn from these somewhat divergent views is that qualitative interviews are less good in this area than an ethnographic study but better than quantitative methods.

Documentary analysis

Thomas (2004) argues that documentary sources are particularly significant in management research. Researchers may trace or read aspects of the social world through documents (Mason, 2002) which was considered to be of particular importance when aiming to uncover and assess the structures underlying social understandings and interactions. Also, it was recognised that documents can tell us a

great deal about the way in which events are constructed (May, 2001) and provide useful insights into organisational events and processes (Gill and Johnson, 1997).

One of the main strengths of documents when working in the critical realist tradition is that they help with a key question, which is identified by Johnson and Duberley (2000), of how it can be known whether the intransitive essences (socially) constructed by scientists are mere fictions of their imagination or are real 'non-empirical' structures or 'generative' mechanisms. While the process of retrodution is likely to involve digging deeper than documents which exist at the level of the organisation to identify causal powers, documents were identified as something which could be used to support analyses of causal explanations made by the researcher.

Yin (1994) suggests that the most important use of documents in case studies is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources and Mason (2002) suggests that, in particular, documents can usefully inform qualitative projects where interviews are chosen as the primary method. One of the principal reasons for using documents in this study was to identify officially prescribed practices and behaviours contained within them and then compare those with actual practices and behaviours occurring as identified from interviews. It was thought that this would provide a useful indication of the level of commitment to corporate policies and of the likely effort required to implement any necessary changes which were relevant to the research questions.

In more practical terms, documents were also used because it was thought that a complete understanding of key organisational processes and stated commitments would not be available from other sources so they provided a way of gaining access to a set of processes which could not be observed without recourse to verbal description or reconstruction (Mason, 2002). Also, in view of the scope of the study, the efficiency of obtaining data from documents made the method attractive.

While recognising the advantages of referring to documents, the researcher was acutely aware that a high degree of sophistication and scepticism should be exercised in the reading and interpretation of them (Mason, 2002). Scott (1990) proposes that documents should be evaluated in terms of their authenticity, credibility in terms of

the nature and extent of biases the author has brought to the document, representativeness if generalisation is being aimed for and meaning. This was considered to be sound advice as was Yin's (1994) observations that it is important when reviewing documents to understand that they were written for some specific purpose and for some specific audience, and May's (2001) point that we should not assume that documents are neutral artefacts from the past. As documents considered in the study had been produced for specific purposes, the researcher was conscious at the outset of the need to take these factors into account when analysing them.

Although some of the benefits of using documents mentioned above appear to envisage a contrary position, it was recognised that scrutinising large numbers of documents can be very time consuming and labour intensive, as well as intellectually challenging (Mason, 2002). Other difficulties which documents present the researcher with were acknowledged as being retention by organisations, and inconsistent recording and validity as a result of mistakes and misrepresentations (Thomas (2004) but these problems were not thought to be very prevalent in relation to their use in this study.

Research methods: Application

Preliminary phase

It was thought important to initially gain an understanding of the views and intentions held by the organisation at a corporate level. This was considered to be important because it was envisaged that, in order to answer the research questions, it would be important to have data which would make it possible to assess where any differences between practices and OL existed.

It was recognised that the analysis of certain organisation-wide documents would be a helpful starting point so the organisation's Learning and Development Strategy, documentation relating to the business design and documentation relating to the staff performance management process were considered in the first instance. However, for many of the reasons discussed above about the shortcomings of relying on documents and because it was considered necessary to understand the views and intentions held

by those possessing the power to influence factors affecting learning, a total of 8 key individuals in possession of such power were identified and interviewed. Within the Welsh Government, these learning influencers included the:

- Permanent Secretary;
- Director of Human Resource Department;
- Director of Corporate Information and Services Department;
- Director of the Department of Public Services and Performance;
- Director of Business Development Department;
- Director of Public Service Management Wales; and
- Head of Human Resource Strategy and Organisation Development.

These interviews were carried out in 2008 before the structure which emerged at the time of the main phase of the research, and described in Chapter 6 (Understanding the Welsh Government Context), as it existed at 31 March 2011. However, the same person continued to be Permanent Secretary and both the Director of Human Resource Department and the Director of Business Development Department were appointed as Director Generals in the new structure. The Director of Public Service Management Wales, and the Head of Human Resource Strategy and Organisation Development continued to occupy the same roles.

Also, because initiatives being driven by the Cabinet Office in Whitehall had the potential to impact upon thinking in the Welsh Government, the person leading on matters related to OL in the Cabinet Office was also interviewed.

The researcher recognised that, like any primary data collection method, the effectiveness of qualitative interviews would be dependent upon the appropriateness of the question posed in order to gather the data necessary for answering the research questions. With the research questions at the forefront of his mind, the researcher developed the questions at Appendix 1.

The findings of the preliminary phase are reported in Chapter 6.

Main phase

The main phase involved gathering data within the three areas of the organisation which had been selected to focus on – including Rural, Programmes and Legal. The approach taken to use qualitative interviews and documentary analysis to gather data in these case study areas was as follows.

Qualitative interviews

A number of issues required careful consideration before undertaking qualitative interviews in the three case study areas. As in the preliminary phase, the researcher recognised that the effectiveness of qualitative interviews would be dependent upon the appropriateness of the question posed in order to gather the data necessary for answering the research questions and - with the research questions in mind - developed the questions at Appendix 2. A pilot study which involved interviewing 4 members of Welsh Government staff was then undertaken. This pilot study was very effective, and resulted in data being yielded which was relevant to the research questions and useful in gaining the understanding required to answer them. However, the pilot study also resulted in some changes being made to a number of questions because it became apparent during the interviews that the questions could be made clearer.

After the questions were refined as set out at Appendix 3, steps were taken to determine who should be included in the interview sample for each of the three case studies which were undertaken one by one. As has been intimated previously, the researcher was conscious that the predominant logic in qualitative sampling is not inherently to achieve empirical representation of a wider universe as is the case in quantitative forms of sampling (Mason, 2002). In the same way as it was considered appropriate to apply a strategic logic to the selection of the three areas of the organisation in which data was to be gathered, it was considered important to base the selection of people to be interviewed on a strategic logic. Mason's (2002) argument that sampling is linked to the process of generating theory and explanation inductively from or through data was seen to have equal relevance and importance when selecting individuals to be interviewed as for selecting the areas of the organisation from where

they would be drawn. As Mason (2002) also suggests, it is always important in qualitative research to consider what it is that a sample is wanted to do in the context of a particular project.

When considering the selection of interviewees in this way, the researcher recognised that the usefulness and meaningfulness of the conventional classification of people which use characteristics or attributes such as age, gender, ethnicity or social class needed to be questioned (Mason, 2002) and not necessarily be viewed as useful classifications to seek varied inclusions of. Instead, the researcher considered what existing OL-related literature and the interviews already undertaken with organisation-wide learning influencers during the preliminary phase had suggested might be important issues affecting individual and collective learning. In terms of an individual's background, important factors affecting learning had been suggested to include educational background, and length of time in organisation and present role. In terms of an individual's work context, grade, strength of team-based working and the extent to which work practices were procedural were factors which had a relevance to learning.

In order to select people who varied as widely as possible in respect of these features, the researcher informed the manager in each research area of the individual features of interest and through discussion and agreement identified – insofar as was possible – people who, collectively, varied in relation to them. The researcher recognised that this approach allowed some scope for managers to exclude any individuals who they did not wish to be included in the sample but, as he was himself in possession of limited knowledge of individuals in the work area and because he needed to agree the access arrangements with managers, the researcher felt that this was the best possible approach.

Having established the approach to selecting people, the researcher then considered how many should be included in the sample for each case study. The numbers in each area of the organisation being focused on varied from 490 in Rural, to 33 in Programmes, to 118 in Legal but the size of the population of each of these areas was not the key determinant for selecting any particular number because - when using a theoretical or purposive sampling strategy – whether or not the sample is big enough

to be statistically representative of a total population is not the major concern (Mason, 2002). Rather, the researcher considered it more appropriate to discuss with the managers which people displayed the aforementioned features of interest and to then select as many people as was necessary to provide variations in relation to each. This accords with Robson's (1993) advice of selecting individuals varying widely on the characteristics of interest when selecting a heterogeneous sample.

While undertaking this process, Mason's (2002) observation that answering research questions usually involves making comparisons of some kind and that it is necessary to ask whether meaningful comparisons with the number and range you have was borne in mind. This led to 14 being selected for interview in Rural, 13 in Programmes and 13 in Legal. However, while the researcher considered it appropriate to select an initial sample in this way, he was aware that data generation and data analysis are to be viewed dynamically and interactively in theoretical or purposive sampling (Mason, 2002). This led to him being mindful of Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame's (1981) suggestion that the size of the sample is dictated by the social process under scrutiny which means that it is not necessary to continue gathering data after a theory-saturation point is reached which is when data begins to stop telling you anything new about the social process under scrutiny (Mason, 2002). The researcher felt that this point was being approached when coming to the end of interviewing the selected samples in each case study area.

Documentary analysis

It was identified that a small number of documents had the potential to be useful at the level of the three individual areas being focused on. The researcher used the same strategic logic to select documents for examination, as described above for selecting the three areas of the organisation to focus on and people to be interviewed. Within the three areas of the organisation, documents were considered to have the potential to assist with answering the research questions by determining how organisational processes supported learning at the individual level. In Rural, this led to the examination of divisional business and training plans - and reports produced following pause and review exercises. In Legal, a report produced following a review

of training and development was examined. No relevant documentation was identified in Programmes.

The findings from the main phase are reported in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

Quality issues

The decisions which were necessary to select a strategy, methods, documents, people to be interviewed and lines of questioning during the process of developing the design described above were taken by the researcher because he believed that they represented the best courses of action for answering the research questions within the constraints of the study. The researcher was concerned to produce a design which had the potential to yield the best possible outcomes and when doing so considered how the quality of the research might be judged.

Thomas (2004) suggests that five key questions which can be used to assess whether research is good or poor. These are: is the topic of investigation important; would the same results be obtained if the investigation were to be repeated by different researchers using the same methods (reliability); does the evidence reflect the reality under investigation (validity); do the results apply beyond the specific situation investigated (generalisability); and has sufficient detail been provided on the way the evidence was produced for the credibility of the research to be assessed (reporting)? It seems that the answers to these questions depend partly on how research is designed and partly on how data collected are analysed.

The reasons why the topic under investigation is important has been explained in the introduction to this thesis (Chapter 1). In terms of reliability, in qualitative research of this kind the findings are not necessarily intended to be repeatable as they reflect the reality at the time they were collected in a situation that may be subject to change (Marshall and Rossman, 1999) and in practice is very likely to change. In terms of whether the evidence reflects the reality under investigation, the researcher endeavoured to select documents and interviewees and to design questions in a way which he believed had the best possible chance of extracting data which reflects reality but this question depends heavily on the data analysis process. The question of

whether the results would be capable of being generalised was an integral consideration when considering the selection of areas of the Welsh Government to focus on and theoretical generalisability was aimed for, as discussed above.

As Bryman and Bell (2003) point out, some have sought to apply the concepts of reliability and validity to the process of qualitative research but others argue that the grounding of these concepts in quantitative research renders them inapplicable to - or inappropriate for - qualitative research. The researcher considered Mason's (2002) view to be appropriate which is that the ideas lying behind the concepts of validity, generalisability and reliability should not be abandoned by qualitative researchers because they have a usefulness expressed in the broad message that qualitative researchers should be accountable, and that research should be rigorous and of high quality. Mason (2002) goes on to argue that, crucially, qualitative researchers need to engage with the question of how they can make a convincing case for their argument and explanations. The quality of data should be high in qualitative research as a result of a typically extended immersion in the field (Silverman, 2005).

Perhaps in recognition of the importance of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that each criterion which has been developed predominantly as a means of assessing the quality of quantitative research has a parallel with what they argue are more suitable criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that credibility (how believable are the findings?) parallels with internal validity, transferability (do the findings apply to other contexts?) parallels with external validity, dependability (are the findings likely to apply at other times?) parallels with reliability and confirmability (has the investigator allowed his or her values to intrude to a high degree?) parallels with objectivity. While this appears to be a useful alternative set of terminology or criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, it does imply that the sentiment of the established criteria for assessing quantitative is the correct starting point for assessing the quality of qualitative research and the researcher did not consider this to be appropriate.

While acknowledging that an anecdotal approach to the use of data in relation to conclusions or explanations in qualitative research has caused disquiet by the

representativeness or generality of fragments rarely being addressed (Bryman, 1988a), the researcher felt that the fundamental differences in the purpose and nature of qualitative research gives rise to the need for a more fundamentally different starting point. Richardson (1994) offers the idea of crystallisation as a better lens through which to view qualitative research which recognises the many facets of any given approach to the social world as a fact of life. As Richardson (1994) explains, what we see when we view a crystal depends on how we view it and how we hold it up to the light or not which leads to us being provided with a deepened, complex and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic with the result that – paradoxically – we know more and doubt what we know.

Thinking of qualitative research in these terms makes Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion that asking how believable findings are to assess credibility to be reasonable as long as it is, in Janesick's (2003) terms, understood that qualitative researchers do not claim that there is only one way of interpreting an event. This leads to the key consideration being whether an explanation fits a description. In order to make explanations credible the researcher ensured that he was reflective about the implications of methods selected, his own values and biases. This is discussed in more detail below.

In terms of transferability and dependability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) do not appear to recognise that whether or not the findings apply in other contexts is not always a principal concern for qualitative researchers and the nature of the phenomena under investigation is likely to change constantly in response to often subtle influences. When using a case study, the value is often in its uniqueness so reliability in the traditional sense of replicability is pointless (Janesick, 2003). However, in this study, it has already been explained that a degree of theoretical generalisability is possible so the findings have a degree of transferability in this sense.

In terms of confirmability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) seem to imply that it is inappropriate for a researcher to allow his or her values to intrude. As mentioned, the researcher believes that – as it is often difficult to make sense of phenomena under investigation in qualitative research without personal characteristics and biases having an influence – being reflective throughout the process and giving explicit explanations

for descriptions improves credibility. Therefore, confirmability does not necessarily follow from the maximisation of objectivity in the way suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and it seems that there is a balance to be struck between subjectivity and objectivity. Most importantly, any subjectivity needs to be made explicit wherever possible which the researcher was committed to doing.

Reflexivity considerations

The importance of asking questions of reflexivity while engaging with qualitative data is highlighted by Patton (2002), and there has in more recent years been greater awareness and acknowledgement of the role of the researcher in the construction of knowledge (Bryman, 2004). The focus of reflexivity considerations is on the way in which a researcher's own subjectivity impacts upon the way in which an investigation is conducted (Sim and Wright, 2000). A researcher's own subjectivity is a reflection of his/her location in time and social space (Bryman, 2004).

In this study, the researcher was acutely aware of his status as an employee of the Welsh Government for the duration of the research and, overall, the researcher aimed to retain a balanced focus recognising – as Patton (2002) stresses – that complete objectivity is impossible and that pure subjectivity undermines credibility. The researcher wished to maximise his ability to engage with the data objectively and – due to the size and dispersed nature of the organisation - the researcher was able to seek authorisation to undertake research in areas other than where he worked. This enabled the researcher to interview people with whom he was not engaged with as part of his day-to-day working life and he believes that this minimised any prospect of interviewees not feeling able to speak freely.

While taking a semi-structured approach to interviews, the researcher ensured that freedom and scope were provided for interviewees to speak freely about issues they wished to focus on which ensured that interviews were not inappropriately steered by him. On reflection, the researcher recognises that there was potential for interviews to be concerned about speaking freely to a colleague working within the same organisation. However, on balance, as evidenced through many of the candid quotes contained within Chapters 6-9 of this thesis, the researcher believes that him being an

employee of the organisation enabled interviewees to speak more freely because they were less concerned about confidentiality issues than they would have been if they had been interviewed by someone external to the organisation. The researcher believes that this has enhanced the insights provided by the study.

The researcher also sought to minimise the imposition of his own understanding of organisational life while interpreting data. Care was taken to interpret what individuals had conveyed and to understand what they had meant and/or felt. The researcher believes that his understanding of jargon used and the overall context as an employee of the organisation reduced the risk of him misunderstanding points being made and, again, he believes that this improves the reliability of the research. While interpreting data, the researcher was able to firstly consider what interviewees had sought to convey and then provide some insights into why they were doing so to enrich understanding. This was especially important while working from a critical realist perspective. In this respect, the researcher's personal experiences and insights were important parts of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomena (Patton, 2002).

Ethical considerations

While gathering data, the researcher was concerned to ensure that ethical standards were upheld at all times. Ethics are the moral principals or values that influence the way researchers conduct research activities and the researcher-subject relationship is the most sensitive one in the process of research in business studies (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005).

The researcher felt that an important starting point was to acknowledge that social life, while illuminated by social research, does not depend on it (May, 2001). It was certainly true that the research subjects in this research were not depending on the research in any way and it was feasible that they could have lost more than they would have gained. The loss of the research subjects' time as a result of participating in interviews was necessary for the research to be undertaken, but the researcher wanted to ensure that participants did not lose in other ways and wished to deliver any benefits possible. This case study was similar to others in that it had an intense

interest in personal views and circumstances – albeit that they were work-related. The researcher was conscious that those whose lives and expression are portrayed can risk exposure and embarrassment - as well as a loss of standing, employment and self esteem (Stake, 2003).

While the consequences of participation in this research would be highly unlikely to have caused the more serious of these consequences, it was recognised that participants risked embarrassment if they made personal comments about colleagues and if these comments were made known to those colleagues. To ensure that such embarrassment did not occur, the researcher gave participants a consent form before interviews commenced which assured them that any information provided would only be used anonymously and an opportunity was provided for any questions to be asked. At the end of interviews, a further opportunity for participants to ask any questions was provided and they were invited to contact the researcher in the future.

The researcher was also mindful that interviewees can find some questions asked unsettling (Bryman and Bell, 2003) and took steps to minimise the possibility of this happening. These steps included discussing draft questions in detail with supervisors and responding to comments made by them, and asking participants in the pilot study at the beginning of the main phase of the research if they felt comfortable with the questions. Participants confirmed that they did.

Before the primary data collection commenced, approval from Cardiff Business School's Ethics Committee was secured.

Summary and conclusion

This chapter firstly considered philosophical issues guiding the approach to social science research generally and this study in particular. The researcher explained his belief that social phenomena is influenced by things which mankind, either individually or collectively, cannot understand fully but which efforts can be made to know more about in order to maximise understanding. His belief that it is inevitable for social outcomes to be shaped by both social structures and human agents was stated and critical realism's distinct focus on each, and the concern it has for the way

in which each interacts with the other, was thought to give it particular strengths - especially when Archer's (2003) notion of the 'internal conversation' is deployed as the basis for understanding how they are mediated. Recognising that critical realism might be conceptualised as an ontological position towards the centre of a positivism-constructionism continuum, an explanation for the researcher's rejection of positivism and constructionism was provided. It was explained that the researcher felt that it was only critical realism which could adequately allow for the investigation of the full range of issues impacting on social phenomena and it was demonstrated why this was the case in relation to specific issues affecting OL.

Secondly, this chapter has provided a justification for the adoption of a case study research strategy in this study. The need for a research strategy capable of investigating context-specific complexity caused by interactions between and within individuals, groups, the organisation and wider society was explained and a case study approach was argued to be most suitable for this. Taking a strategic approach, the rationale for selecting three areas of the Welsh Government was explained which was concerned with producing a relevant range of contexts and phenomena to make strategic and cross-contextual comparisons to build well founded arguments. This resulted in the selection of an area which was concerned with operating established administrative practices, an area focused on developing new high profile arrangements and an area providing professional support. In terms of the possibilities for generalising from the cases selected, it was recognised that insights could be obtained to facilitate understanding of something else.

Thirdly, a justification for the use of selected research methods was outlined. It was explained that ideographic methods, rather than nomothetic methods, were preferred because of their aim to provide explanation of subjective meaning systems and explanations of understanding. It followed that the method of qualitative interviews, along with an element of documentary analysis, was considered to be an approach which could most effectively investigate the phenomena of greatest important to this study. These methods were identified as not being the preferred choice of the majority of previous researchers in the OL field and this was seen as a partial explanation for the relatively small amount of similar work being done in the field. The depth and nuance provided by qualitative interviews was seen to be a particular

strength of the method, as was the potential they offered for asking situationally-focused questions. Documents were predominantly seen as useful to corroborate and augment data gathered during interviews and it was recognised that an analysis of them needed to take account of the fact that they were produced for some specific purpose and for some specific audience.

After justifying the selection of these research methods, a description of how they were applied was provided in the fourth key area of the chapter. This description covered how the methods were used during a preliminary phase which sought to gain an understanding of the views and intentions held by the organisation at a corporate level. During this phase, certain relevant corporate documents were analysed and key individuals in possession of the power to influence factors affecting learning were interviewed. In the main phase, a small number of staff were initially interviewed during a pilot phase to enable questions to be refined before interviewing staff across the three selected areas of the Welsh Government. The people to be interviewed in the main phase were selected using a strategic logic which was based on what existing literature and interviews in the preliminary phase had suggested might be important issues affecting individual and collective learning. To complement data gathered from the interviews, some key documents were examined.

The fifth section of the chapter explained that decisions taken by the researcher when developing the design were taken because he believed that they represented the best course of action for answering the research questions. A number of possible ways for assessing the quality of qualitative research were discussed and, while being committed to ensuring high levels of rigour and quality, the appropriateness of criterion for assessing the quality of qualitative research which took criteria developed for the purpose of assessing quantitative research as a starting point was questioned. The concern for adopting a reflexive approach is stated, and giving explicit explanations for descriptions when analysing data is committed to and seen as an appropriate way of dealing with concerns associated with the prevalence of subjectivity in qualitative research.

The sixth section of the chapter focused on reflexivity considerations with a particular focus on how the researcher's own subjectivity impacted upon the way in which the

investigation was conducted. The researcher's awareness of his status as an employee of the Welsh Government for the duration of the research was made clear and it was explained that, in order to maximise his ability to engage with the data objectively, the researcher sought authorisation to undertake research in areas of the Welsh Government other than where he worked. To facilitate the achievement of objectivity, the freedom and scope provided for interviewees to speak freely about issues during the semi-structured interviews was described and the researcher's belief that his status as an employee of the organisation enabled interviewees to speak more freely was explained. Further, the care that was taken to interpret what individuals had conveyed and to understand what they had meant and/or felt was covered.

Lastly, the seventh area of the chapter covered ethical considerations associated with the research. It was explained that the researcher's starting point was to acknowledge that social life, while illuminated by social research, does not depend on it and it was acknowledged that participants risked embarrassment if they made personal comments about colleagues during interviews and if those comments were made known to those colleagues. The researcher ensured that this was avoided by assuring anonymity and ensuring that it was upheld. Steps taken to develop questions which would not unsettle interviewees were also described.

CHAPTER 6 – UNDERSTANDING THE WELSH GOVERNMENT CONTEXT

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an insight into the context that shaped the experiences of staff working in the Welsh Government. The context has a number of unique features because, as a central government administration in the UK, the Welsh Government is a relatively young organisation with its roots in the much older UK civil service which it remained part of. The chapter is split into two parts.

Part 1 provides an overview of the UK civil service, the devolution process and the Welsh Government civil service. It is explained that the UK civil service functions without a single codified constitution - and is instead characterised by an adherence to codes, doctrines and conventions. In order to understand the UK civil service's practices, it is important to first gain an appreciation of past developments which have shaped it into what now prevails. Therefore, the events since the mid nineteenth century which have influenced the development of the UK civil service are outlined initially. It is apparent from this outline that prominent political figures have influenced developments, as well as practices in the private sector which have been used by some as a reference point for assessments and commentary. This overview of the UK civil service's development is followed by a description of its contemporary characteristics.

While gaining an appreciation of the UK civil service is a key step towards understanding the Welsh Government's civil service, it does not provide the full picture. This is because the process of devolving a range of governmental function and law making powers to Wales, which were previously exercised at a UK level, had a profound impact on the Welsh Government's civil service. An explanation of the devolution process shows that the journey to Welsh devolution spanned three decades and that the pace of change during the first decade of devolution beginning at the end of the last millennium had been rapid and fundamental in respect of the civil service's functioning. After detailing the devolutionary process, the Welsh Government's civil service is described as it existed in 2011 which provides the best possible insight into

how it was comprised when the data for the main phase of the empirical research was gathered.

In Part 2, specific influences on learning are focused on. The various initiatives and documents which covered learning matters are reviewed which shows that numerous organisation-wide strategies and prescribed practices were in place, and that various public sector reform programmes recognised the importance of effective learning. Finally, the perspectives on learning among eight organisation-wide learning influencers are presented which emerged from interviews. These perspectives provide some interesting insights into how these individuals conceptualised learning, the learning stimulants they recognised, the learning practices they had or were influencing, the successes they recognised, the challenges they thought existed, the impacts of accountability and scrutiny on learning they identified, and the learning which they explained had taken place from external sources.

Part 1: UK civil service, devolution and the Welsh Government civil service

Development of UK civil service

Modernisers have concluded that the contemporary UK civil service is the outcome of a continuous process of evolutionary reform (Burnham and Pyper, 2008) so it is important to consider the civil service's historic development in order to understand its present state and, within this study, to appreciate the backdrop to (especially longer serving) individuals' thinking and internal deliberations about contemporary issues.

As Burnham and Pyper (2008) explain, the origins of the UK civil service lie in the sets of courtiers surrounding the early British monarchs and a special part was played in shaping the civil service by two top Treasury officials – Charles Trevelyan in the mid nineteenth century and Warren Fisher between the two world wars. Trevelyan advised that one way to reduce the growth in bureaucracy would be to recruit officials on the basis of competence (rather than on giving favours to friends and relatives of ministers and parliamentarians) and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, W. E. Gladstone, asked for a report from Trevelyan and Stafford Northcote on how to

ensure that qualified people were recruited and then encouraged to work hard (Burnham and Pyper, 2008).

The Northcote-Trevelyan report produced in 1854 suggested reforms which created the civil service in its modern form (Dowding, 1995). Northcote and Trevelyan recommended that it was better to train young men rather than those advanced in life (Hennessy, 2001) and in 1870 open competition was established as the norm (Burnham and Pyper, 2008). However, the Northcote-Trevelyan report was not implemented fully until the inter-world war period when Warren Fisher was appointed as the first Permanent Head of the Civil Service and this marked a defining stage in the emergence of a modern civil service (ibid).

Following further doubts about the efficiency of the civil service, particularly its ability to deal with modern technological society, in 1966 a Committee on the Civil Service was appointed which became known as the Fulton Committee (Dowding, 1995). The Fulton Committee report of 1968 castigated the civil service as amateur and encouraged the entry of more specialists (ibid). The report is often rightly seen as a landmark in the history of the modern civil service and its extensive recommendations were debated for decades. At the heart of the Fulton report was a desire to make Whitehall more efficient and more managerial minded (Barberis, 1996).

While much of the agenda informed by the management revolution sweeping through the business world and advocated by Fulton fell by the wayside, some significant changes were introduced by the early 1970s – including a rationalisation of the staff grading system, the beginnings of managerial training for officials, a few experiments with executive agencies, and the advent of new accountable management, planning and budgetary systems (Burnham and Pyper, 2008). However, the half-hearted introduction of Fulton's recommendations - coupled with a growing concern about the efficiency of the Whitehall machine as the number of civil servants reached 751,000 in 1976 - left the civil service exposed as being 'behind the times' when Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 (ibid).

Thatcher believed that the private sector was dynamic and efficient, while the public sector was passive and wasteful, and had a desire to stop government expansion and reverse public sector growth. She saw the civil service as a great bulwark to the large state and wanted a complete change of culture which she thought could only be brought about through institutional change (Dowding, 1995). Her reforms of the civil service were manifested both in terms of numerous variations on the themes of privatisation and contracting out and in a crusade for greater efficiency, effectiveness and economy (Drewry, 1994). In 1979, a 2.5 per cent reduction in staff expenditure was demanded and targets were set for reducing staff numbers from 732,000 to 630,000 by 1984 followed by new cuts each year until 1988 (Burnham and Pyper, 2008).

The rationale appeared to be that civil servants could be made more manageable by making them managerial and, when this failed to bring about radical cultural change, introduce the market. Thatcher proceeded by setting up a small unit in here private office under the leadership of Sir Derek Raynor which had the objective of stopping waste, and which led to the subsequent establishment of the Financial Management Unit and later the Joint Management Unit which both aimed to help departments examine all aspects of their work to improve financial management. This led to a programme of budgetary devolution and agency creation, usually referred to as the Next Steps initiative after the title of a report written under the leadership of Sir Robin Ibbs (Dowding, 1995).

The main thrust of the Next Steps programme was the break up of a unified civil service which involved developing a policy making core and a policy implementing periphery – the latter being hived off into agencies which may or may not eventually be privatised. Within three years of the start of Next Steps, over fifty per cent of civil servants had been moved into agencies which senior civil servants tended to view as change for the better, while more junior workers in the agencies tended to believe that their job security had been reduced and their workloads increased with no compensating pay rise (ibid). Across the civil service, Thatcher tried but failed to abandon the index-linking of civil servants' pensions but was more successful in matters of pay, union membership and collective bargaining. Famously, in the mid

1980s, workers at the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham were forced to renounce trade union membership (Barberis, 1996).

The number of civil servants dropped by 27 per cent between 1979 and 1994, and by October 1994 - as a result of Next Steps - the government claimed a reduction of 26,900 posts and annual savings of £410 million. A few executive agencies had been privatised and a few more were earmarked for privatisation. The transition from Thatcher to John Major as Prime Minister in 1990 made little difference to the civil service. There were relatively few upheavals in Whitehall's departmental structures under both Prime Ministers and the advent of Major's government saw no weakening in the resolve to reduce staff numbers (ibid). In Major's first year of office, the Citizen's Charter was introduced and in 1991 'Competing for Quality' was issued which required market testing and contracting out to be established across the public sector (Burnham and Pyper, 2008). In 1992, a new Financial Management Initiative (FMI) was launched which involved major changes in management at all central departments - including substantial moves towards devolved budgetary authority and accountable management. Although the FMI had a considerable impact both on the financial processes and working culture in Whitehall, its impact on the traditional style of central administration was limited because of top officials' and the Treasury's reluctance to relinquish control (Drewry, 1994). Under Major, the number of civil servants fell from 580,000 in 1990 to 495,000 in 1997 (Burnham and Pyper, 2008).

In 1997 when Labour won office under Tony Blair, there was not an intention to revert to a 'command model' - nor to pursue the Conservative line that the market was intrinsically better. Instead, a third way was sought and - similar to Thatcher and Major - Blair had units working within the Cabinet Office to promote civil service reform. The publication in 1998 of the White Paper titled 'Modern Public Services for Britain' signalled that the new government's approach was to treat the private, public and voluntary sectors on equal terms. Also, after 1997, the UK civil service adapted to the new Labour government's desire for a more informal, personalised style of administration (Burnham and Pyper, 2008).

A drive for outside blood at the top of the civil service and a systematic approach to strategic policy making characterised the first term of the Blair administration

between 1997 and 2001 (Hennessy, 2001). The 'Modernising Government' White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999) set out the details of the programme of change to be pursued by the Blair administration. It was optimistic about the ability of reform to be driven from within the public sector by suggesting that potential within the public service could be unleashed to drive forward the modernising agenda right across government. It also emphasised co-ordination of policy making across departments and with those who delivered the policies, and joined-up government (Burnham and Pyper, 2008).

Significantly, the 'Modernising Government' White Paper asserted that more new ideas and more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things were needed, and that a key principle for change was to be based on learning from experience where policy making is regarded as a continuous learning process. Further, the 'Modernising Government' White Paper stated that the public service must become a learning organisation – setting out that it needs to learn from its past successes and failures, consistently benchmark itself against the best and that staff must be helped to learn new skills throughout their careers. At a more detailed level, the 'Modernising Government' White Paper went on to refer to new institutions and arrangements which had been developed to train leaders and staff in the public sector, and the civil service's commitment to a target of all its organisations becoming accredited Investors in People by 2000. All of this accorded with the Cabinet Secretary highlighting in a report to the Prime Minister the importance of life-long learning for managers and staff in the civil service (Wilson, 1999).

A few years later, the search for efficiency savings was high on the agenda which in 2003 led to the Lyons and Gershon reviews being undertaken and reporting in 2004. The Lyons review identified 20,000 posts which could be relocated to save £2 billion by 2010 and the Gershon review identified changes to departmental structures, processes and equipment that would produce efficiency gains amounting to £20 billion a year by 2008. These reviews, taken with the merger of HM Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue to form HM Revenue and Customs, were seen as the most significant restructuring of public services for a generation (Work Foundation, 2004). In addition, six agencies - mainly in the Ministry of Defence - were privatised by the Blair government (Burnham and Pyper, 2008).

As stated in the 2006 version of the UK Civil Service Code, civil servants are accountable to Ministers who in turn are accountable to Parliament (ibid) and government is held to account through the electoral process, through its own party, the mass media and the legal process (Dowding, 1995). However, one constant for the civil service since the 1960s has been the need for it to make itself more answerable and accountable for its activities. The steady expansion of parliamentary scrutiny mechanisms from the late 1960s resulted in the advent of the Parliamentary Ombudsman and the emergence of new forms of House of Commons select committees which effectively extended the doctrine of ministerial accountability to civil servants (Burnham and Pyper, 2008). The growth in external civil service accountability in the 1970s in the form of accountability to Parliament, answering Members of Parliament's letters and questions, and the Parliamentary Ombudsman's activities forced senior officials and ministers to give increasing attention to what was happening further down the chain and in later years assumptions that officials have a duty of accountability to service users, clients and customers have underpinned developments including the Citizen's Charter, Government Direct and Information Age Government (ibid).

Indeed, in the period since the 1980s, the civil service has had to adapt to a slow but significant expansion of open government which culminated with the commencement of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 in January 2005. This new openness has been a major challenge given the underlying culture of secrecy within the civil service and it created the certain knowledge for officials that the documents they create and process might become the subject of freedom of information requests at some future point (Burnham and Pyper, 2008). Burnham and Pyper (2008) suggest that the impact of this knowledge on the culture and working habits of the civil service remains to be seen, but it is clear that space for officials to do anything out of the public's gaze has been reduced significantly. However, despite a general view prevailing that freedom of information would have impacted on the way in which civil servants conducted their work, Hazell et al (2010) undertook an empirical study in Whitehall and found that civil servants were no less willing to give free and frank advice to ministers.

Key characteristics of the contemporary UK civil service

On 31 March 2011, 498,433 people were employed across the UK civil service. Just over half (53%) of employees were women, the proportion from minority ethnic backgrounds was 9% and the proportion declaring themselves as disabled was 8%. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of civil servants worked outside London and the South East of England, with 6.7% working in Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

The UK civil service is set apart from the administrative systems found in comparable liberal democratic states where codified constitutions and governing statutes are in place. Instead there is an adherence to codes, doctrines and conventions, and it functions without a single codified constitution. Most obviously, in contrast to the USA, UK civil servants are characterised by non-partisan and permanent careers (Burnham and Pyper, 2008) which means they are expected to serve ministers of any government in office with non-partisan loyalty (Drewry, 1994). In contrast to the European tradition of intensive and highly specialised training for future civil servants, the majority of those in the senior ranks of the UK civil service are people with liberal arts backgrounds supplemented by relatively small amounts of professional training (Burnham and Pyper, 2008). As generalists, civil servants in the UK are trained and socialised to apply general skills of policy and politics – rather than in the detail of their policy sector or of any one academic discipline (Greer and Jarman, 2010).

Civil servants in Whitehall have been characterised by the attributes of internal labour markets and control over the hiring and promotion of staff, generalism, lifelong career paths, Oxbridge education and white male staff. However, these descriptions do not particularly resemble the modern civil service in Whitehall (Greer and Jarman, 2010). While a large majority of senior civil servants are male, only 8% of a sample of 306 senior civil servants in Whitehall considered by Greer and Jarman (2010) were male, Oxbridge graduates and lifetime civil servants.

In the UK both ministers and civil servants are servants of the Crown but ministers, in whom the prerogatives of the Crown are vested, are dominant. In a memorandum issued in 1987 by Robert Armstrong (then Cabinet Secretary) titled ‘The Duties and

Responsibilities of Civil Servants in Relation to Ministers', it was made clear that the civil service has no constitutional personality separate from the elected government of the day (Drewry, 1994). All UK civil servants are expected to perform their roles with a dedication to the core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality (Cabinet Office, 2006).

Devolution and development of the Welsh Government civil service

Although the Welsh Government civil service served a devolved administration, it emerged from the Welsh Office and continued to exist as part of the wider UK civil service. Therefore, the civil service of the Welsh Government has been affected and shaped by developments at the UK level.

Clement Attlee's government established the Council for Wales and Monmouthshire in 1948, but it was not until 1964 that a Welsh Office came into being with just over 200 officials to start with under Jim Griffiths who was appointed in 1964 by Harold Wilson as the chief of a new Welsh Office (Hennessy, 2001). The system of devolved administration delivered by the Welsh Office, as a department of central government, facilitated the implementation of central government policy with some distinctive features reflecting local traditions and requirements (Burnham and Pyper, 2008). The Welsh Office soon became part of a familiar model of territorial government alongside Scotland and later Northern Ireland (Rawlings, 2003).

However, although it might have been a familiar model, it was not accepted universally. The 1970s saw increased electoral support for the nationalist parties in both Scotland and Wales which led to the Royal Commission on the Constitution (the Kilbrandon Commission) being established. A bitter political struggle ensued with the Wales Act 1978 coming into being which led to the people of Wales vetoing in a referendum in 1979 the devolution scheme proposed for Wales (ibid).

The significant impact of Thatcherite policies on the traditional heavy industries of coal and steel in Wales during the early 1980s stimulated awareness of the democratic deficit in Wales which was heightened as a result of successive Conservative governments being established at the UK level while Labour remained the dominant

party in Wales. There was also an increasing number of QUANGOS (QUasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental OrganisationS) established during the 1980s and 1990s which led to discontentment with governance being unaccountable (ibid).

When Labour won power at the UK level in 1997, it did so based on a manifesto including a commitment to hold referendums on devolution in both Scotland and Wales. Subsequently, referendums were held on 11 September and 18 September 1997 in Scotland and Wales respectively. A 30% swing from the 1979 referendum was required to secure a 'yes' vote in Wales which was just achieved with 50.3% voting 'yes' with a turnout of 50.1% (ibid). This might have only come to pass in Wales because people knew when casting their votes that Scotland had voted 'yes' one week earlier and that Wales would not be alone in the UK if it were to embark upon devolution.

Following the 'yes' vote in 1997, the Government of Wales Act 1998 (GOWA 1998) came into being and the National Assembly for Wales was born in 1999 following elections of Assembly Members (AMs). The National Assembly established in 1999 was a single corporate body incorporating a legislature and executive. This corporate status aligned its constitution with the standard form for local authorities, rather than the formal division of executive and legislature that is so familiar in Westminster (ibid). To support the work of the Assembly Executive Committee (later to be known as the Cabinet) a new civil service structure of departments headed by ministers was developed (Parry and MacDougal, 2005) and the establishment of the National Assembly affected the work of the civil service in Wales in a number of other ways (Burnham and Pyper, 2008) with staff increasing by 50% to 3,752 by October 2002 (Rawlings, 2003). In the devolved subject areas, it became possible to create policies and secondary legislation for Wales – rather than Welsh interests being dependent upon the former Welsh Office's ability to influence developments at a UK level. While GOWA 1998 provided a workable solution, it created a legal minefield and the experience of the Welsh Office had done little to prepare officials for the major challenges and opportunities provided (ibid).

A de facto split between a Welsh Assembly Government and an Assembly Parliamentary Service was agreed and implemented on 1 March 2002. This resulted

in the Welsh Assembly Government being proclaimed as an executive consisting of cabinet ministers and civil servants providing all the normal services of government distinct from the National Assembly consisting of AMs and the Presiding Officer etc. This was confirmed with the establishment of two separate legal entities (the Welsh Assembly Government as an executive and the National Assembly for Wales as a legislator) under the Government of Wales Act 2006 (GOWA 2006). GOWA 2006 also made it possible for the National Assembly to apply to the UK Parliament on a subject by subject basis for primary legislation making powers and for a referendum to be held to determine whether or not the National Assembly should be given primary legislation making powers in broadly specified subject areas at once. This referendum was held in March 2011 and a strong 'yes' vote was secured with 63.4% of voters supporting an extension of law making powers for the National Assembly. Following the Assembly elections in May 2011, the name of the executive was changed to 'Welsh Government'.

Alongside these developments the Welsh Assembly Government absorbed a number of QUANGOS in 2006 and 2007 which accounted for a large proportion of the staff increases. This, along with demands from the public for fresh policy initiatives, resulted in an increased volume of work for civil servants (Burnham and Pyper, 2008) which had to be picked up by an organisation which was perceived to have a lack of policy-making capacity (Rawlings, 2003). To support a First Minister and Cabinet, senior officials required a new set of strategic and co-ordination skills and the situation was made extra challenging by the novelty of coalition governments (Kirkpatrick and Pyper, 2001).

However, despite all of these challenges, a unique Welsh system of government emerged. A key part of this has been a relatively strong focus on political and administrative relationships outside, as well as inside, the Assembly. Rawlings (2003) suggests that this is 'a classic little country syndrome' which arose partly through local history and the evolving role of different sectors and diverse actors in Wales. Rawlings (2003) goes on to argue that the 'closeness of Wales' has the advantages of flexibility to cut across traditional departmental lines, responsiveness, conflict avoidance through collaborative working, inclusiveness and solidarity.

However, he also points out that partnership working can result in there being more emphasis on process rather than product and to the blurring of accountability.

Even if Rawlings is correct to speculate that partnership working might result in reduced accountability for any particular entity, devolution has increased the volume of scrutiny imposed on the civil service (Kirkpatrick and Pyper, 2001) in other ways because there is more regular ministerial questioning, an increased number of debates and a growth in scrutiny and accountability through information mechanisms (McMillan and Massey, 2004). There had also been scrutiny from Assembly committees – which gained strengthened powers in 2007 following GOWA 2006 – and various Ombudsman offices which were in 2005 merged into the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales. In addition, civil servants in Wales were subjected to the additional scrutiny which emerged as a consequence of freedom of information earlier than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. This is because progress was made further and faster than was necessary (Rawlings, 2003) by implementing a Code of Practice on Access to Information in 1999 to embed a framework similar to that set out in the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ahead of the Act's commencement on 1 January 2005. As well as these new forms of scrutiny, the Westminster-based Welsh Affairs Select Committee and the Welsh Grand have continued post devolution to scrutinise matters associated with governance in Wales.

Despite all of these developments, devolution has not been divorce from the UK and – as a junior partner in the Union – Wales needs close and continuing relations with the UK Government. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which is a multilateral agreement involving the three devolved administrations and the UK Government, established four principles of which good communication is most prominent. Central co-ordination of the relationship is through a Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) which is a forum for relationships among both political leaders within the four administrations and officials. Also, a Secretary of State for Wales has continued to sit within the UK Government Cabinet and has post devolution been said to have the roles of providing the voice of the UK Government in Wales, to be guardian of the devolution settlement and to be a voice of Wales in the UK Cabinet (*ibid*). Moreover, efforts have been made to establish links between Wales and Europe but this has not been straightforward or easy because Wales is not in itself a state within the European

Union. Writing before many of the key developments discussed above occurred (particularly GOWA 2006 and the extension of law making powers post the referendum in March 2011), Rawlings (2003) concluded that the construction of Wales' governmental constitution was flimsy because of the dependency on political and administrative goodwill. This goodwill was still required in large measure some eight years later, although the advent of primary legislation making powers across devolved areas following the referendum in 2011 certainly provided a greater ability to make progress in a much more autonomous way.

Welsh Government civil service in 2011

In order to provide the best illustration possible of the Welsh Government at the time primary data for the main phase of the study were collected, staff details as at 31 March 2011 were obtained. At this point, the total headcount was 5,809 (5,440 permanent and 369 temporary) which had declined from a total headcount of 6,445 at 31 March 2010 (5,777 permanent and 668 temporary). The significant decline between March 2010 and March 2011 occurred because of a drive to reduce staffing numbers which was achieved by terminating the employment of many temporary staff and by some permanent staff agreeing to accept early release packages.

Of the 5,809 staff employed at 31 March 2011, 2,458 were male and 3,351 female. In terms of ethnicity, of the staff who had stated their ethnic origin, 5,290 were white and 130 were from another ethnic background. Of those who had stated whether or not they considered themselves to be disabled, 250 staff said they were disabled and 5,110 said they were not. 2,346 staff were based in the Cathays Park Office, 55 staff worked primarily from home and other staff were based in a large number of varying sized offices around Wales with a very small number based in offices overseas.

The Welsh Government's civil service was headed by a Permanent Secretary who was supported by six Director Generals who each had responsibility for a department. The Permanent Secretary, Director Generals and two Non-Executive Directors formed a Strategic Delivery and Performance Board. All other staff worked in the departments led by Director Generals, except for those working in the Department of the First Minister and Cabinet, the Legal Services Department and the Office of the Permanent

Secretary. Both the Department of the First Minister and Cabinet, and the Legal Services Department, were headed by Directors who reported to the Permanent Secretary. The numbers of staff working in each department are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Welsh Government department structure and staff numbers as at 31 March 2011

Department	Number of staff
Economy and Transport	944
Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills	732
Health and Social Services	616
People, Places and Corporate Services	596
Public Services and Local Government Delivery	586
Strategic Planning, Finance and Performance	463
Sustainable Futures	1,447
Department of the First Minister and Cabinet	287
Legal Services	126
Office of the Permanent Secretary	12
Total	5,809

Part 2: Specific influences on learning

Initiatives and policies having the potential to affect OL in the Welsh Government

The Welsh Government spent circa £3 million per annum on staff training and development, the vast majority of which was delivered by a training provider under a contractual arrangement. The amount of money invested corporately had increased significantly since the early years after devolution when circa £230,000 per annum was available corporately when the total number of staff had reached around 4,000.

Specific initiatives operated within the framework of an internal Learning and Skills Strategy focused on how skills could be developed through initiatives to best deliver the identified organisational capabilities aspired for, and on building a learning culture and a supportive environment in which everyone was encouraged to accept responsibility for continuous development and in which team and individual achievements are recognised. The main vehicles outlined in the Learning and Skills Strategy for obtaining skills were joining a team dedicated to working on priority projects, becoming an ‘ambassador for change’, building links with a relevant head of

profession, attending courses at the National School of Government, attending core and specialist training modules, becoming a member of the Shadow Management Board, engaging in a leadership programme and applying for a place on the civil service fast stream programme.

In addition, in recognition of the importance of knowledge and information to developing the organisational capabilities outlined in its Business Design, the Welsh Government developed an internal Knowledge and Information Management Strategy for the period 2008-2011. Among other things, the strategy recognised that a lack of knowledge sharing would lead to a loss of expertise and a failure to maximise benefits arising from best practice. The strategy established a vision of making the right knowledge and information available and accessible to the right people, at the right time in a secure and controlled way. A key principle set out for Welsh Government staff was to share appropriate knowledge and information as the norm, and one of the three groups of actions was to develop people to facilitate the cultural change that would engage staff in the secure use of information, knowledge and performance management tools and the information and insights they provide.

It was a requirement for all staff in the Welsh Government to have a performance management plan which consisted of a set of performance objectives and competency-related behaviours which could be selected from a framework of behaviours developed for each category of job bands. Each member of staff was required to prepare an initial draft of their performance plan and then agree it with their line manager at the beginning of the reporting cycle in April each year. It was then necessary for each member of staff to record details of the activities they had performed against their agreed objectives and behaviours before having review meetings mid year in September/October and at the reporting year end in March. After each review meeting line managers were required to add comments to the report and award one of four possible performance marks.

In one section of the performance management plan form, staff were required to outline their planned learning and development activities, and then - before each review meeting with their line managers - record progress against each. There was scope for staff to outline learning and development activities which were either

related specifically to their current role, or which were related to their longer term career aspirations.

More broadly, public sector reform had been high on the agenda in Wales and the importance of learning among the workforce had been recognised. Local public service delivery came under the spotlight in a review chaired by Sir Jeremy Beecham and the landmark report in 2006 titled 'Beyond Boundaries: Citizen-Centred Public Services for Wales'. When recommending actions for all leaders of all public service organisations in Wales in order to be strong on delivery, the report recommended that leaders should create a culture which encouraged learning from best practice at every level of delivery (Beecham et al, 2006). Following the report, the Welsh Government published 'Making the Connection – Delivering Beyond Boundaries' which stressed the importance of recognising that front-line staff are often best placed to help design and deliver service improvement and that their capacity to innovate and continuously improve the way in which services are organised and delivered needed to be built. It was recognised that leaders and managers would play a pivotal role in facilitating these changes (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006).

'Making the Connections – Delivering Beyond Boundaries' also established commitments to design and deliver a suite of development programmes and learning interventions for individual managers and leaders, and to promote skill transference and improved collaboration across the public service (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006). In turn, the Public Service Management Wales (PSMW) arm of the Welsh Government developed various tools to assist individual learning and career development – including a learning journal and a guide titled 'Learning from others – igniting your career through self-development'. The guide covered coaching, mentoring, networking, learning through IT, observation and reflection, action enquiry, secondments and storytelling.

Perspectives on learning among organisation-wide 'learning influencers'

Before proceeding with the main phase of the empirical research, it was considered important in a preliminary phase to understand the views and intentions held by those possessing organisation-wide power to influence factors affecting learning. The

interviews undertaken with these learning influencers provided some interesting insights into what they considered to be important in the arena of workplace learning, the reasons why they considered learning to be important, what they were promoting, what challenges they saw and what they thought would be important in the future

A total of 8 key individuals in possession of such power were identified and interviewed. Within the Welsh Government, these included the:

- Permanent Secretary;
- Director of Human Resource Department;
- Director of Corporate Information and Services Department;
- Director of the Department of Public Services and Performance;
- Director of Business Development Department;
- Director of Public Service Management Wales; and
- Head of Human Resource Strategy and Organisation Development.

These interviews were carried out in 2008 before the structure which was in place at the time of the main phase emerged and is described earlier in this chapter as it existed at 31 March 2011. However, the same person continued to be Permanent Secretary and both the Director of Human Resource Department and the Director of Business Development Department were appointed as Director Generals in the new structure. The Director of Public Service Management Wales, and the Head of Human Resource Strategy and Organisation Development continued to occupy the same roles.

Also, because initiatives being driven by the Cabinet Office in Whitehall were likely to have some impact on thinking in the Welsh Government, the person leading on OL-related matters in the Cabinet Office was also interviewed.

Interviewees

Details of the learning influencers interviewed are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Organisation-wide learning influencer interviewees

Interviewee	Male / Female	Role*
1	Male	Board Member
2	Female	Board Member
3	Male	Board Member
4	Male	Board Member
5	Male	Learning Leader
6	Female	Board Member
7	Male	Learning Leader
8	Male	Cabinet Office Lead

Notes:

** Board Members include the Permanent Secretary, Director of Human Resources Department, Director of Corporate Information and Services Department, Director of Department of Public Services and Performance and Director of Business Development Department*

** Learning Leaders include the Director of Public Service Management Wales and Head of Human Resource Strategy and Organisation Development*

Conceptualisation of learning

The learning influencers had sophisticated views about what constitutes OL, but their interpretations of it differed. They identified a range of pressures placed on the organisation to learn, but viewed these in different ways and had different views on what the most effective stimulants for learning were.

When asked how they interpret OL, those who were Board members tended to identify a link between learning and the broad functioning of the organisation. One Board Member said

‘Organisational learning is part of just being a healthy organisation’ (Interviewee 2).

and another said

‘It’s about the ability of an organisation to develop itself, to self-start and to build on its own experiences, to learn from those experiences and to transfer them into new ways of doing things’ (Interviewee 6).

The Board Member who said the latter seemed to conceptualise OL as something stimulated internally. To some extent, this contrasts with what two other Board

members who placed a heavy emphasis on benchmarking. One Board Member stressed the need to have a focus for learning when saying

'There's no point in having an organisation which just learns.....why do you learn – you learn by aspiring to be the best, to offer the highest quality services to the citizens of Wales and the organisational learning then has a purpose' (Interviewee 2).

That same Board Member felt that many people, depending on when they had been through the education system, have not been taught how to continually learn and change and considered it important to give people the skills to become lifelong learners. Another Board Member seemed to suggest that attitude and courage are features of OL by referring to the need for learning more positively from things that go wrong, rather than looking for blame and the need to be brave enough to try new things because

'If you always do what you've always done you're not really going to change anything' (Interviewee 1).

A Learning Leader (Interviewee 7) with a strategic responsibility for the development of learning policy referred - among other things - to the importance of having a learning and development strategy in place to develop leaders, develop professions and to up-skill people across the board. This implies that he considered corporate frameworks to have the potential to stimulate learning.

Learning stimulants and development of learning practices

It was apparent that efforts had been made to link skills development to organisational needs, but it was suggested that insufficient efforts have been made to focus development on strategic political priorities which learning influencers recognised to be what the organisation should be working to deliver.

In terms of learning being promoted, it was evident that this included a mix of formal training and more informal approaches. However, some learning influencers criticised the introspective nature of learning and recognised the importance for the future of a learning environment being developed throughout the organisation. While

it was recognised that formal training is an important foundation for learning, learning influencers believed that most learning takes place on-the-job.

One Board Member, when asked if there was any pressure on staff to share knowledge, thought there was no pressure on them to share it and suggested that people are likely to see knowledge sharing as a hindrance by saying

'People have probably seen their own information as very important to them as it allows them they believe to do their job effectively and therefore sharing may hinder that process in their minds' (Interviewee 4).

Other interviewees who were asked about pressures to develop OL all felt that there was significant pressure to do so. One Board Member (Interviewee 6) suggested that the pressure within the organisation to develop. A few interviewees referred to the general pressure ministers placed on the organisation which was summed up by one Board Member who said

'Politicians are very ambitious – of course they want to achieve things quickly, their tenure is very limited so they want to move at a fast pace..... we need to learn to ensure we're not putting barriers up which prevent politicians from achieving what they set out to do' (Interviewee 1).

One Board Member (Interviewee 6) mentioned that the new Permanent Secretary had agreed to undertake a capability review which was a Cabinet Office initiative aiming to identify strengths and weaknesses in specified areas to stimulate comparison and learning among government departments. This Board member saw this as a source of new pressure. The individual leading on learning issues at the Cabinet Office described how capability reviews were working. He said

'The Capability Review has different areas in a capability model which described a capable organisation. The Capability Review says that organisations must be good at a number of things and organisations are scored on the model of capability, and you can be scored anywhere from very strong to urgent development. Everyone who was scored as an urgent development area have organised programmes of work to build their organisation's capacity in that area' (Interviewee 8).

A number of other pressures were also referred to – including those imposed by audit and inspectorate bodies, budgets, and the challenge of meeting stakeholders needs in Wales and beyond. One Board Member (Interviewee 2) talked about the pressure of demonstrating that the organisation is mature and delivering tangible benefits for the citizens of Wales.

Some interviewees explained the attempts which have been made to link learning activities with broader organisational strategy. It was apparent that one of the three key areas covered in the organisation's Human Resources strategy was building capacity and capability, and that efforts had been made to link the organisation's skills strategy to twelve organisational capabilities and review this on a regular basis. However, while recognising that the organisation was trying hard, one Board Member (Interviewee 1) felt that the organisation could be better at developing an organisational strategy which fits within the political strategy.

Two interviewees talked about the importance and challenges of cross-cutting working which were described by one Learning Leader who said

'If we're trying to deal with and really sort out wicked issues like child poverty, unless you have the relevant departments talking to one another and learning from one another and sharing that in a cross-cutting way and to have learning interventions that bring people together from across the organisation, you're not going to get it right' (Interviewee 7).

One Board Member explained that the evolving enabling government strategy saw information in a very important light and described how the existing methods for accessing information were primarily based on experience which meant that those who did not know who to contact would experience problems because

'Those who are less experienced or less knowledgeable will find it much more difficult to know the entry points into the organisation in terms of information' (Interviewee 4).

This Board Member envisaged that a recently implemented Business Directory and a planned electronic records management system would help staff.

Interviewees described a wide range of approaches being taken to provide learning opportunities for staff. One Learning Leader (Interviewee 7) talked about the importance of making sure that conversations took place about career development between managers and staff as part of the performance management process. Interviewees explained that staff are able to attend training modules provided as part of a core training programme by a training provider under contract. A management development scheme, a leadership programme, a pathways to success initiative, a fast-stream programme and efforts to develop project management and customer service skills were mentioned specifically. Also, it was explained that the organisation supported staff to work towards formal qualifications including National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), professional qualifications and Master of Public Administration (MPA) degrees. In addition, access was available to courses run by the National School of Government and Public Service Management Wales - the latter of which included the more outstanding initiatives of action learning programmes, leadership enquiries which involved focusing a group of leaders on a particular question, a Summer School for leaders in the Welsh public sector, bursaries, and a 'Wales in Africa' initiative which involved seconding people to organisations in Africa.

A number of interviewees also talked with enthusiasm about less formal approaches to development – including job shadowing, job rotation, mentoring, secondments, interchange placements and undertaking work in the voluntary sector. However, one Board Member was more critical of the existing arrangements and felt that resources were not always targeted in the most effective way when saying

'We spend a disproportionate amount of effort in our learning in people who put their hands up and volunteer.....The more senior you are the more we invest in your learning so you've got to have a balance – not just the new and innovative but how do we do the routine stuff which people do day-to-day better' (Interviewee 2).

The same Board Member also talked about the importance of having a suitable learning environment because

'Unless you create an environment where people are allowed to implement the learning it's like taking a drug abuser away, putting them in a five-star hotel,

treating them wonderfully and then sending them back to the abusing community' (Interviewee 2).

One Learning Leader (Interviewee 7) mentioned that 20,000 formal days of training had been provided within a one-year period which equated to an average of three training days for each member of staff. There was a feeling that training courses had an important role in terms of providing a foundation for learning or supplementing learning. However, interviewees expressed the view that the majority of learning was undertaken on-the-job and some referred to the learning which occurs through moving around the organisation. One Learning Leader who believed passionately that the majority of learning takes place in workplaces said

'We learn most from the people who sit immediately within the vicinity of space within which we sit..... So the six or seven people who sit immediately around our desk or who we engage with very regularly and intensively with are the most influential in terms of our learning' (Interviewee 5).

One Board Member with a key responsibility for strategic change explained that the organisation is now trying to get people to see their development as something beyond formal input. This Board Member talked about a personal experience of learning a considerable amount from a more junior member of staff which led to the view that

'In the best teams, there's that non-hierarchical learning and sharing of knowledge' (Interviewee 6).

Another Board Member (Interviewee 2) suggested a focus for the future should be on peer learning.

Successes and challenges

In terms of what was seen as inhibitors to learning, a range of things were identified – some of which could be associated with the organisation's structure, while others were associated with the behaviours of individuals in the organisation.

Learning influencers thought that managers' promotion of the sharing of experiences and knowledge was patchy, and their explanations for managers' inaction ranged from the pressures managers faced, to a lack of awareness of linkages, to deliberately practised inappropriate behaviours.

Those interviewees who had a specific responsibility for business development and human resource strategy referred to the considerable improvements which they felt had been delivered through the large financial investment in the existing training programme, the way in which the programme was linked to the skills needed and the evaluation of training. As part of this programme, one Board Member considered the commencement of a formal management and leadership development scheme to be the most important thing which had been done and his contentment with the outcome was illustrated by him saying

'I think we've gone from just paying lip service to being a learning organisation to putting our money firmly where our priorities are' (Interviewee 1).

One Learning Leader (Interviewee 7) with the most direct responsibility for overseeing the operation of learning initiatives also talked about the importance of spending time on performance management and having conversations about skills development within that process. Others recognised the benefits of the greater range of tools and techniques used – referring specifically to 360 degree feedback for certain staff, a Policy Week initiative designed to provide exposure to key issues around policy development, the establishment of an 'Innospace' which was a physical space designed to enable staff to be creative, and a Sharing Excellence intranet site for staff who were members of project management and customer service communities of practice to share ideas. Speaking with a personal tendency to learn as a result of curiosity about what is better, one Board Member felt that the overwhelmingly important thing about learning was having the time for reflection which she explained by saying

'The essence of having the time and the space and the privilege of being able to do that reflective practice – whether you're sat in a classroom, or whether you're with a mentor or on a trip or whatever it is – is the thing that really makes the difference' (Interviewee 2).

Interviewees identified a number of factors which they considered to be inhibitors to learning which related to either the organisation itself or people's behaviours. In terms of the organisation itself, one Board Member (Interviewee 4) felt that having over 4,000 people joining the organisation within the past nine years had transformed it into a place where people no longer knew many of the colleagues they saw when they walked down a corridor or sat in the canteen. The same Board Member felt that having staff based in ninety different office locations presented a challenge and referred to the nature of IT systems which, in the case of e-mail, were individually-based and not open for sharing.

A few interviewees saw silo working as something which would be likely to inhibit learning at the corporate level but one Board Member (Interviewee 6) recognised that silos can often be quite powerful in driving delivery, establishing a feeling of belonging and generating some initiative. Based on an example, the Board Member described how things can sometimes come out of a silo which benefit the whole organisation.

One Learning Leader (Interviewee 7) suggested that time pressures and larger workloads inhibit learning and intimated that these were things imposed on individuals which could not be controlled by them. A Board Member (Interviewee 2) suggested that the inhibitors were a sense of busyness, a sense of real importance, some insularity and some complacency which seemed to suggest that these were generated by individuals – rather than imposed upon them. Although it does not explain whether the causes of some of these inhibitors were within people's ability to control, the following comment made by one Learning Leader goes some way to illustrating the issues:

'The level of bureaucracy, meetings and e-mails in this organisation mean that people don't get out and about, they're not citizen-focused enough, they don't join up enough and they don't share and combine learning enough' (Interviewee 7).

When talking about the public sector more generally, one Learning Leader believed that financial considerations often prohibited learning. He said

'Often the decision about what someone is going to learn is driven by how much money is in the training budget and if there is not sufficient money or it's not being used effectively what can happen is that that person isn't developed appropriately' (Interviewee 5).

Within the Welsh Government, any training provided by the contracted training provider was funded from a central budget, but any training or development from another source needed to be paid for from departments' budgets. However, this situation did not appear to eradicate behaviour emerging among managers which presented barriers to learning. One Board Member (Interviewee 1) described how some staff, often working in senior grades, were a barrier as a result of them seeing some specific development initiatives as a waste of time and money.

While it was difficult in the absence of evidence for interviewees to comment on the extent to which managers share experiences and knowledge, the general feeling was that practice was patchy. One Learning Leader (Interviewee 7) suggested that managers did not always see the big picture or make links which would prompt them to share knowledge, and that a lack of time might have had an impact on managers' ability to share knowledge. These explanations for not sharing knowledge seem to suggest that inaction is not necessarily a deliberate act which is a point made expressly by a Board Member who said

'I don't think it's an organisation in which information is power so as a generality I don't think the lack of sharing is because of inappropriate motives per se' (Interviewee 4).

Rather, the Board Member who made this comment thought that at best information and knowledge were seen as commodities and that the sharing of them could occur if the mindset of managers changed so that information and knowledge were considered to be valuable resources. When asked how against this background managers could be incentivised to share knowledge, the Board Member suggested that talking about the importance of sharing knowledge as an abstract notion would be likely to fall on deaf ears as it would be seen as yet another initiative so the interviewee suggested that it might be more effective to talk about working together and then knowledge sharing can occur through that process of working together.

However, one Board Member did not think that the culture was sufficiently open and gave an insight into what the challenges associated with changing this might be when saying

'I think people are quite territorial as well – you know we're alright, we've done this well so we want to share this with others. Am I prepared to give up my best person to go to work in another team so that he or she can share their learning? We probably don't do that as much as we could and I'm not sure that there is as open a culture as I would like in terms of sharing knowledge' (Interviewee 1).

This Board Member also thought that ministers did not like sharing any wider than their own portfolio which was suggesting that they influence this behaviour.

When interviewees were asked what they thought should be promoted in the future to enhance learning at the organisation and individual levels, some references were made by one Board Member (Interviewee 2) to international benchmarking and some dismantling of risk management. Other interviewees referred to the development of specific skills – including programme and project management skills to reduce the level of reliance on consultants, and business and customer service skills. A Learning Leader (Interviewee 7) talked about the need to improve the quality of conversations between staff and line managers about skills development and learning, and the need to undertake an enhanced level of training evaluation so that the business benefits can be determined. Reference was also made to continuing work which had already started to appoint heads of professions for the forty professions which had been identified in the organisation, who could focus on career path development and training for staff in each professional group.

Some interviewees referred to the need for better knowledge and information management throughout the organisation and others talked about the need for more innovation, aspiration, curiosity and no complacency. One Board Member demonstrated where learning could really help management. He said

'I can sit around the Management Board table and not really tell you what the real priorities and challenges are for some of my fellow Directors because you tend to think on a departmental basis' (Interviewee 1).

Impact of accountability and scrutiny

It was recognised that in the light of the amount of accountability and scrutiny to which the organisation was subject, a higher degree of risk aversion was necessary but there was also a recognition that there was additional scope for staff to be able to question excessive bureaucracy and to not apportion blame when things go wrong.

Except for one Board Member (Interviewee 3), all interviewees felt that the forms of accountability and scrutiny to which the organisation was subjected had an impact on the way in which people worked. The Board Member who did not see it as significant was referring to the public sector in general and asserted that the differences between the public and private sector were exaggerated by many because people underestimated the pressure which shareholders and the market applies to private sector organisations.

The remaining interviewees identified both positive and negative effects on learning of accountability and scrutiny. One Board Member (Interviewee 6) felt that scrutiny from sources such as the Wales Audit Office and the National Assembly for Wales' Audit Committee were seen to have an important place and could aid learning if the culture was to learn from reports issued. Similarly, the Board Member felt that the increased number of politicians in Wales following devolution had been a positive stimulus for learning. A few interviewees considered media scrutiny to be less constructive than other sources and some examples were given of where this had diverted resources or stopped what were considered to be worthwhile things happening because of concerns about how it might be reported. The typical feeling was expressed by one Board Member who said

'I think media scrutiny to which we're all subject is more difficult. I think that can sometimes be a diversion and can divert resources down some quite frivolous routes rather than actually encouraging learning in the organisation' (Interviewee 6).

One Board Member felt that the impact of errors in political terms created a blame culture because

'If something goes wrong, people want to find out whose accountable and they're damned' (Interviewee 2).

While recognising that a degree of focus on compliance and governance was appropriate, the same Board Member felt that too much focus on them could inhibit learning and provided an insight into why this might be when saying

'We haven't got a world where we've enabled staff to challenge things when they're bureaucratic and over the top' (Interviewee 2).

This Board Member in particular felt that a better balance could be struck between risk taking and ensuring compliance. However, in doing so, the Board Member recognised that the organisation needed to be accountable for how it was spending public money and said

'We can take risks but we will never take risks in as ruthless a way as you would in the private sector because we're using public money and we are accountable for that public money so we have to have standards and safety levels and risk aversion which is higher than you'd expect to find outside. So the issue here is about balance' (Interviewee 2).

In terms of the impact on staff which a high level of scrutiny and accountability had, one Board Member (Interviewee 4) suggested that it resulted in staff storing vast amounts of information to ensure that they were safe in the knowledge that they could obtain a piece of evidence if necessary. Another Board Member (Interviewee 6) pointed out that scrutiny suffers from the same down side as targets in that the things people are held accountable for are likely to improve and those which are given a lower priority also get a lower priority in terms of attention.

Learning from external sources

It was apparent from interviewees that a wide range of links were made with other public sector organisations, but that there was little linkage with the private sector and that links with the voluntary sector were mainly through secondments. There was a

feeling that the organisation needed to be more outward facing in order to improve. One Board Member gave an example of how links were maintained with peers in the Welsh public service more widely, but considered the organisation to be introspective. The Board Member said

'It's a two-way street and I think there are a lot of opportunities where we can learn a lot more from colleagues in the Welsh public sector and we tend to look at our own areas' (Interviewee 1).

Indeed a number of interviewees provided examples of where they were part of networks or groups which linked them to colleagues in the UK Government, other devolved administrations or the wider public sector in Wales. One particular example which a number of interviewees mentioned was the collaborative working which took place through Local Service Boards which included senior staff from all key public service delivery organisations serving an area of Wales and a senior civil servant from the Welsh Government. A number of interviewees also mentioned the Summer School Public Service Management Wales hosted which brought together 200-300 people from across the Welsh public sector.

Although all interviewees were asked about learning from the private and voluntary sectors, only one Board Member (Interviewee 6) covered these areas specifically. That Board Member considered there to be less resonance with the private sector, but understood that more secondments and exchanges took place with the voluntary sector than with the private sector or with the wider public sector.

A number of interviewees talked about the importance of benchmarking, and one Board Member mentioned the importance of using comparative data and having a much more open discussion about performance. This Board Member thought there was a need for people in the organisation to know who was at the leading edge and what was excellent elsewhere in the UK, and to be proud to tell others what the Welsh Government had done well. The feelings expressed by this Board Member were summed up by her saying

'It's inward and we need to shake that up. I always call it best in class – you know, whose got the best dog and let's go to see the dog and steal the bits of

the dog we want and let's make it appropriate to our environment'
(Interviewee 2).

Summary and conclusion

Part 1 of this chapter illustrated that, although the Welsh Government was a relatively young organisation, it was rooted in the much older UK civil service which it remained part of. The UK civil service functioned without a single codified constitution which resulted in its practices needing to be understood in the context of developments since the mid nineteenth century which had shaped it into what prevailed. It has been illustrated that prominent political figures had influenced developments, as well as practices in the private sector.

It has been seen that gaining an appreciation of the UK civil service does not provide a full understanding of the Welsh Government's civil service because the process of devolving a range of governmental function and law making powers to Wales have had a profound impact on it. The journey to Welsh devolution spanned three decades and the pace of change during the first decade of devolution beginning at the end of the last millennium was rapid and fundamental in respect of the civil service's functioning. After numerous events, on 31 March 2011, the Welsh Government employed 5,809 people who undertook a diverse range of roles.

The Welsh Government in 2011 was a mix of old and new in terms of both the activities it undertook and the people it employed. While the core of the organisation and its staff had evolved from the former Welsh Office, which existed until the birth of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, many staff joined the organisation during the following decade. This created a situation whereby staff had varied experience of being civil servants and had, therefore, been influenced to various extents by working practices and traditions which had been prevalent for some time within the organisation and/or the wider civil service.

In relation to specific influences on learning which have been focused on in Part 2 of this chapter, the various initiatives and documents which covered learning matters showed that numerous organisation-wide strategies and prescribed practices were in

place, and that various public sector reform programmes recognised the importance of effective learning. The initiatives promoted by Public Service Management Wales, the Welsh Government's Learning and Skills Strategy, the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Information Management Strategy and the performance management system applying to Welsh Government staff have been mentioned. The prominence of learning and development in the 'Making the Connections – Delivering Beyond Boundaries' report was also noted.

Moreover, gaining the perspectives on learning among eight organisation-wide learning influencers provided some interesting insights into how these individuals conceptualised learning, what learning stimulants existed, the development of learning practices, successes achieved, challenges faced, the impact of accountability and scrutiny on learning, and the learning which had taken place from external sources.

The learning influencers had sophisticated views about what constituted OL, but their interpretations of it differed. They identified a range of pressures placed on the organisation to learn, but conceptualised these in different ways and had different views on what the most effective stimulants for learning were. It was apparent that efforts had been made to link skills development to organisational needs, but it was suggestions that insufficient efforts had been made to focus development on strategic political priorities.

In terms of learning being promoted by learning influencers, it was evident that this included a mix of formal training and more informal approaches. Some criticised the introspective nature of learning and recognised the importance of a learning environment being developed throughout the organisation in the future. While it was recognised that formal training was an important foundation for learning, learning influencers believed that most learning took place on-the-job.

When asked about the initiatives or practices which were considered to have most effectively enabled learning, most referred to formal training or less formal initiatives but one talked about the importance of time for reflection. In terms of what was seen as inhibitors to learning, a range of things were identified – some of which could be

associated with the organisation's structure, while others were associated with the behaviours of individuals.

Learning influencers thought that managers' promotion of the sharing of experiences and knowledge was patchy, and their explanations for managers' inaction ranged from the pressures managers faced to a lack of awareness of linkages to deliberately practised inappropriate behaviours.

High levels of accountability and scrutiny were seen to have both positive and negative effects on learning. It was recognised that in the light of the amount of accountability and scrutiny to which the organisation was subject, a higher degree of risk aversion was necessary but there was also suggested that there was more scope for staff to be able to question excessive bureaucracy and for fewer attempts to be made to apportion blame when things go wrong.

It was apparent that a wide range of links were made with other public sector organisations, but that there were fewer linkages with the private and voluntary sectors. There was a feeling that the organisation needed to be more outward facing in order to improve. Learning influencers identified different things which they thought should be promoted in the future to enhance learning which ranged from making improvements to performance management and training evaluation processes to behavioural and cultural issues.

CHAPTER 7 – FINDINGS FROM RURAL

Introduction

This chapter is the first of three presenting the findings of each of the case study areas of the Welsh Government in which the empirical research was undertaken. The presentation of the findings starts with a brief introduction of the case setting and an explanation of the characteristics of the staff interviewed. What was established from those interviews is then discussed in four broad areas which, after coding the data, emerged as the areas in which the data could be assembled logically in order to understand the details of each case. The four areas are (1) the working environment, (2) the nature of change and the extent to which staff were involved in it, (3) the approach to learning and support provided for staff and (4) the influence of management interventions and accountability. The presentation of the analysis of a small number of documents is incorporated into the discussion where relevant. Throughout, the emerging findings are analysed with a view to understanding their significance in relation to the OL process.

The Rural Division (Rural) was part of the Welsh Government's Sustainable Futures Department and supported the Welsh Government's Minister for Rural Affairs. Rural was responsible for administering all aspects of the European Union's (EU's) Common Agricultural Policy Single Payment Scheme in Wales. This involves paying European Agriculture Guarantee Fund Direct Aid and European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development support to farmers. Payments are linked to meeting environmental, food safety, animal and plant health, and animal welfare standards – as well as the requirement to keep farmland in good agricultural and environmental conditions within the constraints set by a variety of control mechanisms, also administered by Rural.

A Rural Development Plan for Wales sets out a range of schemes which Rural was also responsible for implementing in Wales - including Tir Mynnydd, Tir Cynnal, Tir Gofal, woodland and other agri-environment schemes – and others schemes which Rural is responsible for assisting other Welsh Government divisions to implement.

Rural was among the largest divisions in the Welsh Government with around 490 staff working in 17 geographical locations in Wales. The Head of Division and staff dealing with central policy or operational matters were based in Cardiff, and the largest number of staff outside of the Cardiff office were based in three regional offices located in Carmarthen (West Wales), Llandrindod Wells (Mid Wales) and Caernarfon (North Wales).

Each of the three regional offices had responsibility for processing payment applications from farmers within a defined geographical area. This case study focused on the Rural regional office in Carmarthen which included 45 staff, 27 of which were female and 18 of which were male. The office processed 6,000–6,500 applications for farm payments each year which was around one-third of the applications processed across the three regional offices. The head of the Carmarthen office was supported by three senior team leaders, one of whom managed a small corporate services team and two of whom oversaw the work of about twenty staff who were organised into teams of 5-6 people. There were 7 teams of non-corporate services staff in total and each had a leader who had line management responsibility for the staff within the team. All of these teams were responsible for processing payment applications, except for one team which ran a front office and acted as a first point of contact for mail, business start-up processing, telephone calls and farmers visiting the office in person.

The majority of staff who were processing payment applications were often described within the office as being part of multi-skilled teams because once established in their roles staff were expected to deal with all aspects of the processing relating to applications made under the Single Payment Scheme. Although line management chains of command within the multi-skilled teams were clear, each team leader had different functional responsibilities and recognised areas of expertise which generated the need for a considerable amount of cross-team communication and working.

The remainder of this chapter explains the characteristics of the Rural staff who were interviewed as part of this research and then what was established from those interviews – as well as from the examination of some key Rural documents – in terms of the arrangements in place to process payment applications, the working

environment in the Carmarthen office, the nature of change and the extent to which staff were involved in it, the approach to learning and support provided for staff and the influence of management interventions and accountability mechanisms. Throughout, the emerging findings are analysed with a view to considering their significance in relation to the OL process.

Interviewees

A total of 14 staff in the Rural regional office in Carmarthen were interviewed. The 14 people represented the full range of staff grades working in the office – as well as a range of educational backgrounds, length of service in the organisation and job roles. The interviewees had the characteristics shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Rural interviewees

Interviewee	Male / Female	Role	Processing Team (PT) / Front Office (FO)	Years in post
1	Male	Administrator	PT	8
2	Female	Administrator	PT	8
3	Male	Team Leader	PT	5
4*	Female	Senior Team Leader	-	5-6
5	Male	Administrator	FO	0-1
6	Male	Administrator	PT	4-5
7	Female	Administrator	PT	1-2
8	Female	Administrator	PT	10
9	Female	Team Leader	PT	10
10*	Female	Senior Team Leader	-	5-6
11	Female	Team Leader	PT	8-9
12	Female	Administrator	PT	4
13	Female	Administrator	FO	5-6
14	Female	Administrator	PT	3-4

Note:

** One of these senior team leaders was the head of the Carmarthen office*

Payment processing arrangements

Farmers applied for most subsidy payments under the Single Payment Scheme which required them to submit an application form by May each year and, following processing and the inspection of a proportion of farms, payments were made from

December onwards. Payments would be delayed if further information was required from farmers, but the divisional plan set a target for paying 90% of valid applications by the end of December. Underpinning this key output target, the divisional plan set high targets for each key element of the processing cycle in respect of the Single Payment Scheme. Similarly challenging targets were also established in the division's plan for all aspects of the other smaller payment schemes administered by Rural.

The processing of payment applications was largely automated. Hard copies of application forms were sent by farmers to the Cardiff office where they were scanned and uploaded into a computer system which could recognise information entered onto the forms. The forms were then allocated to the appropriate regional office for processing where staff in the multi-skilled teams were initially required to check and confirm the accuracy of the scanned information. The computer system then analysed the information provided and assessed it against a large number of rules which applied to the application process and any rule failures identified were listed. This process was described by the one administrator who said

'We process the claims and get them in a position for payment to be made to meet the target at the end of the year. You get the claim in, look at it, resolve any queries if the farmer's omitted any information or sometimes the information might not tally up with what we've got – maybe field sizes or crops in them, anything of that nature- so you resolve these queries by making a telephone call to the farmer or with a letter' (Interviewee 6).

A payment could not be made by the system until all rule failures had been investigated and cleared which was what the staff in the multi-skilled teams were principally occupied with doing. Team leaders checked a sample of the work done by team members, but in the past used to be required to check everything.

Working environment

Rural staff working in the Carmarthen office were working in a stable environment following processes of a highly automated and cyclical nature which had been put in place to process a large number of payment applications. Although the processes led to boredom for some, staff appeared to be generally content and tended to stay in the

work area for long periods of time. The stable workforce, open plan office environment, hands-on management style and a common interest in the same work tasks resulted in staff at all levels taking a close interest in each other and in knowing a lot about each other.

Each of the senior team leaders had their staff located in rooms which were physically separated by walls but each room within itself was open plan with low level partitions between desks. The senior team leaders sat in the open plan rooms with all of the staff and the only staff who were located elsewhere were those working in the front office. The head of the office was the only person occupying a separate room but was visible through glass panelling.

The office building in Carmarthen within which the Rural staff were based was also occupied by staff who were part of other Welsh Government departments and the building was linked to another building occupied by staff working for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. All staff on the site shared a canteen which served food and drink during normal working hours and the canteen was used for breaks and informal meetings. The atmosphere appeared to be friendly as laughter could often be heard and a friendly assistant would interact with people and make comments like 'see you boys' when a group of people were leaving. Some people seemed to regularly spend break times with colleagues who they were particularly friendly with or worked closely with as two administrators explained.

'Most of the tea table I'm with are in the same team as me and also next door, but we've also got a couple from upstairs who've crept onto us' (Interviewee 2).

'Because there are so many people, you tend to go into little groups – me and another woman go up for tea breaks and things. Sometimes we do talk about work and sometimes we say ah where do we start?' (Interviewee 7).

There was a social committee and one interviewee who was a member of that confirmed that all Welsh Government staff in the building were invited to join events. However it was apparent that Rural staff did not routinely interact with other colleagues as one administrator said

'We don't have much contact with other people around the office – we just say hello but we don't mix' (Interviewee 2).

Although staff varied in age from recent school leavers to those approaching retirement age, the teams were very stable with the last new entrants being two people who had joined 8 months before the interviews were undertaken. Although the majority of staff worked at the most junior grade within the Welsh Government's grading structure, despite encouragement from senior managers, many staff were reluctant to apply for jobs elsewhere. A senior team leader aired her frustration about this when she said

'The problem is, even though there have been opportunities here on site, people tend to expect things to fall into their laps rather than going out and looking and applying and it doesn't quite work like that. The opportunities are there – it's just that I think they're in a bit of a comfort zone really and I don't know why' (Interviewee 4).

These factors had led to an environment in which Rural staff in the office all tended to know each other quite well and get along well together, although it was apparent from one team leader that some found the work a bit boring when he said

'I think people generally get on quite well with each other. In the department I'm working most people have been there for a good few years now. I wouldn't say that people enjoy their work, you hardly ever find someone who really says they enjoy their work, but I think if the worse they can say is that their work gets a bit boring it's a good sign really' (Interviewee 3).

It was apparent that the interviewees from the front office team had a stronger team bond when administrators from that team said

'We always have a good laugh – we're always working hard but when there's time to relax we always try and enjoy and have a joke and a laugh to keep the spirits up. One of the girl's birthday is next month so we're going out and we've got Christmas parties coming up. Between April and May is our busiest time and we organise the night out after that period has finished to get together and relax. It's usually just the front office but at the Christmas party there'll be the other people' (Interviewee 5).

'I think people tend to get on with each other quite well. Our part of the office is smaller, whereas the multi-skilled teams are in two large rooms. It's

probably easier for us because we all get on and we can chat and talk so, for me, it's great' (Interviewee 13).

Change and staff involvement

While detailed changes were regularly being made to the payment schemes and processes in place, significant change was rare with the last significant changes being the introduction of the Single Payment Scheme and a new computer system almost five years prior to staff being interviewed.

It was not possible for staff within the office to make significant changes because many of the rules associated with the payment schemes were imposed at the EU level and decisions about how the schemes were administered in Wales were ultimately taken by staff in the Cardiff office. Formal mechanisms were in place for staff to make suggestions for detailed changes, many through pause and review exercises, but many people did not engage in these activities. Those who were actively involved tended to have a different perspective on their ability to influence change.

A number of factors created barriers to staff sharing ideas and making suggestions to influence change. These included a lack of knowledge and/or experience of doing the work among relatively new staff, a feeling that staff in Cardiff who would make decisions about implementing any changes were not connected with the reality on the ground and would be unlikely to respond to suggestions, frustration with the slow speed of any change, some line managers presenting barriers for feeding ideas through the sometimes hierarchical channels in place, personal circumstances preventing some staff from travelling to Cardiff - which was often required to be actively involved in change processes - and anxiety that changes implemented by management in response to concerns would make matters worse. As a consequence, many staff felt that any significant changes were done elsewhere to them, not by them.

It was clear that many individual staff members' main focus was on what they needed to do to comply with existing processes and avoid mistakes. However, it was noticeable that staff in the front office team seemed to have more scope for

implementing changes because the work was not so automated and embedded within computer driven processes.

Due to the cyclical nature of the work, the vast majority of tasks were repeated during the course of processing applications each year. When asked what had been the biggest work based change or innovation for their team, those interviewees who had been working in the division for a number of years most commonly talked about the changes which occurred when the Single Payment Scheme was introduced almost five years earlier and when the present computer systems for both processing claims and managing documents electronically were rolled out. This led to the establishment of the multi-skilled teams and one team leader described the significance of this for those involved.

‘Before we were working in little sections and we dealt with specific schemes. Then it was decided that we’d set up a multi-skilled section where you’d deal with a variety of schemes – that was a huge change, a huge learning curve and obviously you had to learn new schemes which was a huge challenge’ (Interviewee 11).

Those who had joined the division more recently typically said ‘nothing has really changed since I’ve been here’. However, some saw change as being more constant as described by a team leader who said

‘There’s a fair bit of change from week to week and month to month really, with new schemes coming in here and there. We had another new scheme starting in 2008 which a couple of team members are working on now’ (Interviewee 3).

And an administrator who said:

‘The work is constantly changing – it’s not monotonous, there’s a lot of thinking to do in the work’ (Interviewee 2).

Many people talked about the work being monotonous, boring or ‘not the most exciting’ (Interviewee 6, Administrator) and it seemed that people’s different perceptions of the work they were doing impacted upon their appreciation of how their role fitted into wider activities and their motivation to participate in opportunities

to influence change. It was apparent that people's perceptions of the amount of change occurring and the challenges they faced were largely down to what an individual had been involved with and their own capabilities. The latter point was recognised by one senior team leader when she said

'We find that even though what we do each year is predominantly the same on a seasonal or annual rotation, it's surprising how some still need to be trained from scratch - whereas there are others who think oh God do I have listen to this again' (Interviewee 4).

That said, it was clear that on a day-to-day basis change for staff within the office was limited to attempts to improve or clarify the procedures followed to process payment applications and that staff's autonomy to change their working practices was low as any significant changes could only be made through formalised processes. Individual managers within each of the regional offices were nominated as lead contact points for queries about specific schemes or aspects of processes and managers with overall responsibility for schemes sat only within the policy and operations teams in the Cardiff office. Each year a pause and review of every scheme was carried out in the Cardiff office which was intended to give scope for staff to suggest changes for the following year, but one senior team leader described the difficulties involved

'The issue is getting people to think can we do this in a better way? Very often the people who go to these meetings aren't the people you'd want to go because Team Support staff seem to think I can't be bothered and really they're the ones who have the most valuable input but there is scope for them to feed into whoever's going so it's just getting them to do that' (Interviewee 4).

Perhaps in some cases this was because of non-work related commitments, as the same senior team leader went on to say

'There are actually people out there who do a good job but they want to come in after dropping their kids off at school and they want to be able to go. They'll go the extra mile to meet targets and stuff but they don't want to have to put themselves out' (Interviewee 4).

A team leader seemed to suggest, however, that participation in the pause and review meetings was on an invitation rather than a voluntary basis.

'It would probably be my line manager representing the Carmarthen office but I might be asked to attend. What I would be responsible for is sending out the forms to people here to ask them what they thought went well and what didn't' (Interviewee 9).

Another team leader expressed her view that staff do not tend to like making suggestions or giving views but it was apparent that for some there was a knowledge/familiarity dimension to contributing to change in relation to the technical aspects of the work. As one of the shortest serving administrators put it

'Because I have been here for quite a short time, I've been doing more listening than putting ideas forward' (Interviewee 7).

Also, because certain people were assigned to work on certain schemes, those who were not involved with a particular scheme did not see it as their role to become involved in discussions about it which meant that any changes were typically only considered by those most closely involved with the matter under consideration. One team leader explained that

'Sometimes I don't have much involvement at all with the change that's coming along – I'm just told that person and that person are working on it so I just think there you are that's what they're doing' (Interviewee 3).

Some team leaders displayed detachment from the change process and suggested that it was something to be done at a higher level. One hinted at the reasons for it

'When it comes to the policy side of things, I've got to the point in the civil service of thinking that unless it's something you've got responsibility for, as soon as you're relying on someone else in another team somewhere you'll wait for – well how long is a piece of string kind of thing. In terms of influencing change I think generally it's stuck to how you look at specific cases day-to-day which to be fair can be pretty direct' (Interviewee 3).

The feeling of a disconnect with policy colleagues in Cardiff was also echoed by an administrator.

I think that's the biggest problem we have – the policy people don't really communicate with us and in some cases they don't take heed of the feedback

they get..... People in policy are a bit up in the clouds and they don't really meet the farmers and we do give them feedback – we say that's not such a clever thing to do, but sometimes they take heed and sometimes they don't. I'm sure if they had to face farmers...' (Interviewee 1).

Another team leader was more positive about the possibilities for influencing change through the pause and review process

'If we say something has gone really badly and we'd like something else, they do take the feedback and they do act on it the following year' (Interviewee 9).

As administrators needed to feed any ideas they had for change through a hierarchical structure before they could be implemented, it seemed that the differing perspectives among team leaders on how it might be possible to influence change had the potential to create barriers to staff's ability to have their voices heard. It was apparent that the extent to which team members believed they were able to influence change varied widely which did appear to impact upon people's motivation to engage in any change processes. When asked about how she thought she had been able to influence change, one administrator responded by saying 'me influence change – blimey!' (Interviewee 8) but after saying that was able to recall a meeting where she had made suggestions which had been taken on board. Another administrator felt that it was difficult to say whether suggestions he had made in the context of a pause and review exercise had been acted upon and another felt that ideas for small changes were acted upon but expressed frustration about the speed at which things happened

'The problem is that you can put forward your ideas but things don't really respond quick enough. You make suggestions on very minor things and occasionally they'll be accepted but on a bigger scale no – that takes much longer' (Interviewee 12).

A senior team leader suggested that the process for developing policies for implementation was an iterative one based on a good relationship with the Cardiff office and which involved staff in Carmarthen commenting on a proposed approach before implementation. The senior team leader said

'We've got a good relationship with our operations team – a lot of people have worked up there on secondments and go up to do system testing. The way that it works is pretty good because people feel that they're involved from

the beginning – the people that want to be involved obviously’ (Interviewee 10).

Two pause and review reports showed that the reviews had focused on how well processes had worked and how well they had been managed. The reviews set out a number of actions which were to be taken in an attempt to make improvements in the future, including making guidance more clear and precise.

It was evident that the nature of the work undertaken in the front office provided some more scope for staff to influence small scale changes. The position was summed up by one administrator who said

When I’ve put ideas forward they have been implemented, they have considered the pros and cons but they have implemented some of the things I’ve put across which is great because at least you know they’re listening to you and it’s worth participating’ (Interviewee 13).

It was apparent that the front office staff discussed working practices at team meetings and that one outcome of these discussions had been the implementation of a rota system so that staff did something different every day. It seemed that the relatively higher degree of scope available to staff in the front office to change their working practices stimulated a greater enthusiasm among staff for sharing ideas and participating in discussions about possible changes.

For staff in the multi-skilled teams it was clear that the rigidity of the framework imposed by EU regulations and the arrangements for making any changes to the arrangements for processing payment applications via the Cardiff office to achieve a standardised approach across the three regional offices limited the scope staff had to influence any change in relation to their working practices or the systems they were operating. Participation in the formalised arrangements for carrying out reviews was voluntary so staff could choose not to participate and they were more likely to choose not to where they held a perception that those receiving their ideas would be unlikely to seriously consider them. Perhaps this is why one administrator felt that looking back and considering what went well and not so well after completing a task was ‘not ingrained’ (Interviewee 12).

A key role for staff working in the operations team in the Cardiff office was to develop a consistent and compliant approach to the administration of payments. The team's main vehicle for delivering this was desk instructions and it maintained control over their contents. Therefore, at the divisional level, through contributing their ideas, staff could potentially share their knowledge and experiences with the organisation and these could then be passed on to other staff through the desk instructions. It was apparent that the instructions were drafted initially by junior staff but, as one member of staff explained, the instructions would be looked at and signed off by line managers at all levels in Carmarthen before being sent to the Cardiff office for further consideration and eventual posting to the intranet. One senior team leader felt that the desk instructions were 'very user-friendly' (Interviewee 4), but some more junior staff mentioned that the scenarios given in the instructions did not always fit what they were dealing with, that the instructions were sometimes 'not geared specifically for the people doing the work day-to-day' (Interviewee 3, Team Leader), or that they were sometimes too voluminous to read through in practice.

However, it was clear from interviewees that the need to follow instructions when processing payment applications resulted in very little freedom for staff to apply their own ideas to how matters should be handled. One administrator explained why this was the position

'Things have got to be done in a particular way because with the claims process they audit them as well – a particular percentage of claims are audited every year. They have to look at a claim and say how was this claim processed and for obvious reasons you're not given the freedom to do things in a different way and you mustn't do things in a different way...' (Interviewee 1).

Other interviewees explained that the inability to apply one's own common sense and judgement to the work resulted in it taking some time to adapt to it initially – as one administrator said, 'everything was alien to me' (Interviewee 8). Given the need to comply with processes and the technical nature of the work, on a day-to-day basis staff were putting all of their efforts into learning and following the processes and trying to avoid mistakes occurring – rather than themselves taking a step back and considering how something could be best handled or, moreover, how something could be done differently or improved.

Outside of the day-to-day activities, administrators mentioned that from time to time they were invited to have tea and biscuits with somebody who does not work in the office so that they could air any grievances without line managers being present. Some felt that these sessions were good because it was possible to discuss problems which it wasn't felt possible to talk to line managers about, but others suggested that people did not tend to be very open at the sessions. The following comments made by one team leader, which touches upon an experience reported above from an administrator in relation to an attempt to make the work less boring, indicated why there might be a reluctance to make suggestions.

'People have tried to suggest things in the past. I remember once someone making a comment in a meeting with someone senior that a few people find the work boring. Well that was the worst thing that could have happened really because the response was well we're going to have to do something about this now to show we've tried so they changed the way people worked so instead of people being given jobs they knew they could do they said what we're going to do is split up all of the farms in an area and give them to a team so a team can do pretty much everything. That was a bit of a nightmare really because it wasn't practical..... It went on for months and it was nothing more than a token gesture. It reverted back then' (Interviewee 3).

It was apparent that different staff had different feelings about this attempt by management to make the work less boring, but it indicated that some staff feared that management's reaction to suggestions for change or expressions of discontentment about a present position might make matters worse for them.

Approach to learning and support available to staff

The vast majority of training and/or learning took place on-the-job in a largely informal way. Colleagues were largely dependent upon each other for their knowledge and, generally, it was apparent that staff were willing to share their knowledge freely which resulted in support being available to staff as required.

When new staff joined teams, efforts to share knowledge were intensified through personal mentoring - but it remained important for staff to ask colleagues how to do new things that they had not come across before. It was apparent that many staff refrained from asking colleagues for assistance because they were reluctant to disturb them and/or because they feared that they might lose credibility among their colleagues. It was clear that before deciding which colleague to ask for assistance, consideration would be given to who had the required knowledge but also whether the individual was someone who would be easy to approach. It was apparent that some line managers were more willing than others to approach staff who were junior to them for assistance. The overall informality of these arrangements was more acceptable to some than others.

In an attempt to promote learning, management had encouraged staff to spend two hours of their time each week on development activities. However, after some initial take-up, staff rarely used the two-hour slot for development activities because they were focused on meeting targets which was what their performance was being measured against. It was clear that most staff were not interested in spending their time in the office undertaking learning which they did not consider essential for the purpose of undertaking their job and management were prepared to accept that meeting targets would take precedence over anything else.

The unwillingness of staff to take part, financial cost and time away from processing work were all barriers to learning/improvement activities identified by management. It was clear that different staff were motivated by different things which had an impact on what the barriers to their learning might be. Many staff, especially longer serving members, did not wish to seek promotion but did appear motivated to do a good job in the post they occupied. It was easy for staff to opt out of development

activities as most were offered on a voluntary participation basis. Others, especially younger members of staff, appeared to be keen to take advantage of whatever opportunities they could and they were optimistic about their futures in the organisation.

Rural had a training plan in place which stated that the learning and development priorities were awareness raising, customer service training, specialist training where needed and information security awareness. The plan confirmed that - in accordance with the Welsh Government-wide requirement - all staff must have a personal learning plan associated with their performance management plan and set out arrangements for evaluating learning and development, the opportunities identified as being available and the responsibilities for staff and line managers.

The Welsh Government's training provider offered a range of courses focused on general skills required by staff across the organisation, covering – for example – communication skills, management skills (e.g. absence management) and customer service skills – and it was apparent that staff were encouraged to attend these courses. Any training relating specifically to the work of Rural was developed and delivered within the division. It was apparent that this was done when a significant change was implemented - including, for example, annual revisions to payment schemes – such as the introduction of a new payment scheme or computer system.

Other than these occasional training interventions, it was clear from the interviews that the vast majority of learning took place on-the-job. On-the-job training was mentioned in Rural's training plan as an example of 'an alternative learning and development opportunity', but the plan placed responsibility with staff and line managers for identifying and determining how to meet any learning and development needs.

A senior team leader said that 90% of staff learning occurs 'by experienced people teaching other people to do what they do' (Interviewee 10). She also explained how important training is because of the technical nature of the work which means that 'you can't just walk in here and sit at the desk and know what you're doing'.

When a new member of staff joined the division, a mentor was assigned to share his/her knowledge with the new entrant, provide on-the-job training and to act as a first point of contact for any queries. Many interviewees commented that the mentors who had been assigned to them had been very helpful, although one interviewee had noticed that some mentors were more forthcoming with knowledge and information than others. One relatively new administrator explained his typical experience as follows.

'There's a lady who sits by me – she's my mentor. She's the one that has been showing me how to deal with stuff and how to deal with customers and how to do things on the computer. In her own words, she's been here since the year dot so she is quite experienced – she's been really helpful. She's not my manager – just a colleague in the front office. As she has been working there for the longest, we all seem to go to her for advice anyway' (Interviewee 5).

Another administrator from a multi-skilled team explained how the support of a mentor had provided her with a comfortable learning experience.

'She'd ask me every so often "are you okay?" so you didn't feel under pressure or anything then. She said what you'll be doing and went through it and showed me two or three examples on the screen with me doing them – I find when you do it yourself, that's when you learn really. If she wasn't there, I'd look through the desk instructions but sometimes you weren't totally sure and then I did ask her and she was willing to help' (Interviewee 14).

It was apparent that there was no prescribed period of time for people to be mentored after joining the office and a mentor's role would typically reduce over time as the new entrant's level of knowledge increased. In the multi-skilled teams, there were many procedures for new entrants to become familiar with but, as one administrator explained, there was time to be eased into the work and learning was undertaken in small stages.

'I was here for quite a while before I actually went onto the systems. I was just dealing with common land issues for the first couple of months and then I went on to basic administrative checks and built up then'.

Just before you start something new they'll say there'll be a little training, half an hour or an hour whatever, to go through the basics of what you'll be doing so that helps a lot because for the majority of time you can look at the desk instructions and be completely baffled' (Interviewee 7).

However the same administrator went on to express the view that the training given should be more in-depth and talked about an occasion when she had made a mistake because a part of a process had not been covered in the training. Recognising that learning was an on-going process because ‘scheme rules are changing frequently’ (Interviewee 11), one team leader explained that she regularly met with staff to keep them up to date.

Most interviewees described an environment in which colleagues were willing to provide advice and assistance, either by way of offer or in response to a request to do so, and it was only one administrator who said that she was informed that colleagues could not provide her with training she had asked for ‘because they’ve got their own work to do’ (Interviewee 2). It seemed that, generally, and in accordance with how a senior team leader described practice, staff were not afraid to ask questions if they were in doubt about how to do something. One administrator said

‘I feel comfortable speaking to my line manager and I would be comfortable talking to someone else if it involved them more’ (Interviewee 7).

However, later on in the interview the same person expressed a preference for more in-depth training which would avoid thinking

‘I’ll have to go and ask now and then you feel as if you’re pestering them by going back and fore and asking so I feel it would be better if the training was a little more in-depth’ (Interviewee 7).

Similar feelings about approaching colleagues were held by another two administrators who said

‘You feel, oh God, I’m asking the same question again but you’re not asking the same question – the answer is the same, but the scenario was totally different. It’s just that you felt a bit of a nuisance really – they never said anything, don’t get me wrong, but you felt I’m stopping them from doing their work so you tried then to sort things out on your own’ (Interviewee 8).

‘I was steered by other members of staff when I came unstuck but I would try not to bother them obviously because they’ve obviously got their own work to do and you don’t want to take every little problem you’ve got to them – I’d try

and look at it myself, hopefully resolve it for myself but if I didn't manage to resolve it by myself I would take it to a colleague then' (Interviewee 1).

A team leader, however, made an interesting comment in favour of the approach when he said

'It's not necessarily a bad way of doing it because you've got to show a bit of initiative to find out about things you need to know' (Interviewee 3).

An administrator was similarly not content with the unstructured approach to learning and expressed a personal preference for a more structured approach. She said

'The norm here is to give a training session which probably doesn't last more than about quarter of an hour around a computer with somebody saying you do this, you do this and you do this and people give you a handout. People come round and ask you if you've got any problems but nobody really observes you and the only way they know if you're doing something wrong is if something actually goes wrong, but sometimes people don't know the right way of doing things..... More on-the-job training could be done, but I'm aware that that's just my perception. I'm aware of individuals who don't want someone to sit there with them, they don't want that close attention – personally I would' (Interviewee 12).

A senior team leader had noticed that staff were drawn towards certain people when they want advice or guidance because she said

'Some people are more approachable, aren't they, and are actually quite gifted at explaining things' (Interviewee 4).

The senior team leaders recognised that everybody could not know everything about the work and they mentioned that it was important not to force people to speak to certain individuals about certain things – they were comfortable with communications between staff developing naturally. The approach seemed to work because as one administrator said

'I think it's really good. Between the teams somebody always knows the answer – if you don't know, someone is more of an expert. Between us all I think we work well as a team because people have been trained on things in the past and have knowledge of it' (Interviewee 14).

No document existed which listed particular areas of expertise held among staff and it seemed that, when faced with a problem, established staff no longer linked to a mentor were mainly concerned with identifying someone who had the knowledge to help them and who they were comfortable approaching. While some staff said that their line manager would be the first person they would speak to if they were faced with a problem, as there was a separation between functional and line management responsibilities, it was often not the case that an individual's line manager would be the best person to seek advice from. If a member of staff did not know who had expertise in a particular area, some said that they would make enquiries among colleagues. One administrator confirmed the senior team leader's views about the varying degrees to which staff were seen as helpful and approachable among their colleagues when she said

'Its like shop assistants – some are helpful and some are not. You know who to go to' (Interviewee 14).

One team leader recognised that there was often value in asking more junior staff for help because, as she said

If it's a work-related problem which I just couldn't work out I often think two heads are better than one so, especially if it's to do with validation, because I don't actually do validation – I just make sure that it's done correctly, it's sometimes easier to speak to an actual user because they'll be able to tell you if you do it this way it'll work but if you do it another way it'll cause a further problem down the line' (Interviewee 9).

However, when the same team leader was asked if other managers also ask more junior staff for assistance, she replied

'To be honest I think some people do and some people don't look for whose got the knowledge, as opposed to what grade they are. Some of them at Executive Officer level wouldn't dream of going to a Team Support and asking them for advice' (Interviewee 9).

It was strongly apparent that with regards to learning the main focus for staff in the multi-skilled teams was to learn prescribed processes for dealing with payment applications. The underlying mindset seemed to be summed up by one team leader

who said ‘if someone was asking what to do with a particular case, I would probably ask them well what do we usually do?’ (Interviewee 3).

It seemed that the approach to learning activities which team leaders needed to perform was similarly unstructured and on-the-job based. Reflecting on the time when he was promoted to a team leader, one interviewee said

‘I kind of found that when making the jump from Administrative Officer to Executive Officer there wasn’t that much support in a sense. You could go and ask your line manager about certain things but day-to-day it was up to you to find your way through..... On the management, there might have occasionally been a bit of training which would come along so you might catch a bit of training if you were lucky. There’s nothing as formalised as an induction so it’s just kind of get on with the job’ (Interviewee 3).

As individuals within each of the three regional offices have lead responsibility for schemes and other issues (e.g. customer service), staff said that they would from time to time make contact with colleagues in the other regional offices to seek advice. Also, an overall manager for each scheme was based in the Cardiff office so they were a possible point of contact for advice as well. However, it came across in the interviews that it was normal practice for matters to be resolved within the Carmarthen office wherever possible and that advice would usually only be sought from elsewhere by team leaders.

The division had not had an opportunity to all meet together during an awayday since the last one was arranged two to three years ago. However, those who mentioned the last awayday felt that it had been only of limited use.

Moreover, when a senior team leader was asked if she had any contact with the Rural Payments Agency in England, she said that there never tended to be any interaction but if there was it would be via the Cardiff office. She explained that the Rural Payments Agency approached the work in a totally different way because its only contact with customers was via contact centres and she said ‘I could not learn much from that setup because you’re not comparing like with like’ (Interviewee 4).

There were divergent views among interviewees on the extent to which all of their training and learning experiences were resulting in personal development. As expected, people conceptualised development in different ways – some in terms of developing skills and behaviours and others saw it as being synonymous with promotion. When conceptualised in terms of promotion, one team leader felt that it was not possible to develop skills needed to perform at a higher level unless opportunities were provided and felt that staying in the Carmarthen office resulted in limited opportunities for sideways and higher grade moves which could provide development. However, a relatively new administrator compared the opportunities available to him with those which had been available in a previous external role and felt that ‘there is definitely the chance of developing yourself within the Welsh Assembly’ (Interviewee 5).

A number of interviewees thought that management was supportive of staff taking advantage of formal training opportunities, but one administrator felt that time for learning in the work place - which was needed to develop skills relevant to undertaking work on a day-to-day basis - was restricted. She said

‘It’s funny, it’s almost backward – that is the weird one - because if you want to do something away from your job that you’ve seen on the intranet that’s fine, but just don’t ask to sit with someone for a week so that you know what you’re doing’ (Interviewee 12).

It is interesting to consider this comment in the context of what another administrator, who thought the two hour training slot on Wednesday mornings had been beneficial, had said to explain why staff no longer undertake development activities during this time. She indicated that management tried to encourage its continuance but it seemed that meeting targets had been seen as the most important thing among all concerned.

‘It was a great benefit which carried on for a while but, when we were getting to a point when we had to pay farmers and the deadline was getting a bit tight, things like that tend to get put on the wayside’ (Interviewee 8).

While it was apparent that management had taken steps to encourage staff to use the two hour training slot, no formal evaluation had been undertaken of its demise and there was not a view that it should be enforced. It seems reasonable to assess that this

was because meeting targets was ultimately the most important things for management as this would be the most prominent measure of success or failure for the office.

Although the focus on targets and pressures on time seemed to be significant factors preventing staff from spending any non-essential time on learning activities, there were some comments made during interviews which provide some insights about the extent to which staff were motivated to learn new things. As already mentioned, one senior team leader aired her frustrations about staff not wishing to take advantage of promotion opportunities available elsewhere in the Carmarthen office and her feelings that staff were in a comfort zone which they were reluctant to leave. One team leader contemplated whether the staff who had been working in Carmarthen for a long period of time were people who would not try to climb the ladder anyway. One administrator who had attended university, which she thought had developed her inquisitive nature, felt that many people around her were hard workers but that asking questions would not occur to them. She also said

'There are some individuals - I would just die a death if I had to train them because their defences go up straight away and the whole thing of training is the pressure to learn, you can sense it' (Interviewee 12).

Another young relatively new administrator thought that it was easy not to develop because very few training courses are mandatory so it is down to individuals to volunteer their participation. She explained the benefits she saw in taking opportunities which come her way and indicated why others around her do not do so when she said

'I don't know whether it's just because I'm young, but other people think oh there's no point in going on that or I can't be bothered - there are a few people around me who say that - you can hear them saying I'm not doing that. But I do try and do as much as possible because it's good to learn different things. I've been up in the Cardiff office in June and during the last couple of weeks doing testing and things which has been quite good. Others say I'm not going to Cardiff, but I don't mind going up there because it is something different from the usual. I do learn and I understand quite a bit then about how they test our systems so when I come back down here I'll know how it works' (Interviewee 7).

A senior team leader suggested that some people cannot take opportunities which involve travelling to Cardiff because they have ‘personal circumstances’ and that in large teams ‘you’re always going to get one or two people who don’t want to know’ (Interviewee 10). She indicated that her approach was to encourage people and to keep giving them opportunities. However, it seemed that the mindset underpinning the behaviours displayed by some of these more reticent colleagues which the younger interviewees had observed might have been summed up by one older team leader when she was sharing her views and personal feelings about development, and describing what motivated her.

‘If I was ambitious I don’t think it would be too difficult to make my way up, but I’m just not. What I want is self satisfaction – as long as I can do my job well and my manager’s happy and my team’s happy, that’s me you know. I think there are plenty of opportunities out there to be honest with you if you want to go for them. And if you’re prepared to travel, you get quite a few opportunities in Cardiff and there are other places here now because we’ve got WEFO and CSSIW, the NHS and OCVO so if you wanted to get on I’m sure it wouldn’t be too difficult’ (Interviewee 9).

When interviewees were asked if anything had provided significant development for them in the last year or two, for longer serving members of staff the response was sometimes ‘not really’. However, others commented that some of the general courses delivered by the organisation’s training provider had been useful, with one team leader commenting in particular on how useful an attendance management course had been which she had been able to draw on in practice as she had needed to manage a poor attendance case within her team. Another team leader had found dealing with a poorly performing member of staff particularly developmental. One administrator described the ‘second to none’ (Interviewee 8) support she had received from management at all levels when needing to deal with a difficult case recently which she felt she had greatly benefited from. Another relatively new administrator had found small training sessions particularly helpful which had been set up for her to cover new things. One person talked about a Prince’s Trust modular programme she had undertaken 10-12 years ago.

Newer staff tended to go back to the learning that they had undertaken when they first joined the division and one person found that it had been useful to train two new staff shortly after she had undertaken her training to consolidate her knowledge.

Management interventions and accountability

The performance of staff - especially those working in the multi-skilled teams - was very visible to their individual peers and managers, and sometimes to others. Management monitored performance and provided feedback through a formal performance management system which seemed to be done effectively. While staff would be highly aware of each others' performance, there was a reluctance to provide feedback to each other but there was clearly peer pressure to perform well. It was apparent that established staff would not expect to receive any adverse comments from colleagues, including line managers other than their own. More widely, staff – some more than others – were aware that their work could be audited by external auditors and that mistakes they made could be exposed to an appeals panel, Ministers and/or customers.

It was evident that aspects, either singularly or collectively, of the working environment resulted in staff both by necessity and desire being risk averse and principally concerned with adhering to guidance and processes in place.

As has already been highlighted, management at all levels within the Carmarthen office knew each member of staff and more senior managers took a close interest in each member of staff's performance. The head of the office was, by her own description and the descriptions of staff at all levels, very visible and regularly communicated with all staff verbally and via e-mail. There were many occasions during the interviews when staff mentioned examples of good support being provided by senior managers and staff appeared to be conscious that they were very much in management's gaze.

In the view of one senior team leader, any barriers which existed between senior managers and more junior staff were created by personalities rather than grades. She explained that

'There are some people who'll tell me "shut up, you're talking rubbish", and there are others who'll look so it depends on the nature of the person involved' (Interviewee 4).

It was apparent that senior team leaders and senior managers based in Cardiff considered performance statistics on a day-to-day basis to monitor the number of payment applications being processed against targets. One administrator mentioned that senior staff were good at providing regular feedback and explained that this provided motivation. She said

'Only this morning the daily stats came round to show where we are – an e-mail was sent by [head of office] saying excellent effort everybody and that goes a long way. Even when she comes out and says we've done really well today, it gives you a buzz' (Interviewee 8).

It was also apparent that occasional e-mails were sent by the Head of Division based in Cardiff to thank staff and one team leader explained that the Head of Division visits the office about once a year.

In relation to the statistics used by senior managers, one team leader explained that they do not tell the whole story because only payments made are included and not the work which has to be undertaken to deal with issues before processing can proceed.

Different interviewees had different perceptions about who they were accountable to. Many seemed to focus on their team leader and possibly more senior managers. A senior team leader explained that

'If something went wrong to the extent that a wrong payment was made, it would fall to me firstly. We'd speak to the person as the first port of call is to ask is there anything you didn't understand which ended up with this happening? You get people who are reluctant to admit that they don't know how to do something, even though the atmosphere we've got here is one where we're saying if you don't know, ask. If it persists, it would be noted on their performance review and ultimately [head of office] would speak to them and say is there anything we need to address here'?' (Interviewee 10).

Some staff did recognise that they might be accountable to other people and have their work challenged and/or scrutinised by a range of people. When explaining the factors

to be considered when replying to an enquiry from someone applying for a payment, an administrator explained

'You've got to be careful how you respond because applicants have a right to appeal against any decisions we make and when that happens it goes up to a much higher level. My outlook is that it has got to be fire proof. With some appeals cases, they actually bring in a body of experts from outside the Assembly to listen to the appeal. It could go up to the Minister and she might see the file with your correspondence on it so I've always taken the line of being careful of what you say because at the end of the day if you're turning someone's application down that doesn't mean that that's the last you've heard of it' (Interviewee 1).

Interviewees were also aware that their work was audited, but a senior team leader mentioned that junior staff would not think that an audit affects them unless the relevance is explained to them which has been done during team meetings. That senior team leader talked about the potentially serious consequences of the office doing poorly in an audit, including in the most serious circumstances, having its paying agency status being taken away. However, despite the efforts which it seems had been made to make staff aware of the potential consequences of their actions resulting in a poor audit outcome, it was also apparent that some steps had been taken to put staff at ease with the process because as one administrator said

We're told that nobody can be 100% perfect all the time – as long as they're little mistakes, they don't seem to mind' (Interviewee 14).

However, one administrator expressed doubt that an auditor would actually be able to attribute a mistake to an individual and even if they did, she said that 'there's always that thing where you could say I wasn't told how to do it properly' (Interviewee 12). One senior team leader explained that, unlike when she was doing administrative work, junior staff no longer need to explain directly to auditors why any mistakes were made as this was now done at a more senior level. This might go some way to explaining why some more junior staff were not very concerned about the audit process.

Also, one administrator working in the front office recognised that he could be held accountable by farmers who he might meet on a face to face basis. As he explained in relation to a scenario when a farmer comes into the office

'If I've checked the form and I've missed something out and the farmer then gets a letter to say he's missed something out, the first thing they're going to say is I came to the office last week and spoke to... ..' (Interviewee 5).

A team leader in the multi-skilled team explained that farmers occasionally send thank you letters, but they also occasionally send letters 'which are not very nice' (Interviewee 9) and that agents and the farmers unions can get involved when concerns arise. She mentioned that there are also some letters which have been sent to Ministers and that her more senior managers would be involved in dealing with those which would be routed via the Head of Division.

In addition to this, interviewees recognised that any colleague might question them about something they had done which meant that there was a degree of accountability to peer colleagues within the team environment. Any entry or change made on the computer system would be associated with their name so as one administrator explained

'Whatever work you do, your name is there. There's no hiding place – if you've messed up, your name is there' (Interviewee 6).

A relatively new administrator felt that her experience of colleagues identifying any problems with her work had been quite positive. She said

'I've never had anybody who has come across to make me feel bad or anything – it's just constructive criticism really. If I've done something wrong they'll tell me so that I don't do it that way again. They'll explain where I went wrong and what to do next time, rather than saying you've done this wrong sort of thing' (Interviewee 7).

However, one administrator who was more established in the office indicated that the sharing of views among colleagues on each other's work was not as fluid as it might be. She said

'At the level of Team Support, if you notice that somebody's not quite doing something right, for whatever reason, it's difficult to tell them because of the office dynamics. It's not really built into the structure of the office that you're able to say something without it being a big deal. I've noticed that even when a manager from another team comes over and points something out it's often not taken very well and I think it's not built into the process of how we do things in a formal way so people don't accept it' (Interviewee 12).

Another administrator reiterated a conversation she had heard the day before the interview which also indicated that there was a reluctance for staff to approach their peers about issues. She explained that

'Two people were talking next to me and they were really cheesed off because they'd had all the really hard queries. The two people had noticed that the other person doing the queries had chosen the easiest ones and left all the harder ones so they were going to go and see a line manager about it because the other's person's stats were going to be better than theirs obviously' (Interviewee 14).

It was apparent that there was a high level of awareness among staff of individuals' performance which was partly due to the involvement of many people in the processing of each payment application and partly due to the office dynamics. As another administrator said 'if you're not doing something well, the whole room knows' (Interviewee 14). It was apparent that people's awareness of this, along with their own conscientiousness and desire to ensure that the consequences of making payments incorrectly were avoided, resulted in some staff being very cautious. One administrator said

'Sometimes I think yes that is right but I'd better check just in case – I'd rather be like that than just do it anyway' (Interviewee 7).

Although it was apparent that the majority of line managers delivered any feedback to staff in a private environment, one administrator described an occasion when she had been given a 'ticking off' (Interviewee 14) in front of people about an error which it was later discovered was not of her making. She explained that the line manager 'is known for it so we take it like a pinch of salt' but, nevertheless, the experience had the predictable negative impact on the interviewee.

Summary and conclusion

It has been established that Rural staff working in the Carmarthen office were working in a stable environment following processes of a highly automated and cyclical nature which had been put in place to process a large number of payment applications in a way which complied with many technical rules associated with the various funding schemes being administered. The processes in place led to boredom for some, but staff appeared to be generally content and tended to stay in the work area for long periods of time. It was apparent that many had not been attracted to opportunities which had been available to work elsewhere within the Welsh Government's Carmarthen office or further afield, although the opportunities available to them in Carmarthen were much more limited than those available to staff in Cardiff and taking advantage of opportunities elsewhere would have resulted in long commutes to and from work or needing to move home. The stable workforce, open plan office environment, hands-on management style and a common interest in the same work tasks resulted in staff at all levels taking a close interest in each other and in knowing a lot about each other.

While detailed changes were regularly being made to the payment schemes and processes in place, significant change was rare with the last significant changes being the introduction of the Single Payment Scheme and a new computer system almost five years prior to staff being interviewed. When staff were interviewed that change was either a distant memory for them or something which happened before they joined the office. It was not possible for staff within the office to make significant changes because many of the rules associated with the payment schemes were imposed at the EU level and decisions about how the schemes were administered in Wales were ultimately taken by staff in the Cardiff office.

However, formal mechanisms were in place - mainly through pause and review exercises - for staff to make suggestions for detailed changes and management said that despite its best efforts it was difficult to engage people in these activities. However, some staff understood that the involvement in pause and review processes was by invitation only and that their only role would normally be to complete a form in order to submit comments for consideration. Those who were actively involved in

pause and review processes tended to have a different perspective on their ability to influence change and, consequently, did not feel powerless within the organisation.

In terms of taking opportunities to share ideas and making suggestions to influence change, it was apparent that a number of factors created barriers for staff. Some relatively new staff did not feel able to offer suggestions because of their lack of knowledge and/or experience of doing the work, some felt that staff in Cardiff who would make decisions about implementing any changes were not connected with the reality on the ground and would be unlikely to respond to suggestions, some were frustrated by the slow speed of any change which was for them a disincentive to participate, some had line managers who could present barriers for feeding ideas through the sometimes hierarchical channels in place for considering change, some staff's personal circumstances prevented them from travelling to Cardiff which was often required to be actively involved in change processes and some were concerned that changes implemented by management in response to concerns would make matters worse for them as some recalled had happened in the recent past. As a consequence, many staff felt that any significant changes were done elsewhere to them, not by them.

As fundamental change did not feature in day-to-day working life, it was clear that many individuals' main focus was on what they needed to do to comply with existing processes and avoid mistakes. This was understandable as this is what the targets set in the division's business plan and individual performance objectives placed most emphasis on. However, it was noticeable that staff in the front office team seemed to have more scope for implementing changes to the processes they followed and their working practices because the work was not so automated and embedded within computer driven processes.

There was strong evidence that the vast majority of training and/or learning took place on-the-job in a relatively informal way. Staff needed to learn a lot of technical details so the only alternative to this approach would have been to invest in a relatively long period of formal training for new staff at a high financial cost and with no output from them while they were undergoing such training.

Colleagues were largely dependent upon each other for their knowledge and, generally, it was apparent that staff were willing to share their knowledge freely which resulted in support being available to staff as required. Staff were aware that, as it was not possible for them to know every detail about every scheme, they were dependent upon each other for knowledge and in an environment where people were very aware of colleagues' behaviour staff recognised the importance of being seen to be helpful in order for that to be reciprocated.

When new staff joined the teams, efforts to share knowledge were intensified through personal mentoring but, as introductory training sessions did not cover every aspect of every task that a member of staff would be expected to undertake, it remained important for staff to ask colleagues how to do new things that they had not come across before. It was apparent that many staff refrained from asking colleagues for assistance because they were reluctant to disturb them and/or because they feared that they might lose credibility among their colleagues. It was clear that before deciding which colleague to ask for assistance, consideration would be given to who had the required knowledge but also whether the individual was someone who would be easy to approach. It was apparent that some line managers were more willing than others to approach staff who were junior to them for assistance. The overall informality of these arrangements was more acceptable to some than others and this was largely because of the staff's differing preferences with regards to learning. Some were happy with the informal approach, while others yearned for more comprehensive and formal training.

In an attempt to promote learning, management had encouraged staff to spend two hours of their time each week on development activities. However, after some initial take-up, staff rarely used the two-hour slot for development activities because they were focused on meeting targets which was what their performance was being measured against. It was clear that most staff were not interested in spending their time in the office undertaking learning which they did not consider essential for the purpose of undertaking their job and management were prepared to accept that meeting targets would take precedence over anything else.

The willingness of staff to take part, financial cost and time away from processing work were all barriers to learning/improvement activities identified by management. It was clear that different staff were motivated by different things which had an impact on what the barriers to their learning might be. Many staff, especially longer serving members, did not wish to seek promotion but did appear motivated to do a good job in the post they occupied. It was easy for staff to opt out of development activities as most were offered on a voluntary participation basis. Others, especially younger members of staff, appeared to be keen to take advantage of whatever opportunities they could and they were optimistic about their futures in the organisation.

The performance of staff - especially those working in the multi-skilled teams - was very visible to their individual peers and managers, and sometimes to others. Management monitored performance and provided feedback through a formal performance management system which seemed to be done effectively. While staff would be highly aware of each others' performance, there was a reluctance to provide feedback to each other but there was clearly peer pressure to perform well. It was apparent that established staff would not expect to receive any adverse comments from colleagues, including line managers other than their own. More widely, staff – some more than others – were aware that their work could be audited by external auditors and that mistakes they made could be exposed to an appeals panel, Ministers and/or customers.

It was evident that aspects, either singularly or collectively, of the working environment resulted in staff both by necessity and desire being risk averse and principally concerned with adhering to guidance and processes in place. The practices and mechanisms which facilitated learning and improvement had the effect of supporting these concerns, rather than any higher form of learning which would have involved more fundamental questioning and change.

CHAPTER 8 – FINDINGS FROM PROGRAMMES

Introduction

This chapter is the second of three presenting the findings of each of the case study areas of the Welsh Government in which the empirical research was undertaken. The presentation of the findings starts with a brief introduction of the case setting and an explanation of the characteristics of the staff interviewed. What was established from those interviews is then discussed in four broad areas which, after coding the data, emerged as the areas in which the data could be assembled logically in order to understand the details of each case. The four areas are (1) the working environment, (2) the nature of change and the extent to which staff were involved in it, (3) the approach to learning and support provided for staff and (4) the influence of management interventions and accountability. Throughout, the emerging findings are analysed with a view to understanding their significance in relation to the OL process.

The Programmes Department (Programmes) was comprised of the following six divisions:

- Assembly Business and Legislation Management (Scrutiny)
- Public Administration
- Constitutional Affairs and Policy Support (Constitutional)
- Cabinet Secretariat
- Communications
- European and External Affairs

Data were gathered from the Scrutiny and Constitutional divisions (from hereon referred to as ‘Scrutiny’ and ‘Constitutional’) only. This was because – collectively - the work of these divisions was recognised to have in recent times involved the development of new high-level constitutional arrangements and processes, and to have strong and regular links with ministers which were all factors considered to have the potential to impact upon OL processes in significant ways.

Scrutiny consisted of four teams and Constitutional consisted of three teams, as follows:

Scrutiny

- Enabling Better Legislation
- Legislation Competence Orders (LCOs) and Measures
- UK and Subordinate Legislation
- Plenary Business and Legislation Programme

Constitutional

- Policy Support
- Constitutional Affairs and External Liaison
- Policy Development

Scrutiny and Constitutional had within the previous year been created in the guises in which they existed at the time of the data being gathered. The majority of Scrutiny had previously resided within a division named the Office of the Leader of the House (OLH) and the majority of Constitutional had previously resided within a division named Constitutional Affairs and Legislation Management (CALM). The same people as were the heads of the OLH and CALM were at the time of the data being gathered the heads of Scrutiny and Constitutional respectively, but some staff had transferred from CALM to Scrutiny.

Under the OLH-CALM model, CALM had – in addition to constitutional affairs matters - been responsible for developing and managing the Welsh Government’s legislation programme, and for work associated with UK and subordinate legislation. Under the restructure, these functions were added to the functions for which OLH was responsible within the new Scrutiny entity so that responsibility for all matters associated with the development, management and delivery of legislation programmes resided within one division. With responsibility for these activities being transferred from CALM, the remaining activities were supplemented with responsibility for the co-ordination and support of policy development activities which were transferred

form a disbanded Strategic Policy Unit and the new entity of Constitutional then emerged.

Constitutional staff were located in the Cathays Park office in Cardiff city centre, which is the Welsh Government's principal office, and Scrutiny staff (with the exception of the Enabling Better Legislation Team which was based in Cathays Park) were based in the Cardiff Bay office which is connected to the Assembly Chamber (the Senedd).

Scrutiny was comprised of 22 staff (11 male, 11 female) and Constitutional was comprised of 11 staff (6 male, 5 female). Scrutiny and Constitutional both have responsibilities for delivering outputs themselves and for monitoring the activities of colleagues across the Welsh Government. For Scrutiny, the key elements to be delivered by the division itself were a legislation programme - which involves working closely with ministers to determine which legislation proposals should be pursued and in what order of priority – and an improved framework for developing legislation across the organisation. Scrutiny's monitoring activities involved putting arrangements in place for enabling colleagues either to develop legislation through the Assembly or to work with the UK Government in relation to matters concerning Wales in Bills drawn up for consideration by the UK Parliament. For Constitutional, the key elements to be delivered by the division itself were constitutional developments, positions on matters arising in inter-governmental forums and an effective framework for developing government policies. In terms of monitoring activities, Constitutional had responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of colleagues' approaches to policy development and the appropriateness of colleagues' engagement with other administrations.

The remainder of this chapter explains the characteristics of the Programmes staff who were interviewed as part of this research and then what was established from those interviews in terms of the working environments, the nature of change and the extent to which staff were involved in it, the approach to learning and support provided for staff and the influence of management interventions and accountability mechanisms. Throughout, the emerging findings are analysed with a view to considering their significance in relation to the OL process.

Interviewees

A total of 13 staff in Programmes were interviewed. The 13 people represented the majority of staff grades – as well as a range of educational backgrounds, lengths of service in the organisation and job roles. The interviewees had the characteristics shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Programmes interviewees

Interviewee	Male / Female	Role	Scrutiny / Constitutional	Years in post
1	Male	Middle Manager	Scrutiny	3
2	Female	Middle Manager	Scrutiny	3
3	Male	Middle Manager	Scrutiny	1
4*	-	Senior Civil Service	-	-
5*	-	Executive	Scrutiny	4
6*	-	Senior Civil Service	-	-
7	Male	Junior Manager	Scrutiny	5
8*	-	Senior Civil Service	-	-
9*	-	Executive	Scrutiny	4
10*	-	Executive	Scrutiny	5
11	Male	Junior Manager	Constitutional	5
12*	-	Executive	Constitutional	5
13*	-	Executive	Constitutional	10

Notes:

** Limited information has been provided about individual senior civil service members to preserve anonymity. The three members of the senior civil service include the heads of the Scrutiny and Constitutional divisions, and the Director of the Programmes Department. All had been in post for 3-5 years, one was male and two were female.*

** The genders of individual executives have not been included to preserve anonymity. Of the executives interviewed, 3 were male and 2 were female.*

Working environment

Staff in Scrutiny and Constitutional were undertaking a variety of work and their different working environments influenced the way in which they viewed work and how they did it. However, high levels of commitment and motivation appeared to be prevalent among all staff.

All staff were located in open plan office environments except for the Director of the Programmes Department who had a personal office in Cathays Park 1, in the same location as other senior staff away from staff in his department. The Cathays Park 1 building is linked to the Cathays Park 2 building where the majority of staff working on the site are located. Also, the Head of Scrutiny had a personal office in the Cardiff Bay building adjacent to where the majority of Scrutiny staff were located.

The Cathays Park 2 building, where all Constitutional staff and the Enabling Better Legislation team of Scrutiny were located, was housed within a large building opened in 1979 to locate then Welsh Office staff. The building had five floors and was the workplace of some 3,500 Welsh Government staff only. Each floor had four wings where the majority of staff sat in large open plan spaces. There were many meeting rooms and small office spaces along each of the corridors which ran around the central hub of the building. In addition the building had a canteen, 3 snack bars, a faith room and a library. As might be expected in such a large office space, different areas of the building had different ambiances but it was commonplace for staff to have little interaction with colleagues located near to them but outside of their immediate teams.

The area of the Cathays Park 2 office occupied by the Constitutional and Scrutiny staff had been refurbished within recent years, had a reasonable amount of natural light and was generally quiet with most people focused on their computer screens and being disturbed infrequently by the occasional telephone ringing or conversation taking place. Constitutional had its own meeting room and the staff (including the Scrutiny staff in Cathays Park 2) all sat together in one group, with other colleagues around them doing work which had little (if any) connection to theirs.

The Cardiff Bay office was housed in a more modern building which opened in 1993. The building had six floors, but the Welsh Government occupied only one and a half floors of the building. The majority of staff working in the building were part of Cabinet Secretariat either working in ministers' private offices or providing administrative support to the Cabinet. Scrutiny staff sat in space separated from others by physical walls in a separate part of the building to the Cabinet Secretariat staff and had their own meeting room. Canteen and other facilities were shared with

staff employed by the National Assembly for Wales Commission, and Assembly Members (AMs) and their support staff. Due to the high level of interaction staff had with colleagues around the Welsh Government who were dealing with legislation issues, telephones rang regularly and staff tended to be less quiet - perhaps partly because there were no non-Scrutiny staff in the same area who they needed to be concerned about disturbing.

The close proximity of ministers and other AMs to Scrutiny staff working in Cardiff Bay appeared to create a feeling of strong connection between staff and politicians, and an appreciation of how their roles linked into wider issues which staff were conscious of. A junior manager explained

'I didn't get an overview until I came down to the Bay..... That's when I got to realise what it's all about when you start seeing the faces – when you're in Cathays Park you feel so remote and don't really have that feeling of connection' (Interviewee 7).

And a middle manager explained

'Down here you can't help but recognise what goes on in the Senedd, not only because of the work of the team – you're so close to it, you walk past Assembly Members and see ministers every day. I never grasped it before when I worked up in Cathays Park' (Interviewee 3).

The working environment in Cardiff Bay influenced the way in which staff thought and acted which is explored in detail later.

It seemed that staff in both Scrutiny and Constitutional had good working relationships with their colleagues, but in general people appeared to be very work orientated and – although relationships were cordial and people appeared to treat colleagues with respect – people did not appear to give a high priority to socialising with colleagues. It was apparent from a small number of interviewees that they would from time to time have coffee together or socialise after work, but this seemed to be limited and not undertaken by whole teams or with colleagues more widely.

Both Scrutiny and Constitutional had a core of staff who had been in the work areas for a number of years and it was apparent that several people had been promoted to more senior grades while working in the divisions. However, it was also apparent that some posts had been vacated and - in a climate of reducing resources and a drive to do more with less - these posts had not been filled.

Staff tended to display a high level of enthusiasm for their work and seemed to view both their work and their contributions as being important. In turn, these views appeared to contribute towards the creation of teams whose members were generally positive about what they were doing and self motivated.

Change and staff involvement

Staff at all levels had been able to shape change which had been facilitated by the small and generally non-hierarchical team environment in which there was willingness to seek and consider the views and ideas of others. However, more junior staff had been less involved in and able to influence changes relating to the structure and functioning of their divisions which caused them discomfort.

For former CALM staff and those involved in policy support activities within Constitutional, review exercises and reflection on past activities appeared to be embedded in their practices. Former OLH staff had been used to a more task-orientated environment which had not been conducive to spending time reflecting.

Given that interviewees were focused either on the key change delivery mechanisms of government (i.e. legislation and policies) or on shaping Wales' government constitution, it is not surprising that - broadly speaking - interviewees from both Scrutiny and Constitutional conveyed a strong sense of being change shapers in the course of their daily activities. This context in which they worked provided scope for influencing change at all levels. For example, in relation to legislation there had been influence on the development of the Government of Wales Acts which had constituted the organisation and the frameworks for developing future legislation, there had then been influence on the development of National Assembly Standing Orders and legislation making protocols and the implementation of those protocols and then -

after a period of operation - there had been influence in measures to bring improvements into effect.

It was clear that being in the roles they were during a period of significant developments had provided many opportunities for the interviewees to influence change which had come about as a result of pressures to act. One executive explained that

'There was no process set down, no process to get a measure or LCO through. There was a bit in the legislation management toolkit, which to be honest I've never referred to really, and it was all very vague. Really, we made it how it is. Basically, it was a clean slate – you could do what you want, you could shape it' (Interviewee 5).

It was not only senior staff who had the opportunity to influence change. As one junior manager explained

'In terms of scrutiny committees, I almost entirely developed those processes because at the time somebody was supposed to come down and manage the branch but they didn't appear. I took it on and had temporary promotion for that time, set up a protocol with the Assembly Parliamentary Service and reached an understanding between us of how it was going to work' (Interviewee 7).

One executive who was leading a project to improve the arrangements for making legislation gave a flavour of the scope which staff had to determine the direction of travel. The interviewee had even been the instigator of the project which he believed was possible because he had been willing to push it forward. He explained

'We were sat round a table whilst managing the legislative programme and the same old issues were coming up and I happened to be doing a pathways course at the time and they were prompting us to look at some challenging issues. So I said okay I'll look at that. My boss at the time said I was mad.....but I persevered and pushed on and from the analysis I did I put forward a proposal for this programme and it ended up being funded' (Interviewee 10).

However, it was not the case that staff were always free to do whatever they considered appropriate. Depending on the nature of any change proposed, approval would sometimes be needed from the Strategic Delivery and Performance Board

and/or ministers. Also, it was apparent from one head of division that the scope for individuals to have influence over what they were doing depended on her having confidence in them and then on her recognising that allowing them to have a high degree of autonomy was beneficial. This senior civil servant responsible for the division suggested that

'You have to choose the right people to do particular things and its when I'm sure that they've got those instincts then you let them fly solo, but if they haven't you just don't do that..... I've got three people who've all taken their own elements forward in the best way they can because they've developed their own expertise in their particular areas. They know better than I – I'm not going to impose things on them and they'll talk things through with me and ultimately I will guide them' (Interviewee 6).

One junior manager went some way towards confirming that this scope was allowed in practice by saying

'[Name of head of division] will take advice from her staff as long as she thinks it's the right way and we can also go to her with an issue and she'll give us a great steer of where to go' (Interviewee 7).

The small team environment and the approach taken to handling issues within teams was also evidently important to the way in which people were involved in decision making and a junior manager explained how this had a positive impact on him when he said

'The team I'm working in isn't that hierarchical and quite often decision making is a collective business in the sense that everyone's asked for their view. I think it gives me a positive outlook on work because I think most of us like to be asked what our view is – I think it makes people feel valued' (Interviewee 11).

However, having recognised an ability to influence change in relation to day-to-day work-based activities, the same junior manager contrasted this with the more limited influence which he believed he had over issues associated with the management of the division

'For example, if the division is being restructured or your job is changing I often find my view being sought but I still think the decision's been made so I don't find I can influence everything' (Interviewee 11).

The implications of staff not feeling that they had been involved in a change process emerged when interviewees were asked what had been the most significant work-based change or innovation for their team. For some interviewees, the restructuring which led to the establishment of Scrutiny and Constitutional in their present guises had been the most significant change. One middle manager from Scrutiny described the restructuring as coming 'out of thin air' communicated via 'an email first thing in the morning' (Interviewee 1). Clearly, the restructure had had the greatest impact on those staff who were working in Cathays Park and were subsequently required to move to the Cardiff Bay office to join Scrutiny.

It transpired that the high level decision about the configuration of the new divisions had been taken among managers at senior civil service level, but that executives had been involved as team leaders in many of the decisions relating to how the new arrangements would operate in practice. One executive explained that

'I wasn't involved in the decision that it was going to happen. I think somebody said this is the way we're thinking..... We had lots of meetings, lots of discussion, lots of working out job descriptions and team structures and stuff. It was mainly me, [name of another head of branch] and [name of another head of branch] involved in the meetings as the three team leaders' (Interviewee 9).

The staff who had made the move and by the time of being interviewed had worked in the Cardiff Bay office for several months seemed to be content with their situation. Overall, it seemed that interviewees at all grade levels felt that they were capable of shaping change and they had been most uncomfortable when they felt that they had been excluded from decision making processes. Interviewees were at the centre of the Welsh Government's activities and, as has been illustrated, were used to shaping change in their day-to-day working lives. The perception which this provided of their role appeared to emulate in people feeling that, when it came to matters concerning the management of their work areas, they should be part of the management process rather than allowing themselves to succumb to a position whereby they would allow themselves to be managed unquestioningly.

When considering what might explain this perception and confidence among staff at all levels, a few contextual issues are worth attention. The nature of the work and the small team structures meant that staff either had a relatively high degree of autonomy and authority, which was associated with working at middle or senior management levels, or staff were close to people with that autonomy and authority. It is likely that the experience of, or the experience of seeing, influence being exercised affected people's psyches. Certainly boldness was demonstrated by senior staff, some examples of which were given by one senior civil servant who said

'I inherited the legislative programme at the beginning of this year and I looked at why we are going to be introducing a fourth legislative programme when we only have a few months left of the Assembly..... I had to interrogate the information to see whether or not officials had thought the bids through properly, whether they'd identified the resources, whether it was capable of being introduced, had they consulted the drafting lawyers to see if there was a window to draft..... I had to go back and forth to ministers and the First Minister to say my view is that we cannot deliver a fourth programme and if you're insistent that we do take a programme forward it has to be a limited number' (Interviewee 6).

Many staff had experienced significant and constant change to their job roles over a substantial period of time. One senior civil servant explained that 'we've practically had to reinvent ourselves every year because the picture's changing' (Interviewee 8).

Apart from the impetus for change and staff involvement coming from some of the contextual issues which were more unique to the work areas, some impetus came from efforts to review tasks undertaken which is a source more likely to transcend contextual differences of the kind identified. It was apparent that former CALM staff had more experience of reflecting on past experiences. They had taken time to reflect both at the end of significant work programmes and on a more routine basis. At the end of the work programme to achieve formal separation between the National Assembly and the Welsh Government, a review was undertaken which involved meetings of those people who had been members of a Task and Finish Group which oversaw the separation.

In terms of more routine reflection, one interviewee explained that when Bills were being managed within CALM lessons learnt exercises took place after each key stage in Parliament. Another executive explained how she used to undertake reflection with her team in a more structured way twice a year in a separate building and how the idea was picked up by another team.

‘Every year I take them off to Innospace twice a year. Once before we pull together the overarching team objectives for the coming year and we discuss the previous year and how it went and things we could improve – sometimes we draw pictures of how we feel and touchy feely stuff like that. And then in the mid year to check how we’re going and to help people before their mid year reviews. I do this just for my team, but I remember back in CALM I said it and certainly [name of another head of branch] did it as well’ (Interviewee 9).

In addition to reflection occurring in a planned way, it was apparent that there had been a preparedness to reflect when there was a feeling that something had not gone as well as it might have. As one senior civil servant explained

‘Sometimes if we’ve not done something as well as we think we should, then there’ll be an immediate reflection on that..... It’s done just in dialogue by talking to people outside of the team and asking how did that go and what might we do next time’ (Interviewee 8).

Apart from the reflection which former CALM staff referred to, it emerged that some reflection had been undertaken in other areas where interviewees had worked before joining the newly constituted Scrutiny or Constitutional. One interviewee mentioned that formal reviews of the policy gateway and associated training had been undertaken which involved series of interviews and reports being produced with recommendations for change.

It was evident that former OLH staff had engaged in some reflection on past activities, usually within the context of a specific task – for example, one member of staff talked about the improvements which had been made when preparing staff guidance on engaging with scrutiny committees. However, one senior civil servant explained how an in-depth review of the legislation programme had been carried out following the prospect of a review being raised by the Counsel General. This had involved meetings with Chairs of Assembly committees and the Presiding Officer,

and meetings with staff who had considerable experience of dealing with legislation. It seems that the review had the potential to result in significant changes.

One middle manager who had worked previously in OLH believed that the task-orientated working environment in OLH had not been conducive to spending time reflecting and had noticed that former CALM staff had been more active reflectors. He described how a community of practice constituted by CALM and now co-ordinated by Scrutiny was prompting former OLH staff to join in with reflective activities.

‘There was something called a community of practice where they got all the lead people working on LCOs and Measures to meet regularly to share best practice, supporting each other through the legislative process and all that kind of thing. So we organised a community of practice meeting and we all took turns at giving them presentations on aspects of the process and there was a little group discussion and things like that. After that we all sat round and had a session discussing what went well, what didn’t go well, what we can do better next time amongst ourselves. The feedback I had from colleagues on the presentation I gave has definitely improved my script and training on that with the teams’ (Interviewee 1).

Another former OLH member of staff also referred to the community of practice and the improvements which had been made following asking members for feedback on training and forms they used. This seems to show that the restructure has provided an opportunity for people to be exposed to different practices which they have adopted and secured benefits as a consequence of doing so.

Approach to learning and support available to staff

Before commencing a detailed discussion of the approach taken to learning among staff in Scrutiny and Constitutional, it is important to firstly consider some relevant aspects of the contexts in which any learning was occurring. Elements of the work undertaken within both Scrutiny and Constitutional involved repeating activities which had been done in the past, but it was apparent that Scrutiny (with the exception of the Enabling Better Legislation Team) was more process-orientated. The core activities for Scrutiny were the preparation and monitoring of a legislation programme and specific legislation timetables which, although the issues arising during the

passage of each piece of legislation varied, followed a staged and largely predictable course. Similarities were apparent between these activities and the work of the Policy Support Unit within Constitutional, although policy development is often more messy and less predictable than the process for making legislation. Constitutional's other core activities were centred around the constantly evolving and unchartered areas of inter-governmental relations and constitutional development respectively.

For many, the possibility of receiving training had not existed due to the newness of work tasks or the developmental nature of the work itself so the exercising of good judgement was very important. The vast majority of learning was undertaken on-the-job and senior civil servants had a clear view that it was not desirable to force people to attend formal training sessions. Those who had attended formal training had differing views about the value of what they had experienced, but the longer-term accredited learning programmes available were praised. In addition, a small number of people had benefited significantly from the Civil Service Fast Stream programme.

Interviewees recognised that significant learning and development had emerged from workplace experiences which had occurred naturally. Particularly fruitful experiences arose from people management matters, contact with colleagues elsewhere in the organisation and contact with staff in other UK administrations. Many interviewees had taken advantage of learning opportunities that had been made available to them, which seemed to have been a feature of their apparent motivation to develop and progress within the organisation, but it was also apparent that it would have been relatively easy for staff to have not taken advantage of such opportunities because little pressure was generally applied by managers.

As well as developing their own knowledge and appearing to be willing to share it with others within the immediate work areas, staff had made efforts to record and share their knowledge on an organisation-wide basis. However, several staff recognised the possibilities for developing more guidance and training but said that they were unable to do so because insufficient time was available to them.

Despite this generally very positive learning environment and high level of motivation to learn among staff, some barriers to learning and reflection were prevalent. The

most significant of these were a lack of time and a perceived lack of resources to undertake learning beyond the opportunities made available under contract by the Welsh Government's training provider. Moreover, some interviewees, normally when referring to colleagues outside of Programmes, complained that people were sometimes unable to accept advice and/or had a 'closed mind'. It was also thought that there was a lack of a knowledge bank.

Although significant differences in the nature of the activities undertaken by staff at the time of the interviews were evident, all staff had been and/or were involved in developing new solutions. There had been no blueprints for dealing with the issues faced and, even if similar issues had been handled elsewhere, there were invariably significant contextual differences which inhibited read across. Further, there had in many instances been no formal training available and it would not have been possible to have made formal training available because issues were new. Some people had been in the fortunate position of having time to work through the issues, while others had been required to hit the ground running.

'It was quite fortunate at the stage I joined because we were still flushing out most of the policy issues so most of the days were spent in very very long meetings.....and trawling over what was happening in Scotland and Northern Ireland and elsewhere to look at what options we had' (Interviewee 10, Executive).

'Over the summer of 2007 we were thinking about how we can actually do these jobs and put them in place so there were mostly internal discussions' (Interviewee 7, Junior Manager).

'It was trial and error in terms of the tasks with the safety net of my then line manager' (Interviewee 3, Middle Manager).

'There wasn't any official training and CALM was so busy at the time that you just got chucked in at the deep end. In my first week I had to write a note for the First Minister' (Interviewee 9, Executive).

In situations where interviewees had been required to deal with new things, they had done so by trying to extract whatever knowledge they could from people around them, drawing from any experiences they had which were relevant and exercising their judgement. One executive explained that

'Because I inherited one member of a team who'd been doing a bit of a job, I did sit down with them and went through. In this job the Bill work I did previously helped because obviously the Measure process is quite similar..... And we did sit down with our CALM colleagues and discuss what would a timetable look like' (Interviewee 5).

In order to benefit from the experiences and ideas of other people, the willingness to ask other people was shown to be as important as the willingness of others to be forthcoming with their knowledge and ideas. While some people would tend to speak to their line manager for advice, it was apparent that a number of managers would also ask their subordinates to seek their views and there was a general willingness to make efforts to speak to whoever it was thought could help with a problem. From what one executive said, it would appear that, at least in one team, a healthy environment for ideas and knowledge sharing was in place because it was explained that

'We may not have regular let's sit down and do some problem solving, but it just comes up naturally through the job – whether its through our weekly team meetings or all of us might just gather together for 10 minutes and say this has come up, how are we going to deal with it' (Interviewee 12).

When dealing with constitutional matters, it was apparent that efforts had on occasions been made to seek advice, information and knowledge from people outside of the divisions and even outside of the organisation. The approach taken was described by one senior civil servant who said

'If we're embarking on something like a referendum, then we think who has done any of this before and we find the people in the organisation who worked on the last referendum, which was in 1997 of course under completely different rules, and outside the organisation getting to know the key people – for example, the experts in the Electoral Commission. A lot of it is finding people with relevant knowledge and talking to them, plus any research skills that people have brought with them' (Interviewee 8).

However, it was apparent that learning what others had done had to be coupled with an assessment of relevant contextual considerations and good judgement in order to achieve the best outcome. One executive explained how problems had arisen because he had not given sufficient consideration to relevant contextual issues.

'We went with a centralised model of the legislative programme based on a hybrid of Scotland and the UK but it really doesn't work for our purposes because we're not a single department in the way Whitehall are..... What I missed is that I didn't look properly at the cultural effect because the Whitehall system works because they're all geared up for delivering Bills, they're not geared up for delivering legislation' (Interviewee 10).

One senior civil servant suggested that there were more general risks with the approach of learning just what was needed to be learnt on-the-job by saying

'I think there is a case of just finding out as much as you need to do to get a particular task done. I suppose a risk for the Welsh Assembly Government is that we don't have the depth and breadth of knowledge of subject areas to be able respond to something if something new in an area came up because we're in a just in time just enough mode to get things done' (Interviewee 8).

Those staff who had joined after their team was more established and who were required to deal with established procedures for UK and subordinate legislation did have a different experience at the outset because they could benefit from the knowledge which had been developed within the team, have access to relevant training relating to process matters and draw from whatever experience they had of those processes. As one middle manager explained:

'I knew of Bills, but hadn't had much previous involvement. I'd done one government supported Private Members Bill which affected me so I got involved a little bit with that..... So I came in with very little knowledge of the process and I gained that by doing a National School of Government course which was very helpful..... I was very fortunate, [name of line manager] gave me a lot of time to explain the process and guided me to a Cabinet Office website which provided a full guide for a Bill manager.... So she guided me to that and all the devolution notes and memoranda of understanding. Some of it I knew already – it helped that prior to coming to CALM I was involved in subordinate legislation' (Interviewee 2).

This middle manager felt that the support she had received from her managers had been very important and she also praised the support which her team colleagues had provided. A positive reference was made by this middle manager to a National School of Government course she had attended, but an executive's experience of a course run by the same institution was less positive.

'I went on the Bill Manager course so that I could understand what a Bill Manager was that I was supposed to be, but it wasn't very good' (Interviewee 10).

Regardless of whether or not these brief training interventions had been useful or not, it was obvious that the vast majority of learning had for everyone taken place on-the-job. In most instances, learning happened during the course of work but there were some instances where time had been dedicated for the purpose of learning. One middle manager explained that

'[Name of line manager] tells me how this should be dealt with and then we'd have a little session of putting it into context and going through how this would be dealt with if it came up again – it would be more informal at the desk' (Interviewee 1).

As elsewhere in the Welsh Government, staff in both Scrutiny and Constitutional had access to the range of training provided under a contractual arrangement by an external provider. In general terms, this training focused on developing generic skills associated with matters such as leadership, communication and customer service. The training available was either in the form of short (often one-day) courses, or programmes over a longer period of time which were accredited by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM). It was clear that senior civil servants in Programmes did not see value in forcing staff to attend formal training. One explained that

'I'm not someone who has a great belief in sending people on formal courses unless they have very clear perceptions themselves or missions or gaps in their knowledge which can be rectified in that way' (Interviewee 4).

One executive in Scrutiny confirmed that there had been some encouragement to attend training from senior management but saw work pressure as a significant barrier to attending training courses and, although there had been no reduction in central funding for training, had a perception that there was a financial barrier. The executive said

'There's never enough time, there's never enough space to have the indulgence unless it's a specific job-related need like [name of subordinate member of staff] went on a Bills course in London..... You can't order

stationery at the minute so you're not going to be able to go on training courses' (Interviewee 9).

However, a number of interviewees had managed to attend short training modules and/or longer accredited leadership programmes which some people had found very useful. One middle manager had received some pressure to attend a number of courses which he considered to be of variable use. He explained that

'I've been on a whole suite of courses to do with leadership, confidence and presentational skills which wasn't a bad one because it was something solid – it wasn't a soft thing. In general, I was sent on a load of courses but it's a case of when's the next available course and it's always difficult to bring back soft skills to your working environment' (Interviewee 1).

Views were all positive about the longer term development programmes provided by the training provider and accredited by the ILM which three of the five executives interviewed had been on, or were engaged in. All three thought that the programmes had developed them significantly which seemed to be because of the approach that involved applying theoretical learning to issues in practice and reinforcing learning through undertaking formal assignments. One of the three executives explained that

'It's structured around an actual learning path where you've actually got the theoretical bits and the lecture-based training, with the structure and the assignments. You loathe them at the time but they do reinforce the learning, they get you to specifically apply' (Interviewee 10).

Another one (Interviewee 12) of the three executives made similarly positive comments and also mentioned the benefits of engaging with other colleagues on the programme away from the working environment.

Two different interviewees had been accepted on the Civil Service Fast Stream, one of which had completed the programme some time ago and the other of which was still undertaking the programme. The Civil Service Fast Stream is administered at a UK-level and is a talent management programme for graduates who are considered to have potential to become future leaders. Entrants start at the middle management level and typically undertake different roles for six month periods until they are considered to be sufficiently well developed to perform at the executive level. Being

on the Fast Stream meant that a lot of focus was given to individual's learning and development which was described by one executive who said

'I was purposefully moved around and you were deliberately thrown into a lot of different situations. If you're a fast streamer, they do at least pretend to care about your training needs and you have 15 days when you're allowed to go off on courses and stuff, but I've never found it in another job' (Interviewee 9).

However, it was apparent that a number of interviewees had had powerful learning experiences in relation to their people management skills from problems they had faced in the workplace. One middle manager, who had been line managing an individual in relation to which problems occurred, explained that

'The working relationship began to deteriorate and I persisted for a couple of months to talk to him on a one-to-one basis, rather than to get some advice from HR..... In hindsight I think I could have handled that a lot better, got advice from HR a lot sooner perhaps and tried to be a lot more proactive in managing the issues in a more professional sense rather than in an informal way' (Interviewee 3).

It was emerged that some people recognised that they were developing as leaders through less exceptional experiences on a day-to-day basis. One executive said

'I would say that the team and the make up of the team has helped my development – I've had changes in the team over the last couple of years and I think each one has brought different challenges, different personalities, ways of handling and management and I think in that respect it has developed me I hope as a manager' (Interviewee 5).

It appeared that the small team environments and the concentration of people from a wide range of grades in relatively small physical spaces meant that staff at all levels had opportunities to speak to each other regularly. This was helped by more senior staff being prepared to allow communication to happen without putting hierarchical barriers in place and this facilitated quick problem-solving and decision making. One junior manager explained that

'As a team we work very closely – there's not a massive hierarchy or anything, we all do similar work. If necessary [name of Head of Branch] will talk to [name of Head of Division] about it. If we can't resolve something

within the team, Special Advisers would be our first port of call' (Interviewee 7).

As well as open communication channels being important, it was evident that having managers who had been prepared to provide sufficient opportunities had aided development. One middle manager explained that

'I've had line managers who've given me work to do which has tested me in ways that sometimes you don't even realise..... I've been very lucky in that I've been given a lot of chances to do things – some things I haven't necessarily wanted to do, but its taught me how to deal with situations and challenged me and also made my working day very interesting' (Interviewee 2).

In terms of contact with people outside of the teams within which interviewees worked, it was apparent that not everyone had a good understanding of the work undertaken by colleagues in different teams in the same division. When asked about the Enabling Better Legislation Team, one middle manager from Scrutiny (Interviewee 1) said 'I don't have much of a day-to-day connection with them at all'.

It was not surprising that those now working in Scrutiny who had previously worked in CALM had a better knowledge of the work undertaken by former colleagues now working in Constitutional. Given the nature of their work, it was apparent that most interviewees communicated regularly with the Legal Services Department and found lawyers to be a very useful source of knowledge and advice. Communication channels on similar lines would also open up where there was a need – for example, one executive commented

'I built up a good relationship with communications colleagues when I was developing a communications strategy' (Interviewee 12).

It was also apparent that liaison with people in the organisation was necessary to inform the direction of travel in relation to core matters for which interviewees were responsible. One junior manager explained

'I've been involved with the UK relations strategy and the aim of my team is to build relationships with key people in each department so that we can identify

the key issues they have with the UK Government and then look at how our services can be deployed to help those departments' (Interviewee 11).

It was clear, mainly from more senior interviewees, that some liaison took place with colleagues in other UK administrations to inform decisions in relation to matters for which interviewees were responsible. For example, one senior civil servant explained

'We have looked at what's happening in Scotland – we know what's happening in Scotland anyway and I have conversations with my counterpart in Westminster' (Interviewee 6).

It also emerged that a small number of staff had had opportunities to engage in networking at an international level either by attending academic seminars or, in one instance, a conference in Australia on policy development which had led to useful learning from contacts subsequently developed in Australia and New Zealand.

Having outlined the various learning activities which interviewees were - or had been – engaged in, it is apparent that many had actively taken up opportunities which had been made available to them while recognising that it was easy not to make an effort to learn and without being under pressure to do so by senior management. As mentioned previously, senior civil servants held a view that training courses were not necessarily the most effective mechanism for learning and this view was shown to be correct by those interviewees who had not found training courses to be useful. Senior civil servants were aware of their staff's enthusiasm to learn. One explained that

'This department is quite unusual in certain respects. The people who come into it are lively and intelligent and have an openness to learning things and making new ideas work and all the rest of it' (Interviewee 4).

It seemed that those who had strived to learn had a genuine enthusiasm for their work and the situations in which they had found themselves stimulated people to learn. One executive explained that when dealing with constitutional matters when CALM had been established

'There was a shared sense of being involved in something quite big and exciting and the new chapter of devolution for Wales which meant that there was a good pulling together' (Interviewee 12).

Also, those who had strived to learn appeared to be ambitious which seemed to be necessary because, as one junior manager explained

'I think development depends on the individual a great deal. You've got to have the personal motivation to do it because nobody will really push you' (Interviewee 7).

Those who were striving to develop also believed that their efforts could pay off in terms of career progression. The fast streamers had a clear goal of securing an Executive Band post, while others had typically experienced the satisfaction of being promoted which seemed to stimulate hope that further promotion could be attained in the future. One executive explained that

'If you are interested in something and prepared to push it, it is quite interesting how far this organisation is prepared to let you go with it because the job that I have now came out of a bit of work I did' (Interviewee 10).

Despite the general commitment and motivation to learn, as mentioned previously, interviewees did face some barriers – the most commonly cited being a lack of time to dedicate to learning and reflection activities caused by heavy workloads and a perceived lack of human resources. Financial resources to undertake learning activities outside of what was available through the corporate training provider were limited and, because of the organisation's willingness to only provide limited support for external learning not directly relevant to a person's present job role, one junior manager (Interviewee 7) had not found it possible to develop finance skills in order to prepare himself for a move into a finance role elsewhere in the organisation. While a move to a finance role would have required specialist knowledge, one executive (Interviewee 10) mused that the inconsistency of practices across the organisation made it generally difficult to move elsewhere because the need for learning new things was increased as a consequence. In addition to this process issue, when referring to colleagues in the wider organisation, one senior civil servant thought there were cultural barriers because

'Increasingly I get frustrated because there is this negativity – you can't do that, all too difficult. I think if you have that attitude it's going to prevent anybody from wanting to change' (Interviewee 6).

In addition, some interviewees had experienced difficulty while trying to share their knowledge with colleagues elsewhere in the organisation because, as one explained

'There are people who see you as a pain and not necessary to the process, and they don't see that there could be a constitutional issues there' (Interviewee 2, Middle Manager).

Another executive (Interviewee 13) believed that a lack of awareness of the work undertaken by the team presented a barrier to engagement with colleagues. Moreover, in terms of barriers to lessons being learnt when numerous people are involved in an issue, one junior manager explained what happened when it was identified that a Wales Office Minister had been briefed inaccurately. He said

'There was definitely a lot of blaming going on, and people taking sides and not letting other people know that they were taking sides. I can't say I participated in that kind of thing – I just tried to be objective and neutral' (Interviewee 11).

Regardless of the way in which learning happened and of the barriers that sometimes inhibited learning occurring, it was undoubtedly the case that knowledge emerging from learning was held primarily in people's minds. As noted previously, one senior civil servant (Interviewee 8) commented that there was a lack of a knowledge bank and that momentum was lost when people left teams or when they were broken up. To embed learning and knowledge within teams, rather than in individuals, attempts had been made in some areas to multi-skill staff which also helped the team to deal with work matters in the absence of an individual.

However, a number of examples emerged of attempts that had or were being made to capture learning or knowledge in the organisation more widely. A lot of effort had been put into developing a communications strategy to embed understanding of constitutional changes among colleagues throughout the organisation, and both Scrutiny and Constitutional had developed a range of staff guidance and training modules to help develop knowledge. There were numerous examples of where

considerable time had been invested in these activities which had often involved obtaining input from team colleagues, lawyers and/or people with experience of following the processes being focused on. To formalise and embed processes there were examples of the Strategic Delivery and Performance Board being invited to consider and endorse proposals. However, despite all that had been done, a number of examples were cited of where sufficient resource wasn't available to develop needed guidance.

Management interventions and accountability

Interviewees conveyed a high degree of satisfaction with their managers at all levels within Programmes. There was generally a high level of awareness among managers of subordinates' actions and some efforts were made to celebrate success.

It was possible for staff to rectify some mistakes without any involvement or awareness of what had happened on the part of management. However, there was also a high level of awareness – especially within Scrutiny – that some mistakes could cause significant and very public embarrassment for which some believed they would be blamed by people outside of the division (including politicians). Although senior civil servants themselves indicated that they would not seek to apportion blame but, it was apparent that certain matters had not been and would not be overlooked.

Colleagues were generally supportive of each other and, because each small team within the divisions tended to have its own distinct responsibilities, often within the divisions only a small number of immediate colleagues would be aware of any mistakes made by an individual. However, interviewees were conscious that any mistakes they made would in many instances be known to a number of people. That said, due to the characteristics of the work performed by many of the staff, there was often no clear right and wrong way of doing things which presented a difficulty for those scrutinising the work. Especially in Scrutiny, good political judgement was considered to be an essential component of an individual's skill set. Interviewees were clear that solutions developed needed to fit with minister's aspirations and not cause political difficulties.

Senior civil servants did not appear to be prescriptive about the way in which work should be approached, and seemed to believe that staff were capable of being involved in shaping the work agenda and that better outputs could be developed as a result of their involvement. One senior civil servant conveyed this by saying

'Staff have been involved in influencing change here because we couldn't operate in any other way and I have to take people with me because I'm relying on people's good will..... I couldn't work in a situation where I'm just imposing rules on people – I've got to take them with me and they've got to have ownership of them' (Interviewee 6).

Other interviewees made some comments about senior civil servants which indicated that what they said was being practised. An example of these was

'[Name of head of division] is very good at getting a team atmosphere together' (Interviewee 7, Junior Manager).

In general terms, interviewees appeared to be content with the style of management that they experienced both from senior civil servants and from other more junior managers. It was apparent from one middle manager that his line manager had given feedback and supported his development because he explained that

'When I started the job it was a new grade and feedback from my line manager now is that I'm doing an okay job whereas when you start off in a new grade you do start floundering a bit..... The whole performance management system is supposed to give you the feedback and when you have your meeting with your manager it's, well, how would you like to develop this year, how can we help you develop in those areas, what courses can you go on' (Interviewee 1).

In terms of recognition, one senior civil servant felt that the role of staff in the area meant that there was a problem generally with them getting recognition for the work they did, although there was recognition within the division. It was explained that

'It doesn't matter what we do – ministers will take the credit for doing something good and if it's not us it's the policy officials because it's their particular area. But they get the credit here and I have these arguments with people..... It's an unsung hero type of thing' (Interviewee 6).

Another senior civil servant explained how success was celebrated among in the teams when it was explained that

'In terms of the positives, there would be recognition at team meetings and we'd have updates. If there was a particular milestone, people would say so the whole team would know that and also make a point of celebrating milestones achieved' (Interviewee 8).

However, it seemed that some teams did not manage to celebrate achievements because, as one executive explained, the team was very busy dealing with Bills which they had no control over the timetabling of. The executive said

'It's so ongoing and it never stops – there's no point when you stop and say great job everyone because even if a Bill gets introduced we'll already have started thinking about the next set of Bills' (Interviewee 9).

It was apparent that other interviewees had received recognition of their work from within their divisions and sometimes from elsewhere. As one mentioned

'There have been examples of somebody else from another division sending a thank you email to [name of head of branch] about something I've done which she'll then send on to [name of head of division] and [name of head of division] will then say well done' (Interviewee 1, Middle Manager).

As already mentioned, given the high profile nature of the work and close contact with politicians for a number of people in Scrutiny, interviewees recognised that any mistakes they made could have significant implications and, as one senior civil servant said, 'if it goes wrong, it's terribly public here' (Interviewee 6). An executive elaborated by saying

'Unfortunately the job here is not something that you can hide behind – we're in a very public forum and if we don't lay something on time or we didn't follow standing orders that is a breach and is embarrassing for ministers and the government' (Interviewee 5).

However, there were still mistakes that interviewees found possible to rectify without any involvement of their managers and without any significant impact. One middle manager gave an example of an instance of this nature when she explained that

'Yesterday I questioned something which may be I didn't need to question and I said apologies for confusing the issue and the person did come back and say thank you' (Interviewee 2).

Perhaps largely because of this environment, although managers were prepared to allow people considerable scope to determine how to handle matters, it was apparent that they were generally very aware of what subordinates were doing and the majority of interviewees believed that their managers would notice if they made a mistake.

One senior civil servant recognised that mistakes happen and, when they happened, recognised that there should be a focus on putting matters right rather than on blaming. The senior civil servant said

'I work hard to promote a non-blame culture here – you can't blame, you know I always say everyone makes mistakes, it's not what you've done, it's how we go about solving it that matters' (Interviewee 6).

However, another senior civil servant explained how such matters would not be overlooked when explaining that

'In terms of people not doing things so well, then I think the two levels of line management would know and reflect on that and discuss what to do in terms of what are the development needs' (Interviewee 8).

Colleagues seemed to be generally supportive of each other and there appeared to be a willingness to share and discuss problems with team colleagues. This was noticed by one senior civil servant who demonstrated support for this practice when she explained that

'They're very supportive of each other – they do an awful lot of peer discussion. They'll talk to each other and if there's something they really can't deal with, then they'll go to their line managers or they'll come to me. I have an open door policy and they'll come in' (Interviewee 6).

However, each team within each division tended to have responsibility for separate issues and sometimes there appeared to be a lack of awareness about what other teams were doing. Therefore dialogue was typically restricted to the specific team environment and line management chain. The consequence of this was that any

mistakes made would not necessarily be noticed by people outside of the immediate team.

While what has so far been said about the care taken to avoid mistakes and the management support provided represents what emerged about typical practices across both Scrutiny and Constitutional, one executive appeared not to have acted in a similar way while being responsible for managing an internal matter some time ago which ministers would not have been close to or even aware of. It was described that

'My actual learning with regards to some of the pitfalls came from watching the travails of my hapless subordinates..... It meant that the suffering was done, learning was reaped from it and I wasn't doing the suffering myself' (Interviewee 13).

As well as interviewees - especially those working in more junior grades - being conscious of the likelihood of their managers being aware of any mistakes they made, there was also an expectation that colleagues in the immediate team would notice. Further, the actions of many interviewees had implications for colleagues across the Welsh Government. One junior manager explained that

'I suppose if we haven't been able to provide the best service to policy officials then I suppose they could get irate if their time is cut short for providing information to committees because obviously we have to provide the information' (Interviewee 7).

An executive who was managing a project to improve processes also described a consciousness of how colleagues internally were observing the progress of the project and how this was a source of pressure by explaining that

'It's being watched quite carefully and I know there's a few people interested, including the Permanent Secretary, so that ramps up the pressure on delivering that's for sure' (Interviewee 10).

Senior civil servants were also aware of who they were accountable to which was explained by one who also pointed out the limitations of the scrutiny that was possible in the work areas. The senior civil servant explained that

'The Permanent Secretary is very well aware of what I do because much of what my work touches on her interests and so the accountability issue is strongly to her..... the Wales Audit Office don't really feature in my work because I don't have considerable expenditure-type issues. The other area, which has an element of accountability, is the Central Services Corporate Governance Committee which I attend regularly and from time to time asks questions about how I am conducting the business or my part of the business so there is an element of scrutiny there. The nature of the work I do is such that quite a lot of it they cannot really contribute to because it's about the workings of the political machine' (Interviewee 4).

Also, a middle manager recognised that in his work area - if something had not been done in the best way - there would be some difficulty in deeming it to be a mistake or error. He explained that

'I think because the work area in which I work is quite subjective, therefore, the advice I give is subject to analysis – but as long as that analysis is evidenced, I can recommend a way forward..... If a different course of action is decided for whatever reason, I don't think that's necessarily a mistake' (Interviewee 3).

However, all interviewees were very aware that many of their actions had the potential to have political implications and - in the view of one senior civil servant - the impact of political scrutiny which staff faced influenced them by leading them to take

'The course of action which is likely to secure ministers' aspirations without causing political difficulties' (Interviewee 4).

One executive who had recently attended a Cabinet meeting and had, therefore, been very much reminded of ministers' interest in the work recognised that any political implications would not always be immediate when he suggested that

'They would notice if we did a duff job. When they would notice would depend on what way it was done' (Interviewee 13).

It seemed that the political context had the potential to have both positive and negative effects on learning and subsequent performance because, as one senior civil servant described, on the positive side

'Here we have to be seen to be absolutely squeaky clean, and open and transparent. We will always do the right thing and not be seen to be trying to be devious in any way. That's the trust we have with the opposition and that's what we have to maintain here with them. It's maintaining the integrity of the government' (Interviewee 6).

And on the negative side

'People will blame here.....they're very conscious that oh my God if I get this wrong them I'm letting [own name] down because [own name] is the one who has to defend it in Business Committee and to ministers' (Interviewee 6).

Being able to exercise appropriate judgement in the political environment was considered to be important, but not easy to develop within staff. One senior civil servant asserted that

'You either have a political antenna, or you don't. You can't learn that, it has to be instinctive so what I try to do here is to develop people so that they look for the indicators and start to think of those things – it's getting them to think in a different way. You have to make a lot of judgements here – nobody's sitting on your shoulder and they can't second guess you – you have to do it' (Interviewee 6).

It seems that this senior civil servant was suggesting that in a working environment closely connected with a political landscape, the possession of good judgement was more important than the possession of knowledge and skills which could be acquired through learning.

Summary and conclusion

It emerged from the interviewees that staff in Scrutiny and Constitutional were undertaking a variety of work and their different working environments, especially their physical proximity to politicians, contributed to the composition of the prism through which they viewed work and how they did it. All staff appeared to be very much work-orientated with high levels of commitment and motivation.

Significantly, staff at all levels had been able to act as change-shapers which had sometimes come from their responsibilities for implementing new things and

sometimes from their principal purpose being the development of new constitutional arrangements. The ability of staff at all levels to shape change had been facilitated by the small and generally non-hierarchical team environment, and more senior managers' willingness to seek and consider the views and ideas of their subordinates. It was apparent, however, that more junior staff had been less involved in and able to influence changes relating to the structure and functioning of their divisions which they had not been comfortable with. Certainly, staff did not convey an impression that they were prepared to allow themselves to be managed unquestionably.

It was apparent that former CALM staff and those now involved in policy support activities within Constitutional had been involved at the end of significant work programmes in review exercises and reflection on past activities appeared to be embedded in their practices more generally. Former OLH staff had been used to a more task-orientated environment which had not been conducive to spending time reflecting and it was apparent that the restructuring, which had brought some former CALM staff together with former OLH staff in Scrutiny, had brought the benefit of former OLH staff being influenced by former CALM staff in relation to reflecting on past activities.

Due to the newness of work tasks or the developmental nature of the work itself, for many the possibility of receiving training had not existed. In these circumstances, the exercising of good judgement had been as (if not more) important than the possession of knowledge. In some instances the timing of people taking responsibility for work areas had enabled them to have space to learn and think about issues, whereas other had to hit the ground running. Interviewees described how they coped in these circumstances by drawing from whatever relevant experiences they had personally and from engaging in dialogue with colleagues around them to draw from their experiences and judgements. In this environment, it was clear that the willingness for individuals to ask colleagues for advice had been as important as colleagues' willingness to provide advice. Also, people had benefited from being prepared to speak to whoever might have had relevant knowledge, regardless of their grade or role being fulfilled at the time.

Especially in relation to constitutional matters, there had been recognition that people outside of Programmes - both within the Welsh Government and more widely - were likely to possess useful knowledge and experiences which had been drawn from. However, as one interviewee explained, resource levels meant that, in terms of knowledge, staff were in a 'just in time, just enough' mode to get things done which resulted in learning often being undertaken only to the extent that was absolutely necessary.

It was apparent that the vast majority of learning was undertaken on-the-job, either on an ongoing basis as part of undertaking activities or with some time being set aside for speaking to colleagues in the workplace. Senior civil servants had a clear view that it was not desirable to force people to attend formal training sessions and, those who had, had differing views about the value of the training interventions they had experienced. However, those interviewees who had or were undertaking some of the longer-term accredited learning programmes provided by the Welsh Government's training provider all praised the programmes and felt that they had contributed significantly to their development. In particular, the programmes' focus on applying theory to practice and assignments were considered to be very useful. In addition, the privileged few who had been or were undertaking the Civil Service Fast Stream programme had benefited in large measure from the opportunities they had had to perform different roles and the quality time provided for learning and development activities.

Aside from these more exceptional programmes or experiences, interviewees recognised that significant learning and development had emerged from workplace experiences which had occurred naturally. Some described how their knowledge and skills associated with people management matters had developed from experiences they had been subjected to. Also, some work activities brought staff into contact with colleagues elsewhere in the organisation – including lawyers and communications experts - which had led to learning being realised from those contacts. Those interviewees fulfilling more senior roles had tended to have contact with staff in other UK administrations, from whom they had acquired knowledge, and one senior civil servant had benefited from learning through networking at an international level.

Many interviewees had taken advantage of learning opportunities that had been made available to them, which seemed to have been a feature of their apparent motivation to develop and progress within the organisation, but it was also apparent that it would have been relatively easy for staff to have not taken advantage of such opportunities because little pressure was generally applied by managers. In one instance, an individual's motivation to develop within the organisation had led to a desire to appear to be knowledgeable and competent in front of colleagues which had provided an impetus to ensure that sufficient learning was done before attending a meeting to discuss an issue. Those motivated to learn seemed to believe that their efforts could pay off in terms of progression within the organisation and this often appeared to be based on an experience of this occurring in the past.

As well as developing their own knowledge and appearing to be willing to share it with others within the immediate work areas, staff had made efforts to record and share their knowledge on an organisation-wide basis through – for example - developing and implementing a communications strategy on constitutional affairs issues, and developing a range of guidance and training knowledge covering specific subject areas. However, several staff recognised the possibilities for developing more guidance and training but said that they were unable to do so because insufficient time was available to them.

Despite this generally very positive learning environment and high level motivation to learn among staff, some barriers to learning and reflection were prevalent. Most significantly, people had a lack of time to engage in learning activities because of heavy workloads and there was at least a perceived lack of resources to undertake learning beyond the opportunities made available under contract by the Welsh Government's training provider. This led to some interviewees airing frustrations at not being supported to develop skills which they believed would enable them to move into a different specialised work area of interest to them. Moreover, it was thought that – despite the efforts made to share knowledge – there was a lack of a 'knowledge bank' that could be accessed and this was thought to result in the risk of teams' outputs floundering when key people left.

Generally, interviewees conveyed a high degree of satisfaction with their managers at all levels within Programmes. There was generally a high level of awareness among managers of subordinates' actions and some efforts were made to celebrate success - although some felt that there was a lack of recognition of Scrutiny's achievements outside of the division.

If mistakes were made, it was possible for staff to rectify some without any involvement or awareness of what had happened on the part of management. However, there was also a high level of awareness – especially within Scrutiny – that some mistakes could cause significant and very public embarrassment for which some believed they would be blamed by people outside of the division (including politicians). Senior civil servants themselves indicated that they would not seek to apportion blame but, at the same time, it was apparent that certain matters had not been and would not be overlooked.

Colleagues seemed to be supportive of each other through engaging in regular discussions with peers about issues faced and senior civil servants encouraged this dialogue among staff. Because each small team within the divisions tended to have its own distinct responsibilities, often within the divisions only a small number of immediate colleagues would be aware of any mistakes made by an individual. However, because the nature of many work activities involved engaging with staff elsewhere within the Welsh Government, interviewees were conscious that any mistakes they made would in many instances be known to a number of people.

However, due to the characteristics of the work performed by many of the staff, there was often no clear right and wrong way of doing things which one senior civil servant recognised to be something presenting a difficulty for those scrutinising the work of the department and another interviewee recognised to not make it possible for anyone to straightforwardly criticise his actions. Because of the political context, senior civil servants – especially in Scrutiny – considered good political judgement to be an essential component of an individual's skill set and saw great difficulties in developing this judgement if someone didn't naturally have political antennae. There was a strong sense in the department that solutions developed needed to fit with minister's aspirations and not cause political difficulties which was in many respects

one of the most powerful influences on people's actions. People were conscious that not achieving politically acceptable solutions could result in them and others within the Welsh Government (including Ministers) being blamed and this created a pressure to get things right first time.

CHAPTER 9 – FINDINGS FROM LEGAL

Introduction

This chapter is the last of three presenting the findings of each of the case study areas of the Welsh Government in which the empirical research was undertaken. The presentation of the findings starts with a brief introduction of the case setting and an explanation of the characteristics of the staff interviewed. What was established from those interviews is then discussed in four broad areas which, after coding the data, emerged as the areas in which the data could be assembled logically in order to understand the details of each case. The four areas are (1) the working environment, (2) the nature of change and the extent to which staff were involved in it, (3) the approach to learning and support provided for staff and (4) the influence of management interventions and accountability. Throughout, the emerging findings are analysed with a view to understanding their significance in relation to the OL process.

The Legal Department (Legal) had emerged from a much smaller legal service in the Welsh Office with its primary purposes being to provide legal advice to Welsh Ministers and their officials, and to draft legislation. In response to the much increased demand for legal advice and decisions to prepare legislation for Wales following devolution, and the additional functions which the Welsh Government acquired as a consequence of merging other bodies, the department had expanded significantly during the last decade and at the time of undertaking the research was comprised of 118 staff. Legal was headed by a Director who was supported by 4 deputy directors and one Welsh Legislative Counsel who together formed a Legal Management Board. Each of these senior civil service members had a personal secretary and there were 18 staff who undertook administrative duties associated with legislation management and the department's functioning. All other staff worked as lawyers in teams of 4 to 6 people with each team being led by a senior lawyer. All lawyers and members of the Management Board were qualified solicitors or barristers, or in a small number of instances trainee solicitors. Of the 118 staff in Legal, 72 were female and 46 were male.

The remainder of this chapter explains the characteristics of the Legal staff who were interviewed as part of this research and then what was established from those interviews in terms of the working environment, the nature of change and the extent to which staff were involved in it, the approach to learning and support provided for staff and the influence of management interventions and accountability. Throughout, the emerging findings are analysed with a view to considering their significance in relation to the OL process.

Interviewees

A total of 13 staff in Legal were interviewed. The 13 people included representatives from each of the staff grades, including the Director. In order to provide better insights into the relevance of particular contextual issues, interviewees were drawn from areas managed by two of the deputy directors plus one team of lawyers which was line managed by the Director. However, one Deputy Director outside of these areas was interviewed because she had a department-wide responsibility for staff training and development. The interviewees had the characteristics shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Legal interviewees

Interviewee	Male / Female	Role	Years in post
1	Male	Senior Lawyer	2
2*	-	Senior Civil Service	-
3	Female	Lawyer	9
4	Female	Lawyer	7
5	Male	Senior Lawyer	2
6	Male	Lawyer	8
7	Male	Lawyer	2
8	Female	Senior Lawyer	1
9*	-	Senior Civil Service	-
10	Female	Lawyer	4
11	Female	Lawyer	2
12	Female	Lawyer	1
13*	-	Senior Civil Service	-

Note:

** Limited information has been provided about individual senior civil service members to preserve anonymity. The three members of the senior civil service include the Director and two deputy directors. All had been in post for 3-8 years, two were male and one was female.*

Working environment

All Legal staff were located in the Cathays Park office in Cardiff city centre which is the Welsh Government's principal office. The Cathays Park complex consists of two buildings, namely Cathays Park 1 and Cathays Park 2. All Legal staff occupied, along with some other Welsh Government staff, two floors of the Cathays Park 1 building which had a total of four floors and was a Grade 2 listed building overlooking Alexandra Gardens which is a picturesque park area. The building was used by the Secretary of State for Wales before the creation of the National Assembly for Wales and continues to contain offices used by Welsh Ministers when they visit the Cathays Park site. Therefore, the building had significant stature and prestige.

As well as Legal, the building housed the Permanent Secretary's office and some other senior managers' offices. Within the space assigned to Legal, the Director and deputy directors had personal offices and – with a small number of exceptions - each team shared an individual room which were all accessed via central corridors and separated from other parts of the building by permanent walls. Cathays Park 1 was connected to the much larger Cathays Park 2 building by enclosed corridors and staff could walk between the buildings freely which they often did to obtain refreshments from the canteen or snack bars, which were all housed in Cathays Park 2, or to meet colleagues.

The physical working environment had the potential to create segmentation among teams and for there to be a high level of awareness within teams of what team colleagues were doing. However, the department was small enough for all lawyers to at least know of all their colleagues within the same profession and many people had worked in more than one team so communication and relationships often transcended team boundaries. It was also apparent that colleagues across the department socialised with each other and department-wide social events were organised, at least in terms of a Christmas party.

The offices in which teams were located were small enough for most people to be able to hear any conversations taking place within the room and the level of interaction among colleagues within teams was, at least in part, dependent upon the

nature of the work being undertaken. When talking about her team's working environment, one lawyer explained that

'You could come in one day and it would be deadly silent, but then you might come in at another time and there'd be three of us having a chat about something so it depends on what we've got on really' (Interviewee 10).

Especially because of the complex nature of much of the work being undertaken which required a high level of concentration, sharing office space with team colleagues appeared to have both advantages and disadvantages. This was illustrated by one lawyer who said

'We all tend to talk about our work anyway because we sit in the same room which can at times be frustrating because sometimes you need some peace and quiet and there are people on the phone or generally chit-chatting, but it can be useful because with us all being in the same room we tend to at least have some idea of what everyone else is doing' (Interviewee 3).

Both of these lawyers so far quoted joined Legal from private practice and they contrasted the working environment with their past experiences. In comparison, they considered the working environment in Legal to be more conducive to positive interaction among colleagues which seemed to indicate that knowledge sharing and learning within a team environment would be easier in Legal than in the private practice environments where they had worked previously. Some of the key points they made to illustrate this were

'In private practice it's very competitive and you're out for yourself whereas here we're all on a level playing field..... In private practice there's a lot of competition between certain people and if you asked a certain person to help they wouldn't because time is money and if you help somebody else that's time you can't bill. So you couldn't work like this in private practice in my experience – you couldn't say can I just pick your brains on this' (Interviewee 10)

'It's very different in private practice – I had my own office and secretary. I can now say to colleagues I've got this and am going to say this, what do you think?' (Interviewee 3).

Change and staff involvement

In general, interviewees were operating in an environment which was stable and had not experienced significant change in recent times. When asked specifically about how they felt they had been able to influence any change, some interviewees struggled to think of any examples. However, others were able to cite examples of where they had been able to influence small, but in terms of impact significant, changes to their working practices. Two lawyers explained how suggestions they had made had resulted in better coordination of work and knowledge of other team members' activities when they said

'I was one of the ones who asked for the introduction of work lists which I think has been a good thing because it enables us to all know what other team members are doing so it's not only the team leader who has an overview' (Interviewee 3).

'I've influenced change to a degree in terms of how we deal with instructions. We've adopted a team inbox, that was my suggestion, based on practice in other teams' (Interviewee 6).

However, it was interesting that both of these lawyers' line managers also mentioned these changes and described how they had made them. This leaves some uncertainty about the extent to which the two lawyers' influence was perceived, rather than real. Moreover, in terms of influence over internal practices at a broader level within the organisation, all senior lawyers and senior civil servants attended corporate leadership events where attendees were encouraged to make suggestions for change and one senior civil servant (Interviewee 2) mentioned that lawyers are 'starting to be invited to corporate leadership events'.

When the idea for change came from a senior lawyer, it was apparent that that some efforts were made to consult staff. One lawyer explained that

'We have team meetings and we're asked if we think something would be beneficial – we have the discussion and we can say yes or no' (Interviewee 10).

It was also apparent that senior civil servants took some steps to involve staff in change initiatives, but it seemed that on occasions that involvement was sought in respect of implementation issues rather than the underlying direction of travel. In relation to a ‘Lawyer Plus’ initiative which was aiming to extend lawyers’ roles from just acting on instructions to working with other departments to shape policy development, one interviewee (Interviewee 4) mentioned ‘a useful meeting’ that she and other lawyers had had with the Deputy Director leading the change.

One senior civil servant (Interviewee 9) explained that there tended to be a lot of engagement with staff when significant cross cutting legal changes were on the horizon – such as the commencements of the second Government of Wales and Human Rights Acts - to discuss the implications and how issues should be approached, and recalled a time when a small group of people had been convened to inform a review of administrative support arrangements. However, this senior civil servant explained that there would typically be more scope to engage staff in respect of legal changes, as opposed to ‘corporate administrative changes’, and indicated a belief that in certain circumstances staff do not wish to be involved when the comment was made that

‘In the case of corporate administrative changes to some extent we have to make decisions and they have to be implemented, and sometimes it’s not possible to do that by committee. On other occasions there is and there might be consultation’ (Interviewee 9).

Therefore, it seemed that in respect of corporate or administrative issues, senior civil servants within Legal would make a judgement on whether and how to seek staff involvement. In addition to what the previously quoted senior civil servant said about staff engagement in a review of administrative support arrangements, another senior civil servant said

‘From time to time as we do certain things like our competency framework etc, our objectives, we’ll consult across the department about how we’re taking those forward – it’s very much a set of proposals – and when we respond to staff surveys we will put a proposed course of action through to staff’ (Interviewee 2).

However, despite the efforts made by senior civil servants to consult staff, it seemed that some staff still felt unable to influence the actions of managers. One lawyer explained that

'I feel that if I make a suggestion it can result in something different happening, but much more at a team level or with clients than at a management level if I'm honest' (Interviewee 12).

As monthly meetings took place between senior lawyers and members of the Legal Management Board and because the team leader role performed by senior lawyers provided an ability to direct a team, senior lawyers felt more influential. One senior lawyer (Interviewee 8) who had implemented new processes within her team to monitor work recognised the change these had delivered and felt that she had had a considerable influence over practices in the department when the Deputy Director who line managed her had shared the processes with three other teams and encouraged the adoption of them. This same senior lawyer talked positively about the way in which she thought she could influence matters more widely, including through the monthly meetings between senior lawyers and the Management Board. She said

'You're asked for your opinion at the team leaders meetings and in fact you get an email from [name of Director] asking what are your experiences in the team on this and you feed back. There definitely is a two-way system – I have my meetings with [name of Deputy Director line manager] and he speaks to [name of Director] so it all goes up through the chain' (Interviewee 8).

Despite this very positive view of the communication flow among the levels of management, it came to light that the monthly meetings between senior lawyers and the Management Board were not as effective as they might be. When talking about these meetings, one senior civil servant (Interviewee 2) said 'I'm not sure that that works entirely as it should' and went on to explain that a project being undertaken by a senior lawyer as part of a leadership programme was going to review the arrangement. This was further evidence of senior management's willingness to allow input from more junior staff.

When asked what had been the biggest work-based change or innovation for their teams, a number of interviewees talked about the introduction of a new electronic

records management system which had been implemented around three years before the time of the interviews to replace the previously long-established paper-based filing system. The new system, called 'iShare', had been introduced in Legal during a pilot phase preceding the main rollout to other Welsh Government departments. Interviewees had mixed views about the effectiveness of the system, but there was considerable discontentment among the majority of people who spoke about their experiences of its implementation. One senior lawyer explained the process and gave some insights into why the discontentment had arisen when he said

'There was a group within legal services that were dealing with it so there was quite a lot of involvement but I think there was a feeling that our involvement didn't actually change things that much which I think led to some of the resentment to be honest..... You should either be told that this is happening and you'll have to work with it, or you're consulted' (Interviewee 1).

A lawyer (Interviewee 4), who had been a member of the iShare implementation group within Legal and was now enthusiastic about the system, also conveyed an impression that the system was imposed but had now accepted that it was fit for purpose. She said

'As far as the wider way in which iShare operates I don't think I had much influence because they decided that they were going to use the IPSV name categories and we were resistant to that in the team initially because we thought it wouldn't work and, actually, I think in practice what we have found is that it does work really..... My ability to influence was making noises and ultimately accepting that they weren't wrong with what they were doing with iShare' (Interviewee 4).

It was clear that the introduction of iShare represented a significant change to established working practices in Legal which, even if people were at the time of the interviews content with the system, had been an uncomfortable experience at the implementation phase. As it was clear that some people were using the system effectively, it was difficult to determine whether the cause of ineffective use emerged from a resistance to learn because of their discontentment with the perceived imposition of it or a more general preference for working with paper and/or dislike of computer usage. However, perhaps one of the things which made the experience stand out in people's minds was that it was an example of the organisation influencing

a change to their working practices rather than the contrary situation of them influencing the actions of others through providing legal advice which was normal on a day-to-day basis and something which they were more used to and comfortable with. One lawyer explained that

'In the nature of the job you give legal advice on whether things can or cannot be done so you can say you've been able to influence change by telling them they're able to do something. Therefore, my role carries influence.....' (Interviewee 7).

Additionally, one senior lawyer (Interviewee 5) said that 'influencing change through giving advice is quite a common feature of our work' and one senior civil servant described the level of influence that lawyers in the department have by saying

'Our competency framework will place upon them a responsibility to act autonomously to a degree. They're not expected to be heavily supervised so they do have latitude to give advice. Okay, they have to be alive as part of the competency framework to sensitivities, to complex issues where they have to take them back and push them back up the chain but they do have scope within their job role to be quite influential within the areas that they work' (Interviewee 2).

The most important points conveyed by this senior civil servant is that lawyers had a considerable degree of influence which they would exercise during their core activity of providing legal advice or drafting legislation, and that influence would shift to senior lawyers and/or senior civil servants in Legal where issues were sensitive and/or complex. It is also important to recognise that, while acknowledging that legal advice tended to carry more weight than advice from other sources and that it was more often than not impactful, everyone in the department had a remit to advise rather than to instruct. It was apparent that advice provided was not always followed and that layers would sometimes be unaware of if and how advice they provided had influenced activities. One lawyer explained that

'From some clients, you won't even get an acknowledgement that they've had the advice' (Interviewee 10).

Also, in addition to providing legal advice requested from them, lawyers had some scope to influence change more widely through the contact they had with clients. One

lawyer explained that he had been able to influence clients to change outdated templates and correct ‘fudged terminology’ contained in documents associated with grants. He explained that when doing the latter

‘To spur it on, basically I kept nagging clients in emails that what they were doing wasn’t the way to go and copied that to the team leader’ (Interviewee 7).

Also, beyond the day-to-day advice, there was some scope for people to contribute to the development of corporate procedures. For example, one senior lawyer said

‘I’ve had quite an input at a Welsh Government level into the provision of advice and guidance vis-à-vis legislative processes and inevitably that’s something that’s been part of change because of part of the new procedures post Government of Wales Act 2006’ (Interviewee 5).

It was also apparent that interviewees had sometimes reflected upon activities they had engaged in. However, the extent to which this had occurred appeared to be potentially influenced by a number of factors – one of which was the nature of the work. This is illustrated when one lawyer, who had moved from a role where he had advised in the context of projects to a role where he was required to provide ad hoc pieces of advice, said

‘Looking back to consider whether a significant piece of work what had gone well and not so well was certainly something I did in my previous team because it was project-based if you like where there was that formal step of doing a look back exercise’ (Interviewee 7).

However, two other lawyers (Interviewees 4 and 11) who worked in the team referred to which undertook the more project-based work could not recall a time when they had participated in any formal look back activities – although it was acknowledged that informal discussions often had a reflective dimension to them and that performance review discussions focused mainly on past activities. A senior lawyer and a lawyer (Interviewees 1 and 10 respectively) from a different team considered that looking back was something which happened regularly in an informal way which suggests that the team environment facilitated learning from past experiences.

There was clearly a recognition of the value of reflecting on past experiences by senior management in the department as one senior civil servant said

‘What I’m trying to develop in my own teams, and I think the idea for this has come from one of the team leaders rather than from me, is making sure that after every significant piece of work we have a lessons learnt session so we’re taking that forward within my own teams and I’m hoping that if that’s good we’ll roll it out further.....’ (Interviewee 13).

There was also a similar recognition embedded in the programme for trainee solicitors as one interviewee who had been through the programme said

‘When I met with [name of training supervisor] fortnightly we’d look back at my work lists and we’d talk about it – I’d usually put something down for improvement’ (Interviewee 12).

Despite these recognitions of the value of reflecting on past experiences, it was clear that it was not routine for many interviewees and two explained that this was largely because of work pressures and time constraints as illustrated by one who said ‘we don’t have much time to sit and contemplate things’ (Interviewee 11).

Approach to learning and support available to staff

In order to understand the approaches taken to learning and support available to staff, it is firstly important to understand the factors that manifested as pressures to learn. Although the working environment for Legal staff was well established and generally stable, work activities were changing constantly and tended to present new challenges on a daily basis. One senior civil servant explained how high level changes had impacted on staff in Legal and how these had created pressures to learn by saying

‘It has to be a learning organisation because most lawyers will have encountered novel issues whether it’s in terms of how we develop the constitution or how we deal with problems in a different way to how they’ve been dealt with across the border. So I think it is an organisation of almost continuous change that’s grown significantly since I’ve been here – we’ve gone through the mergers process, we’ve had a second constitutional settlement and even now there are issues which are still being developed as we go into a further phase. We’re coming to terms with legislative competence and a further change of powers, and all lawyers to a greater or lesser extent

are going to get caught up in addressing those issues so we have to be supple and agile and creative in how we take things forward' (Interviewee 2).

These pressures to learn were emerging from decisions taken by politicians, but others emerged from the expectations management had – which were aligned with those in the civil service more widely - about what lawyers and senior lawyers should do in their roles working at the grades they were. As one senior civil servant said

'I think when you're talking about legal advice, generally speaking we have an expectation that lawyers can work autonomously with minimum supervision because they're professionally qualified etc etc' (Interviewee 9).

When talking about how he learnt the things he needed to learn when becoming a team leader, one senior lawyer was clearly conscious of the expectations that were held about how he should perform because he said

'It is a team leader position that you're going into and you do need to do things independently, and there is an expectation that you will do things.....' (Interviewee 1).

The day-to-day challenges faced were also confirmed by lawyers, one of whom said

'You never get the same thing twice – there's always something different coming in' (Interviewee 11).

As well as the new daily challenges emerging from changing constitutional arrangements, it was expectedly the case that clients would usually only seek legal advice in relation to novel issues. One senior lawyer explained that

'I think most of the [client subject area] people once they've had an answer they appreciate that and they don't come back only when a new situation arises which is pretty often – they then send a new question' (Interviewee 5).

There was the obvious point made by one lawyer (Interviewee 3) that 'the law keeps changing'. However, one of these interviewees, when comparing her present role with her previous role in another team in Legal, indicated that the challenge faced varies from team to team because of differences in the nature of the work and in senior lawyers as team leaders. She said

'When I was in [previous subject area] we were advising on particular policies that the Minister had and we were basically saying whether or not that's legal, or what the issues and challenges are. What we're doing now is a lot more difficult.....we are giving advice on things that are sometimes quite theoretical..... a lot of it is linked to the personality of our team leader who wants everything covered' (Interviewee 11).

Some credence to this analysis was given by an interviewee from another team who said

'You can tick over and in terms of how far I can refer to the fact that I'm relatively new within the team' (Interviewee 7).

Despite this comment, there was generally an overwhelming sense from interviewees that they were working in an environment that necessitated a high level of ongoing learning. Even though many staff had qualified as lawyers before entering Legal, unless they had come from another public authority, they would have faced a very steep learning curve. One interviewee explained why this was the case when he said

'When I joined here from [name of previous employer], it was getting to grips with public law. This is a subject that most law students do as a module in their first year and it's something that you quickly forget. In the case of [name of present team] you need to get yourself up to speed with European law – that is a compulsory subject for law undergraduates and is a subject you don't really see the practical ramifications of. Your subsequent training as either a solicitor or barrister very much focuses on the practicalities of suing people, preparing wills – it rarely, if ever, goes back to public or European law. So, I think it's fair to say that for a lot of lawyers – especially those coming in from the private sector – can initially find themselves quite deskilled when they join the department' (Interviewee 6).

In addition to these pressures to learn which arose from the nature of the work undertaken within Legal, others arose from obligations to undertake continuous professional development (CPD) as directed by the Law Society and other bodies to which lawyers, as qualified solicitors or barristers, were associated. One senior civil servant (Interviewee 9) commented that 'I think people are generally self-motivated to accrue the required points etc'.

Senior civil servants in Legal had made considerable efforts over recent years to facilitate learning and one Deputy Director oversaw the work of a small team headed by a Training Manager and had a Legal-wide responsibility for development issues. One senior civil servant described what had happened during recent years by saying

‘The main thing that’s happened over the past few years is the movement away from people just signing up to go on courses away from here and to an agenda that someone else has set to us devising our own training programme so that carrying out a training needs assessment across the department, then tailoring the courses in an in-house training programme to what needs to be delivered, utilising our legal services contracts to get people in to provide support, using our panel counsel to come in and provide support, using our network with not just Whitehall but the other devolved administrations to bring in their knowledge and experience’ (Interviewee 2).

A questionnaire distributed to all staff and individual learning and development plans informed the development of annual training programmes which would cover any Legal-wide training needs.

It was the case that relevant training could not be sourced externally because either few other people needed to acquire the knowledge, as would be the case in relation to National Assembly law making processes, and/or the subject matter was very specialist.

It would be possible to draw a distinction between the subject-based knowledge and other knowledge which was applicable to many areas of work within Legal. The latter category of knowledge was transferable and the training programme had aimed to enhance it across the board. When talking about this type of knowledge, a senior lawyer said

‘There are certain aspects of the work which are more public law in nature irrespective of the particular portfolio and there are a lot of skills you acquire in legal services which are transferable between teams’ (Interviewee 5).

The format of the training developed and delivered in-house, and some of the resultant benefits that the approach taken were considered to deliver, were described by a senior civil servant as

'Mainly classroom – it's not just lecture, almost all of them will have an interactive element to them, either exercises or role plays. The events are generally delivered by internal lawyers so that's where the greater benefit comes in because, obviously, if you're designing training materials and delivering the training course it really embeds your own knowledge very well and also it's sharing our own home grown knowledge that nobody else has got – so it's succession planning' (Interviewee 13)

Therefore - although all of this was being delivered under the umbrella of a training programme - the approach taken was stimulating both individual learning for those developing and delivering the training, and learning among colleagues during the delivery of the training.

In the year prior to the interviews being undertaken, the in-house training programme had for the first time provided enough training places for everyone in Legal to obtain all of their sixteen required CPD points as a result of attending the courses provided. However, this was beyond what was necessary but appeared to be desirable to staff because, as one senior civil servant explained,

'Lawyers have to have sixteen continuous professional development points per year – only four of those have to be obtained through accredited courses, the rest can be done by self-study – reading and so on' (Interviewee 13).

Interviewees spoke about the training programme in very positive terms. One senior lawyer said

'I think training in legal services is now much better than it used to be – it's now much more targeted' (Interviewee 5).

Annual departmental Training and Development Reviews were undertaken and reports produced to provide an overview of the in-house training delivered, feedback provided in relation to training, attendance levels and an analysis of money spent. The report produced for the year ending March 2011 demonstrated the effectiveness of the in-house programme. It showed that 95 per cent of people said that training courses they attended met their expectations, that attendance increased by 12 per cent compared to the previous year and that spend on external courses as a result of the in-house programme had decreased by 44 per cent.

However, despite the apparent all-round satisfaction with the in-house training, it was recognised by senior management that it might not be the best approach in the future. The approach was adopted when many staff were new and few staff would have received training in the areas covered by the programme. One senior civil servant explained that

'I want to move on now from just classroom-based training partly because that's just one building block in a learning organisation..... A lot of people have acquired a basic to intermediate level of skill in a lot of areas and at this point I think we may be at a point where we have a lot of disparate needs..... So, I think we need to think about are there other or better ways of doing this' (Interviewee 13).

The role of buddies was already a key feature of the arrangements for inducting new staff into Legal as part of a departmental induction programme which had been developed to supplement the Welsh Government-wide induction course. The departmental induction programme involved some classroom-based learning and senior lawyers had responsibility for ensuring that a buddy was in place.

However, when talking about how they learnt to perform their roles, nobody mentioned the induction programme or the contribution of a buddy which indicates that they had not been the main sources from which knowledge had been acquired. It seemed that senior lawyers and other colleagues had been willing to provide support and a typical experience was described by one lawyer who said

'My then team leader had a meeting with me and he gave me what were then the principle pieces of legislation which governed the work that we do and he spoke to me and gave me a general view..... And it was then really a case of having the queries passed to me and initially every piece of advice I gave would go via my team leader for him to check what I was saying was correct' (Interviewee 3).

In addition, it was apparent that new entrants developed some of their knowledge by reading, attending meetings and interactions with team colleagues. When asked how she had learnt when starting in her role, one lawyer said

'I read things I suppose – anything that was available. I would research if I needed background information..... and the web generally and then I would ask questions of colleagues' (Interviewee 4).

Interviewees who spoke about their experience when joining their teams praised colleagues for the support they had provided when they started in their roles. An example of some of the comments made is

'Colleagues within the team were very helpful in giving me some introductory chats and a lot of notes and materials that they thought would be useful' (Interviewee 7).

One lawyer explained why there was generally a willingness to help new colleagues when she said

'I've been in the team now for almost nine years and in that time there's been substantial turnaround of staff.....so when the new people start we were prepared to help them so I think there is a general willingness to help people who are new and haven't got the background in a particular area of law' (Interviewee 3).

There seemed to be an acceptance that new entrants needed time to build their knowledge and one interviewee (Interviewee 3) said that 'people build up over six months'. The same interviewee indicated that this was conveyed to a new entrant and put into practice where possible, and that offers of support were made when she said

'It's made clear to them that you're new and it's to be anticipated that you will need help and it tends to be the case that they get more straightforward things when they start' (Interviewee 3).

There was further evidence that new entrants did learn on-the-job and that they were eased into their roles because one lawyer when talking about his own experience said

'If I remember rightly, there was an element of me having to ask for work a few times which sort of implied that I was being given bits to get on with' (Interviewee 7).

As well as the technical learning which all interviewees needed to undertake in order to provide legal advice, it was clear that lawyers benefited from other learning. One

lawyer who had joined Legal from private practice had learnt that it was not effective to simply work from instructions provided by colleagues responsible for policy development. The lawyer explained that

'I think the one thing I've learnt through being here is that with clients when you receive instructions from them you're not necessarily given the whole picture because I've learnt that you don't take the instructions at face value..... I think it's vital that we understand the policy context in which we're working in order to provide the tight advice' (Interviewee 3).

Senior management had recognised the importance of effective engagement with policy officials and staff across the department had been consulted about a 'lawyer plus' initiative which aimed to realise this. One senior civil servant explained that

'We're starting to work on something called lawyer plus which is about how do we project ourselves to client departments' (Interviewee 2).

It follows from these comments that it is important to consider the possibility for lawyers to learn from clients and it seems that this possibility existed. One senior lawyer explained how it was possible to engage in a two-way learning process with policy colleagues when he said

'In some ways, it can be quite a passive process – you kind of assimilate information through discussing without actually engaging with a particular view to learning something' (Interviewee 5).

Further to the learning associated with the core activities relating to functioning as a lawyer, senior lawyers and senior civil servants had the added learning relating to staff management to undergo. When senior lawyers had taken up their roles, there was no formal training available other than short courses provided by the Welsh Government's corporate training provider on specific issues such as attendance management and health and safety. There was corporate guidance for line managers on specific issues and then it seemed that senior civil servants and peers were relied upon for advice on the handling of more difficult issues.

One of the key initiatives delivered through an external provider over the year prior to the interviews taking place had been a Leadership Programme which both senior

lawyers and senior civil servants in Legal had participated in. The programme had consisted of a series of classroom-based events and then each participant was required to take forward an individual learning project focusing on an issue in Legal. Some of the contents of the programme were described by one senior lawyer as

'There have been elements which have been taught or delivered on leadership models, ways that you learn, ways that you engage with people on personnel issues, what makes people tick' (Interviewee 5).

Senior lawyers and senior civil servants seemed to believe that the Leadership Programme had been a beneficial experience and the learning projects were considered to be useful learning experiences. One senior lawyer said

'Each team leader has had to take up a project which is really helpful as a development opportunity' (Interviewee 5).

Moreover, one senior civil servant had drawn some impactful learning from observing how two senior civil servants elsewhere in the organisation, who were clearly considered to be impressive, had developed their staff. It was explained that

'It was the willingness to use games if you like, but also the fact that they'd go below the surface and they weren't just thinking about what information people need to do this job but what skills do they need and how can I put this over to them, what roles will people be playing in this project we're all going to be working on together and what kind of exercise or game can I devise that will enable them to realise that and how those roles will interact with others.....but it made me feel that with these senior people doing this it kind of made me feel freer to think well it is okay to do that – it can be good practice to do that. I can at least consider the possibility of that' (Interviewee 13).

Learning outside of a structured training environment was clearly the context in which much learning occurred, as has already been described in relation to new entrants and the high level of ongoing learning which people's roles necessitated. Many interviewees recognised the potential which existed for learning in this context, as is illustrated by one lawyer who said

'In terms of developing new knowledge and experience, I think it is fairly easy because there's a lot of variety in my role. I think if I wanted to get involved

in something different or more challenging, I think I could go and ask' (Interviewee 4).

Even if people did not feel that there were sufficient opportunities for development in their present roles, one lawyer explained that there would – if desired - be opportunities to move to acquire development elsewhere when he said

'I think there are opportunities here if you want to move from being a lawyer to policy and people have done it, but whether most lawyers would feel comfortable and would want to do that I don't know. The good thing about our department is that it's so big and you do have opportunities to work across teams if you've decided I'd rather do something else' (Interviewee 7).

In the light of all the opportunities which existed for development in day-to-day activities, it was not surprising that - when asked if anything had provided significant personal development in the last year or two - a number of interviewees talked about work-related challenges which they had found beneficial to them personally. An example given was

'There's the commencement order – that was quite pressured. I was basically drafting the legislation myself, liaising with the Wales Office, Legislative Counsel and my own team leader..... I'd learnt quite a lot from it and I'd learnt how to deal with conflicting interests and come to a conclusion' (Interviewee 11).

This lawyer also described how she routinely learnt on-the-job when she said

'I'm working with someone at the moment who's a newly qualified solicitor and she will talk things through with me and I will do the same with her..... She might come back and say well what about so and so. It does help a lot to do that – just to talk out loud. Sometimes I talk to myself' (Interviewee 11).

Another lawyer described how colleagues had benefited from the experience of a particularly knowledgeable lawyer who had left Legal. He explained

'There was a particularly legendary lawyer here and he was an excellent mentor people say who had the luck, basically, to just sit in his room and he would point people in the right direction' (Interviewee 6).

Another lawyer provided some insight into why many people considered their most significant recent learning experience to be something that they had done during the course of their work, rather than as part of a formal training intervention, when she said

'I think a lot of the learning takes place on-the-job because, as a lawyer, I think you can attend a course which can be very helpful – it can point out what the principle changes are in an area and set out an overview of the new legislation – but until you're actually faced with a problem where you actually have to call upon that you don't actually get down to the nuts and bolts of it until you have to provide the advice' (Interviewee 3).

Therefore, it seemed that learning undertaken during training interventions could stimulate or facilitate learning on-the-job. Not only did this appear to be true in relation to the technical knowledge element of the learning, but also in respect of the networking which bringing people together for training events stimulated. One senior civil servant explained that

'As we're split up into subject-based legal teams, it has the potential to develop into silos so by bringing people together in a cross-cutting way for training we just get people talking to each other and we consistently get feedback that that is a side benefit but a real benefit' (Interviewee 13).

Apart from networking which had emerged from people being brought together as a result of undergoing training, a small number of virtual teams had been established in Legal which brought together people from across teams who had an interest in a particular issue – for example, European law and Legislative Consent Motions. These teams sometimes met physically, but more frequently team members would communicate via email to share new information or ideas about how a particular issue might be handled. Interactions in these teams were considered to be useful and one lawyer explained how benefits could be realised when she said

'We'd been discussing a particular issue via email and then a colleague from another team said to me, as an off the cuff comment, perhaps we ought to have a discussion or a crisis meeting about this – it was only in the sense that we'd hit a difficult issue. I organised a discussion about the correct approach to Legislative Consent Motions and we had a discussion and a note of that has just gone out and I'm going to try to take that forward' (Interviewee 4).

Outside of any established structures for networking within Legal, it was clear that lawyers had over time built up an awareness of what knowledge their colleagues possessed. However, a detailed awareness of who knew what took a considerable amount of time to acquire. There was some information on the intranet about roles, but it seemed that knowledge of people's experiences which had been gained on an ad hoc basis was what people considered to be most helpful. When talking about the information available about colleagues' knowledge on the intranet, a typical comment was 'I always forget to use it' (Interviewee 7). However, another lawyer suggested that not everyone is always willing to make an effort to help other colleagues when she said

'Sometimes we have cause to consult other teams and there are some teams which you wouldn't, or you might and you'd know you wouldn't get an answer or get an answer quickly' (Interviewee 10).

Many interviewees also interacted regularly with their counterparts in other UK administrations to share knowledge or experiences. One senior lawyer said

'We've got a reasonable working relationship with lawyers in other administrations.....we tend to have meetings at least twice a year where we all get together so that's a good forum for exchanging views. It also does mean then that we can pick up the phone and discuss issues with them' (Interviewee 5).

One senior lawyer believed that she needed to do more to develop her relationship with counterparts in the Scottish Government, but she had regular contact with her counterparts in Whitehall which she explained was because

'I find them very helpful, but that's because we've built relationships. We've met them, they've come down to us for a day with our team to see how we work – it's good will. You know you trust each other and working towards the same goal whilst respecting that they're a different government so it all works' (Interviewee 8).

A number of lawyers also spoke about benefits which had emerged from contacts with other administrations and, even if they did not speak to people for the purpose of aiming to seek knowledge or share it, they would engage in dialogue regarding the handling of specific issues. However, some lawyers – perhaps for good reasons – saw

some difficulties with engaging with other lawyers externally and it was clear that relationships were not well developed in all subject areas which appeared to present barriers. A comment made to illustrate these issues was

'I have had cause to phone the Scottish lawyers or the lawyers in [name of UK Government department] and occasionally you see things that have come from them. My experience is that within [name of UK Government department] they're not that forthcoming to discuss matters with you' (Interviewee 10).

The two key repositories for storing information that were then accessible to all staff in Legal were the intranet and the electronic records management system which has been mentioned previously. However, some interviewees found it difficult to retrieve information from the electronic records management system, but certain key information which needed to be drawn upon when formulating legal advice was sometimes stored in a separate electronic folder so that it could be accessed more easily. Also, the Office of Welsh Legislative Counsel was setting up intranet pages to display examples of good instructions produced for others to refer to when drafting new instructions for counsel.

Extensive guidance had been produced and placed on the intranet about how lawyers should handle constitutional issues and one key repository of people's knowledge seemed to be in training materials they produced when delivering training to Legal colleagues and occasionally to other colleagues. One senior lawyer recognised that more needed to be done in his team to store people's knowledge in organisational systems, rather than just in people's heads, when he said

'I've asked some team members to provide powerpoint presentations to explain to newer members the intricacies of [specific subject area]' (Interviewee 5).

The danger of the repository for knowledge being in people's heads was highlighted by one lawyer who said about a particularly long serving and knowledgeable colleague who had retired that

'I would have asked [name of retired colleague] once upon a time – particularly when I think it's something that's part of his corporate memory, or his wide legal knowledge' (Interviewee 4).

Two senior civil servants (Interviewees 2 and 13) had clear aspirations for improving the way knowledge was managed in the department – one said

‘I’m conscious we need to do more in the area of knowledge management, but am still searching for the mechanisms to make it work better’ (Interviewee 2).

One of the factors that was identified as a barrier for sharing the knowledge of the retired lawyer was the issues of time. It was explained that

‘If we’d had time, there would have been all sorts of things we could have done..... We didn’t have that luxury – [name of retired lawyer] had to keep working’ (Interviewee 4).

However, in broader terms, the issue of time constraints was not the only factor which made knowledge-sharing among colleagues challenging. One senior civil servant believed that knowledge-sharing was easier when the department was smaller because he said

‘As we’ve expanded, this is where the knowledge management issue has come up - we need to be a little bit more organised and structured about how that happens compared with the old days when with a smaller department a lot of it would happen almost organically’ (Interviewee 2).

One lawyer also considered the length of time that lawyers in Legal tended to stay in the same post as being a barrier to them learning new things and to knowledge being shared. Referring to lawyers working in UK Government departments, he said

‘Lawyers in the Government Legal Service as a general rule of thumb move on every three to four years..... it’s seen as being beneficial as general public law lawyers to move to a new subject, to move departments’ (Interviewee 6).

One senior civil servant (Interviewee 13) also thought that there were merits in lawyers moving to different posts after a three to four year period, but mentioned that other Legal Management Board members did not share this view. This was likely to be because, as the lawyer who drew comparisons with the arrangements in UK Government departments acknowledged,

'The quid pro quo, especially for policy colleagues, is that lawyers will develop deeper knowledge. Invariably, lawyers will accrue a lot of policy know-how' (Interviewee 6).

This clearly exposes a tension between learning a depth or a breadth of knowledge. Although some lawyers made it clear that they had no aspirations to work at a higher grade, the flat hierarchical structure of Legal meant that opportunities for progression to a higher grade were very limited. However, there was little evidence that this impacted adversely on people's motivation to learn – perhaps because 'if all you're concerned about is climbing the ladder you wouldn't be in the public sector' (Interviewee 10) - but it does provide a partial explanation for why people tended to stay in the same role for longer than people elsewhere in the Welsh Government might typically do. There was also the issue of some people wanting to stay in their comfort zone because, as one senior civil servant said,

'Not everybody might see their role elsewhere – maybe they're accustomed to dealing with a certain workload and they're happiest dealing with something they're accustomed with and may not like the novel' (Interviewee 2).

However, that comment did not mean that the senior civil servant was content to see everyone coasting along because the next thing said was

'I think the opportunities are there and that sometimes people may need to be encouraged to take them up, but ultimately they're necessary because if the organisation is going to flourish it's going to need people who are alive to how things are developing' (Interviewee 2).

Management interventions and accountability

The senior civil servants interviewed all recognised that lawyers needed a degree of autonomy to fulfil their role which they seemed keen to provide and wished to avoid taking a heavy-handed approach. It has emerged from the above discussion about the approach taken when implementing change that senior management often took steps to consult staff, but had in a limited number of instances considered it necessary to themselves make decisions and implement them. On a day-to-day basis, senior civil servants did not prescribe exactly how things should be done, but tried to influence

change by highlighting issues to people. An example of the approach taken was given by one senior civil servant who explained that

'I've had conversations with two team leaders this week where they currently produce management information in a particular way, for example, and I've challenged them to think is that taking me too long for the benefit we get out of it' (Interviewee 9).

In particular, it was apparent that senior lawyers tended to feel supported by their managers and that they felt able to approach them for guidance on how to handle any problems. One senior lawyer explained that

'[Name of Deputy Director] is really willing to see me on a relaxed basis – I can go to see him whenever I want' (Interviewee 8).

This support was also available from senior civil servants when people were new to senior lawyer positions. One senior lawyer mentioned, when talking about when he was new to his role, that

'I think one area of support was from my line manager who was quite keen to give me the time to get to grips or have the space to read around the areas without taking on a too specific case load. [Name of Deputy Director] was very supportive' (Interviewee 5).

It was clear that senior civil servants were prepared to give careful consideration to any concerns about the actions of staff and not make hasty judgements. One senior civil servant explained how concerns raised were dealt with and the rationale for the approach which is worth quoting at length.

'The usual situation that arises in is that some advice has gone up, its been received by a minister, the minister's not happy, a minister comes back to me to question it or the minister goes to the Counsel General, which tends to happen these days, and we look at it and we think yeah there's a problem – that's not the line Legal would adopt. I think in that situation, you have to look at how that's come about..... You have to avoid taking people to task or coming explicitly as a criticism because you don't ultimately want to deter people giving advice that they need to give. Having said that, they need to be aware that they have departed from what Legal think..... I don't, and I don't think my managers, tend to come down heavily' (Interviewee 2).

The same senior civil servant then explained how any matters which senior management in Legal considered to be of concern would be addressed when he said

'If there's a pattern, where somebody has given a particularly poor piece of advice that shouldn't have been given from what we expect of our lawyers, or there's a repetition then we pick it up under performance management' (Interviewee 2).

It came to light that the sentiments of this approach by senior civil servants had been applied in a situation which one senior lawyer had faced. In this situation, it had emerged that some aspects of legal advice he had been provided in relation to a very high profile matter had been contradicted by Counsel ahead of a judicial review. The senior lawyer was very concerned about what had happened, had found senior civil servants to be very supportive and had learnt from the experience. He explained that

'I looked back afterwards and I raised it with my line manager and also with the Director of the department and discussed it..... We started the process of how did this happen, what went wrong and I thought a lot about it myself and I've identified issues of perhaps being a bit too close to a project that you lose the distance and independence that you need' (Interviewee 1).

There was an expectation among senior civil servants that matters would be escalated to them in certain circumstances because as one explained

'Lawyers work in teams – they're expected to know broadly the issues that are being dealt with and for team leaders to be aware that we do have a process of escalation within the department where if something is complex and sensitive and has wider implications then it should be coming up the chain.....' (Interviewee 2).

This seemed to be effective because, as one lawyer described

'I think we've got a very good structure in Legal in that a line manager would become aware quite quickly of anything' (Interviewee 6).

In terms of the approach senior lawyers took in their line management roles, it emerged that they practised different styles and organised work in different ways. One senior lawyer controlled all work activities closely which she considered necessary to achieve order. She explained that

'Everything that comes in comes to me. I allocate it and I now prepare the work lists – before people did their own..... So it's all ordered – everyone knows where they are' (Interviewee 8).

Other senior lawyers took a much more hands-off approach as another senior lawyer explained that

'I've introduced a team mailbox so that requests for advice now go through a central point. I do receive requests for advice sometimes, but principally a request should be routed through to this team mailbox and team members will then themselves pick up work..... I tend to leave it to their discretion, they're professionals' (Interviewee 5).

A lawyer from another team described different arrangements, but which involved the senior lawyer not being in control of every piece of work. She said

'The way in which requests for advice come to my attention is a mixture of directly from clients or via my team leader. If I have some long running established relationship with a client, they usually come to me. Other matters which I haven't been involved with before and clients I haven't dealt with will come via the team leader' (Interviewee 4).

These different approaches led to variation in the degree of independent learning which lawyers needed to do. This is because the senior lawyer who controlled work closely said

'If people don't need it, then obviously I wouldn't burden them but if people want a steer then I would set out how I would approach that answer, give them a framework with headings to say how I'd see the answer unfolding..... There's lots of dialogue and I get my weekly legal alerts coming through which I'll analyse and then I'll send that through to the team saying I've ordered this article for you on this or provide a link to an article, I've ordered books for them' (Interviewee 8).

The senior lawyer who took the more hands-off approach took a view that

'Given the breadth of law in relation to which the team undertakes, there's no way I can be an expert in all of those areas..... I see myself as primarily a facilitator.....' (Interviewee 5).

One of the significant consequences of these different approaches was that a senior lawyer's input would in some instances be offered and in others have to be sought. No lawyer said that they did not feel able to approach their senior lawyer as a team leader if they needed to and it was apparent that senior lawyers who did not seek to control work closely tended to volunteer advice and support in circumstances where they considered that that would be helpful. Therefore, it is important not to exaggerate the impact of these different approaches in practice, but if the support did need to be sought it was apparent that this could stimulate more individual learning for a lawyer because – referring to her own senior lawyer – one lawyer said

'He's up to his eyes, he's really busy, so I don't want to bother him.....so I basically try and read around the subject. I think most people in my team do that' (Interviewee 11).

In terms of how work was organised, the key difference was that in some teams lawyers might be expected to deal with any enquiry or legislation falling within the subject area(s) covered by the team while in other teams lawyers specialised in dealing with enquiries or legislation falling into a particular category of the subject area(s) covered by the team. This difference led to lawyers either needing to acquire a deep knowledge of a specific subject category, or a broader knowledge of the wider subject area(s) dealt with by their team. It seemed that the model which involved individuals specialising in specific subject categories within teams was more widespread in Legal and, while nobody said this explicitly, it was clear that certain areas of work were more complex in nature – such as European funding issues and agricultural payment schemes, which might have necessitated, or led to the perception of a requirement for, greater specialism on the part of lawyers. The rationale for moving away from people specialising in specific subject categories to dealing with any matter within a broader subject area(s) was explained by a senior lawyer in a team where this change had occurred as being

'What I'm doing now is making sure that everyone delivers in the same way because it's not fair to put additional pressure on people..... I'm trying to keep it even. I ask them actively to share pieces of advice and I send it – it works both ways.....' (Interviewee 8)

Another difference prevalent among the teams, largely because of differences among approaches taken by senior lawyers in their team leadership roles, was the frequency and format of team meetings. Some teams did not appear to have many team meetings and did not feel that they were needed. One lawyer explained that

'We don't have many team meetings, but we do talk a lot. [Name of team leader] is very good at copying information around. I think there's a general awareness of what's going on in the team anyway' (Interviewee 4).

Where team meetings did take place they tended to have different purposes, ranging from 'more about planning work for the future' (Interviewee 11), to 'we incorporate a bit of training' (Interviewee 8), to the following which one lawyer considered to be beneficial as she said

'At the meetings everyone goes through the work they've got on and highlights any issues that they'd like to discuss with the rest of the team..... That's been useful.....it makes us more aware of what's going on' (Interviewee 10).

Senior management's reaction to concerns about the actions of staff has already been discussed and nothing emerged to contradict the view already outlined by one senior civil servant (Interviewee 2) that managers in Legal did not tend to come down heavily on people if a mistake was made. However, as has already been said, that did not mean that no action was taken where concerns came to light and – for example – one lawyer said that after she had forgotten to do something before taking leave 'I got it in the neck from [name of line manager] when I got back' (Interviewee 11). It was also apparent that senior lawyers would take some action to try to avoid problems occurring again because as one lawyer said when talking about her team leader

'If there was something not done well, I don't think there'd be criticism..... I don't think he'd be the type who'd say what on earth have you done' (Interviewee 10).

It seemed that as in most instances lawyers would take responsibility for tasks individually, the actions of one individual would usually not impact directly on another individual so it appeared that staff did not take a particularly close interest in what their peer colleagues were doing and – therefore – expressions of views about others' work did not seem to be particularly prevalent.

Despite the support that staff felt from management in Legal, although they could often understand the reasons underpinning them, it was still possible for them to feel uncomfortable with reactions from colleagues elsewhere in the organisation. In the situation described previously where a senior lawyer's advice had been contradicted by Counsel ahead of a judicial review, when talking about colleagues outside of Legal the senior lawyer said

'They were supportive to a point but you could see well you're the lawyer..... It is this thing that everyone is trying to protect their own position' (Interviewee 1).

Indeed, for a number of interviewees it was clear that reactions from clients did have a significant impact on them. The situation just described was where a client's reaction had caused discomfort, but it was clear that the contrary situation occurred as well. Two lawyers mentioned that

'I get greater satisfaction from someone saying that's really helpful' (Interviewee 4).

'It's nice that they come back and say that's exactly what they want, that's really helpful' (Interviewee 10).

One senior lawyer (Interviewee 8) had been particularly pleased that the Director General in charge of her client department had specifically thanked her for efforts she had made. It was also apparent that senior civil servants from time to time received positive feedback directly about the work of staff in Legal and recognised the value of it because one mentioned that

'If someone takes a big Bill through, you often see the compliments as they come to the end of a very demanding project which are always well received and very deservedly received so to be fair some ministers have been quite genuine in passing praise' (Interviewee 2).

However, recognising a fuller set of consequences resulting from giving positive feedback, one senior civil servant had clearly given careful thought to an appropriate course of action in this area because it was explained that

'I try to do that myself in terms of thanking people.....but I think you need to have a discipline about the number of occasions you do it just so that it retains its credibility etc and be aware of sensitivities if people think they're not being complimented when they think they should' (Interviewee 2).

One lawyer described the circumstances in which she had received feedback from this senior civil servant which shows that feedback had been provided in relation to something out of the ordinary and that it had been well received. The lawyer said

'I had to do a piece of work recently relating to [specific work area] which attracted quite a bit of publicity so there was quite a bit of advice around that and it had to go to [name of senior civil servant] and I had a nice email back saying thanks for the advice, it was good advice.....' (Interviewee 3).

While interviewees were mainly office-based either advising clients, or drafting legislation to deliver policy outcomes for clients, they were very much aware of the scrutiny to which they and/or their work could or would be subjected to. When one senior civil servant was asked whether the way in which people were held accountable and were scrutinised affected the way in which they thought and acted, the reply was

'It must do at every level. This is the balance you need to strike in how we express our competencies and in how we react when problems come up..... – we don't want individual lawyers constantly giving the burden to their team leaders of endorsing advice etc so there is the ability to work autonomously and to a professional standard combined with the need to recognise situations where they do need to where its complex or there are ministerial sensitivities or there may be wider implications. In terms of accountability, if they are criticised for doing something or feel that they've strayed then it's a natural human instinct to become more cautious next time and that applies all the way through' (Interviewee 2).

This indicates that concerns about accountability and scrutiny influenced both management practices and the actions of individuals. Indeed, it was clear that lawyers would focus a greater level of attention on issues that they considered were, or were likely to be, the subject of a high level of scrutiny. One senior lawyer (Interviewee 5) explained that

'Inevitably there are some areas which are more contentious than others and you would give more attention' (Interviewee 5).

It was also apparent that lawyers would from time to time attend meetings with ministers and support ministers during committee and plenary meetings in the National Assembly. This could happen where there were questions arising about legal advice provided, as it did in the situation already described where Counsel's advice had contradicted advice provided ahead of judicial reviews proceedings. The senior lawyer involved in that explained that

'This went to the minister and to the First Minister as well, and we had discussions with them.....' (Interviewee 1).

It became apparent that scrutiny of advice was variable, but an established process was in place to scrutinise legislation drafted by Legal staff. Most draft legislation had to be scrutinised by various National Assembly committees and in plenary session. One lawyer talked about other factors that would typically be in a lawyer's mind when drafting legislation and some of the barriers which could exist to lawyers producing the best possible draft. He said

'When it comes to legislation, it goes without saying that the first thing that will happen when a piece of legislation is printed is that you will have your canny lawyer in private practice looking for any loopholes..... The danger in just drafting things solely from a perspective of your instructions is that you fail to take a critical eye to the deficiencies of the product' (Interviewee 6).

In many ways, the various sources of scrutiny had the potential to put pressure on lawyers to ensure that they learnt what they needed to in order to avoid a legitimate criticism of their work being identified. However, while driving learning focused on the achievement of high quality, this scrutiny – in terms of drafting legislation – also had the potential to disincentives lawyers to learn and apply new approaches and, instead, to use old precedents because as the same lawyer explained

'The attractiveness of doing so is that you can say an old precedent is a tried and tested product. It's been out there in the public domain, if it was to be subject to a legal challenge then it should have been to date' (Interviewee 6).

Summary and conclusion

The interviews with staff in Legal revealed that their working environment was generally stable and that, while people regularly interacted with colleagues across Legal, there was a strong sense of association with a particular team which was contributed to by the physical working environment in which teams sat together in rooms separated by physical walls. Those who had practised as lawyers in the private sector felt for a number of reasons that the working environment was more conducive to positive interactions with colleagues than the environments they had experienced in the private sector.

Within their work areas, staff had had some scope to suggest changes and examples were given of where these had been implemented. In most instances, the changes which had occurred within Legal as a direct result of ideas expressed by lawyers were small in scale, but had sometimes made significant and beneficial differences to working practices. Senior lawyers had reason to believe that their ability to influence change in the Legal working environment was greater and they, along with senior civil servants, had on more occasions had the opportunity to attend corporate leadership events where they could contribute to discussions about change at a higher level. Senior civil servants seemed to encourage more junior staff to make an input to change and be involved in it. However, in practice, this was sometimes around implementation issues – rather than the underlying direction of travel – and less in relation to matters associated with the running of Legal or wider corporate issues than with technical issues associated with work tasks. There was certainly widespread discontentment with the way in which a new electronic records management system had been considered to be imposed on staff in Legal as part of a corporate programme.

Although lawyers did not consider themselves to be particularly influential within Legal, this did not mean that they did not feel influential overall. This was because all interviewees exercised considerable influence in their roles as legal advisers and legislation drafters, and interviewees were very conscious of the changes to government policies and practices that they could influence on a daily basis. It also emerged that lawyers' influence would sometimes not be limited to legal matters.

This significant influence interviewees undoubtedly had was tempered by the fact that their roles were to advise, rather than instruct, but nevertheless it was evident that people recognised the significant impact they could make. As this situation was what interviewees had become accustomed to, it was perhaps not surprising that they had felt distinctly uncomfortable when the tide turned and others exercised influence over them.

It was apparent that staff did sometimes reflect on past experiences to consider what had worked well and what had not worked so well, and this usually happened either through ad hoc discussions with colleagues or during more formal individual performance review discussions with line managers. Senior civil servants recognised the importance of learning lessons from past experiences and had aspirations for stimulating more activity in this area, but many spoke about the significant barrier that high workloads and a consequent lack of spare time presented to this happening.

However, while work pressures appeared to result in little time being available for reflecting on past experiences, these pressures also provided some of the strongest stimulants for learning. As well as work pressures arising from a high volume of work, they also arose from the complexity of issues interviewees were required to deal with which emerged not only from the inherent complexity of many legal matters but also from the novelty of issues caused by continually changing constitutional arrangements and the normal situation of lawyers only being asked to advise on new issues which clients were unable to themselves handle without legal advice. Additionally, interviewees' membership of professional bodies led to them being required to undertake continuous professional development. While there were inevitably some variations among teams, there was an overwhelming sense that the nature of work tasks necessitated a high level of ongoing learning. This context stimulated significant ongoing learning among all staff, although it was clear that learning was more intense for newer staff – especially those who had not previously practised as a lawyer in a public sector environment.

Senior management had made considerable efforts to facilitate learning by developing in-house training programmes which were compiled following training needs analyses to meet specific needs. These programmes had been particularly effective, partly

because they provided training which could not be acquired from external sources and training modules were delivered by Legal staff which enabled them to consolidate their own learning during the processes of developing and delivering training as well as to share their knowledge with others. Feedback provided on training delivered through the in-house programmes was very positive, but senior civil servants recognised that new approaches would need to be examined as training already provided had developed a basic level of knowledge among staff across Legal.

Although the in-house training programmes appeared to have been effective, it was clear that most of people's learning took place in their teams' working environments through knowledge being shared among colleagues, self-learning, and positive interactions and support among team members. People were especially willing to support new members of staff. While the most significant learning for staff was the acquisition of knowledge about technical legal issues, it was also apparent that other learning was important such as – for example – how to engage with clients effectively. Moreover, it was evident that interviewees had in many instances learnt from their clients and it was apparent that learning from people who were respected by the learner facilitated this process. Interviewees recognised that opportunities existed for them to develop in their own role and elsewhere within Legal or the wider organisation

The training interventions were a complement to, rather than a substitute for, on-the-job learning and one of the key ways in which training interventions had complimented on-the-job learning was by developing relationships through joint participation in training and the subsequent generation of greater interaction among staff across Legal. The benefits of networking across teams were demonstrated by the useful outcomes achieved from virtual teams, which had been developed to focus on specific issues, and it was clear that one of the prerequisites to effective networking was knowing who possessed what knowledge so that productive linkages with others could be made. Building up knowledge of who could be approached about particular issues took considerable time, but it was also apparent that some individuals perceived certain colleagues or teams to not be approachable or helpful which was a deterrent to contact even being attempted. The same situation occurred where there was a perception that colleagues in other UK administrations would not be helpful,

but a number of very good relationships with other administrations came to light which had been beneficial.

It emerged that information and some knowledge was captured in organisational systems, but there was a recognition that more needed to be done to capture knowledge effectively. This was considered to be more necessary in a larger department because it was felt that knowledge-sharing had happened in a more organic way when the department had been smaller. Partly because of the flat hierarchical structure in Legal, which meant that promotion opportunities were very limited, staff tended to stay in the same roles for long periods of time. It was recognised that this resulted in people developing an in-depth knowledge of the areas in which they focused and that this could lead to higher quality advice, but that it also limited knowledge transfer among teams and the development of broader knowledge in individuals.

Interviewees generally expressed a high level of satisfaction with their managers and senior civil servants were careful to ensure that they provided a high level of autonomy to people so that they could fulfil the professional roles they needed to as practicing lawyers. Interviewees felt that management were generally very supportive and there was an established process in place for making senior management aware of contentious and/or sensitive issues in which they might need to be involved. It transpired that senior civil servants did not react in a knee-jerk way when potential concerns were brought to their attention - rather, they were careful to firstly construct a full understanding of what had happened and the context in which it happened. Nevertheless, any problems identified were not overlooked.

It was clear senior lawyers had varied management styles and that they organised work in different ways which meant that some were much more hands-on than others. These differences among senior lawyers' approaches had consequences for the amount of independent learning lawyers needed to themselves undertake. This was because in some instances senior lawyers' support would be offered and in others would have to be sought, and - when having to be sought - self-learning could be stimulated because of a reluctance to 'bother' senior lawyers. Also, the type of learning lawyers needed to undertake varied because a broader knowledge was

needed in teams where all lawyers would be expected to handle any matter within the team's broad subject area(s) – whereas where each lawyer took responsibility for a specific subject category more in-depth learning relating to a narrower range of issues was needed. There were also differences among teams with regards to the frequency and format of team meetings, and it was apparent that benefits were recognised in people updating team colleagues on work they were doing where this happened.

Senior lawyers tended to take some action to attempt to avoid identified problems occurring again, but – as was the case with senior civil servants – did not take a heavy-handed approach in their line management roles. Interviewees often worked independently to produce advice or draft legislation so the actions of individuals often had little impact on their colleagues and this seemed to result in views about colleagues' work or performance being expressed infrequently. People were quite sensitive to any reactions from their clients to work they did and any praise was always well received. Senior civil servants did themselves provide praise from time to time, but were very careful about how they went about this. The approach they took did appear to result in a significant and positive impact on more junior staff in receipt of praise given. The importance upon which any reactions from others were viewed appeared to contribute to staff being motivated to deliver high quality work which could only be done following effective learning.

Staff at all levels were very aware of the scrutiny to which their work would be or could be subjected and this influenced both the actions of managers and other individuals with more attention being given to issues which were considered to be likely to be the subject of a high level of scrutiny. While the scrutiny of advice varied, established processes were in place for scrutinising legislation and staff drafting legislation were acutely aware of the scrutiny which would occur before legislation was made and which might occur after it was made. This stimulated a lot of effort to learn how the job could best be done in order to avoid problems occurring.

CHAPTER 10 – OVERALL ANALYSIS

Introduction

The findings which have emerged from the three diverse case study areas within the Welsh Government provide a range of illuminating insights into how individuals learn in those areas and the features which could facilitate or inhibit individuals' learning being shared with others or captured and fed into other repositories. After the data from the three case studies were categorised, they were analysed and presented in previous chapters in the four broad categories of 'working environment', 'change and staff involvement', the 'approach to learning and support available to staff', and 'management interventions and accountability'. These areas emerged as those in which the data could be assembled logically in order to understand the details of each case and – for this chapter – develop a framework which allowed for the empirical data to be compared and contrasted both among the three case studies and with existing literature.

This chapter aims to do three things. Firstly, it aims to compare and contrast the data emerging from the three case studies - identifying principal similarities and differences, and with reference to the views and understandings expressed by the organisation-wide learning influencers interviewed during the preliminary phase of the research. Secondly - taking a critical realist approach - it seeks to explain the findings with reference to the interviewees as agents in the context of six key structures, with a particular focus on the relationship between agents and structures. In doing so, the Welsh Government's context, as outlined in Chapter 6, is factored in. Thirdly, it seeks to incorporate an evaluation of how the findings relate to existing literature throughout.

After outlining the analytical framework deployed to achieve the three aims of the chapter, it was considered appropriate to start with a discussion of the matters relevant to OL associated with the individuals interviewed which came to light during the empirical investigation. Then, the focus turns to the six key structures which emerged from the analysis as being relevant to OL which – through considering how individuals interacted with them – enabled understanding of the facilitators and

barriers to OL to be developed. The key structures around which the analysis occurs are (1) physical, (2) accountability, (3) development, (4) management intervention, (5) workplace social and (6) work task-based.

The overall conclusions which can be drawn, the implications of the research, the contribution of the research and areas for further research are all covered in the next and final ‘conclusions and implications’ chapter.

Analytical framework

It is important to be clear at the outset about the theoretical framework underpinning this analysis. The fundamental basis of the framework is a critical realist stance based on a belief that every action performed by human agents requires the pre-existence of some social structures which agents draw upon in order to initiate action, and in doing so reproduce and/or transform them (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). A key consideration throughout is the sense people have of being constrained or enabled by their circumstances in terms of the structures in which they are located (Ackroyd, 2004), while – as a critical realist - being cognisant that agents possess their own causal powers which are revealed in their mediated interplays with structures.

Accepting Archer’s (1995) view that structure and agency are radically different entities possessing different emergent properties, and that they should not be conflated, the question arises of how behaviours resulting from mediation between structure and agency can be understood? As was explained in Chapter 5, Archer (2003) sees the ‘internal conversation’ as the missing link between structure and agency. This form of conversation is recognised throughout this analysis when considering the actions of individuals, recognising that – as Archer (2003) suggests – the internal conversation is a ‘personal emergent property’ and individuals are trying to establish a ‘modus vivendi’ where their concerns are always taken into account. Working from this standpoint, structures have the power to enable or constrain OL practices in different ways among people operating in the same context. As Archer (2003) observes, an individual evolves during his/her life course and is shaped by social background, life-chances, personal inspection of his/her own morphogenesis and – finally – application of personal powers to pursue replication or transformation.

This gives rise to a requirement for a relational analysis which recognises both prevalent structures and the prospects for agents. This form of analysis has tended to be applied infrequently in organisation studies (Mutch et al, 2006).

A relational analysis of the kind required in this context was undertaken by deploying the sentiments of the notion of 'retroduction' to the consideration of individuals' internal conversations. As was explained in Chapter 5, retroduction involves digging deeper to identify causal powers lying behind mediated empirical patterns (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). In this analysis, consideration has been given – based on the researcher's knowledge of the structures and agents involved – to what people had been thinking and, crucially, to why they had been thinking what they had been thinking. This enabled the researcher to form and provide explanations for actions, while recognising that there is a transcendental reality beyond his discursive production which cannot be known (ibid).

The relevance of actors' temporal agentic orientations exposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) is also recognised with reference to Dorado's (2005) outline of routine behaviours being common where a focus on the past prevails, sensemaking behaviours being likely when a focus on the present exists and that strategic behaviours emerge when a focus on the future is prevalent – albeit with a recognition of the non-independent prevalence of such behaviours.

Power is central to critical realist thinking and, therefore, it is important to explain how it is understood and applied within this analysis. As is touched upon in Chapter 3, Clegg et al (2006) highlight the unequal distribution of power in organisations and stress the importance of deciphering the influences which frame individuals' decisions to contest. This has been done in this analysis by, when considering individuals' internal conversations, seeking to understand what power they had and how it might have influenced their internal conversations. In doing so, the author's conceptualisation of power took account of the important elements of power outlined by Giddens (1979) – namely the existence of a 'could have done otherwise' situation, no connection with intention or will and relations always being two-way. However, as discussed in Chapter 5, Giddens' thinking expressed in his later work (Giddens,

1994) does not inform this analysis because of his rejection of the critical realist view that structures can also be a source of power.

Individuals as agents

As understanding in the analysis of data undertaken from a critical realist standpoint arises from surfacing how the power of agents is mediated against the power of structures, it seems logical to start by outlining matters relevant to OL which came to light among the people interviewed during this study and to develop understanding of their significance – including their potential to impact on people’s internal conversations.

It was apparent that one dimension of individuals’ situations which had the potential to impact upon the way in which they might engage with OL was their educational backgrounds. It was apparent that all staff in Legal and most staff in Programmes possessed a higher education qualification which seemed to contribute to their motivation for and comfort with continuous learning. Because of the high degree of similarity in this regard among staff in Legal and Programmes, it is difficult to identify how the possession of a higher level of learning experience impacted upon individuals in those areas. However, in Rural where staff possessing a higher education-level qualification appeared to be in a minority, the difference which this had the potential to make was clearer in that individuals possessing a qualification at this level seemed to be more inquisitive and likely to question processes – rather than to passively accept what they encountered. This is consistent with Archer’s (2003) view that the internal conversation is a ‘personal emergent property’ rooted in an individual’s life course and shaped by social background, life-chances, personal inspection of his/her own morphogenesis and application of personal powers to pursue replication or transformation.

This situation demonstrates that Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) expectations on the behaviours of all individuals seems to be overoptimistic as they appear to make no allowances for differences in individuals’ intellectual capacity, and that March and Olsen (1988) and Hayes and Allinson (1998) are right to respectively suggest that the capacity of individuals and cognitive styles impact on how people can engage in

learning processes. However, this study has also demonstrated how diverse the types of learning individuals need to undertake can be and it does – therefore – seem entirely possible for individuals to successfully engage in one type, but not another. This results in the learning capacity of individuals only being assessable when considered in a specific context which is in line with arguments from Streufert and Nogami (1989).

Moreover, it was clear that engagement in any learning - or sharing of an individual's knowledge - beyond that required to perform a job role to a basic standard was to some extent dependent upon an individual's levels of motivation and enthusiasm. While some of an individual's motivation and enthusiasm levels come from within, it is of course also true that these will be affected by what is encountered within a workplace. There were a number of interviewees in Rural and Legal who appeared to be motivated to perform as well as they could within their roles, but did not wish to progress to a higher grade. Due to the significantly more complex and non-process orientated nature of the work being performed by staff in Legal - than that being performed by staff in Rural - and the greater level of comfort with ongoing learning prevalent among staff in Legal, staff in Legal engaged in considerably more learning than staff in Rural.

However, across all three case studies it was apparent that those staff who had ambitions to be promoted volunteered themselves to take part in additional learning experiences which ranged from taking part in pause and review exercises in Rural, to leading special interest groups in Legal, to volunteering to engage in longer-term leadership programmes in Programmes. Therefore, it seemed that having enthusiasm and motivation instilled in staff had the effect of stimulating learning. It follows that this illustrates the importance when attempting to understand the actions of individuals in the OL process of Burns and Stalker's (1961) observation that individuals in organised working communities seek to realise other purposes than those they recognise as the organisation's. This fundamental situation has often been largely overlooked in the literature by those with strong unitarist underpinnings (e.g. Senge, 1990; Pedler et al, 1991; Reid and Barrington, 1999; Denton, 1998; Sadler, 2001).

In Rural, there was a dimension of people appearing to resist engaging in learning not directly necessary for performing their job roles which acted as an inhibiting factor to them engaging in wider learning. This was demonstrated further in Programmes where examples emerged of colleagues outside of the department resisting receiving the advice staff were able to provide. Clearly, why people appeared to not be open to certain learning needs further exploration in the context of discussions of their interactions with various structures and – as the examples of individuals demonstrating resistance in this study were concentrated in Rural – that indicates that there might be factors which had featured in people’s internal conversations in Rural which emerged from context-specific structures. However, here the point that a person’s own attitude towards learning has the potential to be an inhibiting factor can be made which, again, supports Archer’s (2003) view that the internal conversation is a ‘personal emergent property’.

Another hugely significant individual characteristic which was an essential prerequisite for many instances of learning was the willingness and ability to form effective relationships with other people. While the range of people with whom effective relationships needed to be forged varied from job role to job role and workplace to workplace, it was evident that both sharing one’s own knowledge and receiving knowledge from others often depended on good relationships. This was largely because the vast majority of learning occurring on an informal basis was mainly dependent on people’s goodwill.

The impacts of these variations in individual characteristics are considered throughout the following discussion of relevant structures focusing on the way internal conversations shaped OL practices.

Physical structures

One set of relevant structures prevalent were of a physical nature. It was apparent that the geographical location of a workplace relative to where learning activities could be engaged with was important. In particular, this came to light in Rural where staff were able to benefit from more learning opportunities if they travelled to Cardiff and – typically – staff had the power to decide whether to or not. The travel time between

the Rural office in Carmarthen and Cardiff was around one and a half hours each way. It was clear that some staff had decided that they would make this effort because they considered it would be helpful to their endeavours to progress within the organisation and others – typically who said that they did not wish to progress – avoided doing so if at all possible. Others had to consider how the travel time would impact upon their domestic commitments and often concluded that it was not feasible or desirable for them to make the journey. Staff working in Cardiff were more able to benefit from a range of learning experiences without having to internally deliberate so many complexities associated with doing so.

More broadly, it was apparent that for Rural staff in Carmarthen their distance from the centre of the organisation in Cardiff and separation from senior colleagues who were mainly based in Cardiff had important impacts, especially for more junior staff, on both their perceived and actual ability to share their learning. There was a feeling of disconnect with, and lack of ability to influence, colleagues in Cardiff responsible for policy. This impacted significantly both upon people's mindsets and upon their communication channels through which aspects of learning would occur. Therefore, the frustration or derailment of goal attainment for individuals and organisations located far from the decisional centre identified by Wildavsky (1964) also applies to learning processes – accounting for less effective learning and possibly being caused by less effective learning.

Even if people in Rural thought it would be possible to influence change, the distance in both geographical and hierarchical terms between more junior staff in the Carmarthen office and senior managers in Cardiff led to frustration arising about the speed at which changes happened and this led to further disengagement because people's internal deliberations led them to conclude that it was not worth them making efforts. Existing OL literature seems to have largely failed to recognise the challenge that geographical spread prevalent in many large organisation can present for OL, both within units of organisations and across organisations.

The situation for staff in Programmes, who worked in much smaller teams and who mostly all sat in close proximity to their senior managers with whom they interacted on a daily basis, was vastly different. This contributed for staff at all levels to a

feeling that they could influence work-related matters and, for staff based in Cardiff Bay close to politicians, they could more clearly see how their work fitted into political scrutiny mechanisms. Not only was the location of the workplace significant and its proximity to influential actors, but the location of people in the physical environment also impacted upon interactions affecting learning. Even where staff were in the same building, but separated by permanent walls, these walls tended to act as barriers to interactions which could facilitate knowledge-sharing and learning. As would be expected, there was more interaction among staff located in the same room than there tended to be across physical wall boundaries – although either a need to speak with people outside of a room or personal relationships often ameliorated the effect of physical walls on communication channels. In most circumstances, staff had the power to decide who they would communicate with and they needed to decide for themselves whether the effort associated with doing so was likely to be outweighed by the benefits of doing so.

The benefits of learning through interactions with colleagues working in the same physical space could sometimes be at the expense of individual learning which for some was facilitated by peace and quiet. The disadvantage of being disturbed by other people was recognised by lawyers in Legal to also bring the advantage of at least having some idea of what immediate colleagues were doing. Moreover, in the Rural physical environment, people were conscious that everyone in the room would know if anyone was not doing something well which was compounded by the also prevalent work social and work task-based structures discussed later. Therefore, in Rural, the physical features of the environment served to hinder positive experiences of learning emerging from any mistakes made.

Although the drawbacks of being physically close to colleagues should not be overlooked, overall it seems that the absence of physical barriers between staff facilitated OL because it lessened the effort burden being considered in any internal deliberations people had about whether or not to engage in communication. In large organisations, where it is not possible for staff to be physically close to all colleagues from whom they might usefully learn, this raises some issues for consideration around office planning if aspiring to facilitate OL. The issue of office layout is another basic, but significant matter not adequately recognised in existing OL literature.

Accountability structures

Some accountability mechanisms also influenced the way people acted in ways relevant to OL. Some elements of these, including the European Union-led audit of Rural's activities and the Corporate Governance Committee's scrutiny of Programmes, did not appear to impact upon people's actions in a significant way because people doubted that any particular activity would be scrutinised and/or that it would be possible for blame to be attributed to an individual. In relation to the European-level audit of Rural's work, in addition to staff doubting that activities they were performing would be scrutinised, it was believed - when staff internally considered any possible consequences - that the identification of any mistakes could be responded to by asserting that insufficient guidance had been given. Therefore, people tended to decide that they did not need to be very concerned about this particular audit.

The majority of staff in Programmes, perhaps partly because of their greater closeness to politicians, saw the potential for most of what they did to be scrutinised and understood how that might happen. People were especially keen to avoid causing embarrassment for ministers and so possible actions were limited to what fitted with ministers' aspirations. It was not the case, as LaPalombara (2001a) seems to suggest, that innovative thinking and questioning established practices were not possible in this context – but it was the case that staff would want to know that externalising such thinking and any resultant proposals for action would accord with ministers' wishes. This situation is very much in line with what the constitutional position for UK civil servants requires of them which is, as Drewry (1994) points out, to serve ministers with non-partisan loyalty.

The situation prevailing was close to Hartley and Skelcher's (2006) observation that public services are often characterised by complex policy and political environments operating under the control of politicians with high levels of scrutiny and accountability. This creates a situation where, as LaPalombara (2001a) valuably points out, the degree of freedom open to a person in a public sector organisation is limited. However, LaPolombara (2001a) does not note – as this study has

demonstrated – that there is often scope for public sector workers to operate freely within broad frameworks as they are understood between civil servants and ministers.

Staff in Rural processing applications for subsidy payments recognised the potential for any of their work to be scrutinised by management because there was awareness that all processing actions were logged in electronic systems. Although staff knew that managers would check a sample of their work, because the vast majority of staff in Rural had no direct connection with - and therefore no knowledge of – customers, it was not possible for them to assess which customers would be the most likely sources of challenges. This led to staff deciding to take a default position of assuming that any action they took could be the subject of a challenge and, as Vince and Saleem (2004) also found, through fear of getting things wrong acting with caution and in the interests of self protection.

Generally, the lawyers appeared to be better able to predict which elements of their activities were most likely to be scrutinised and where they could be held directly accountable which led to their greatest focus being on mistake-avoidance and targeting extra efforts to ensure that the most robust solutions possible were targeted in the areas that mattered most. There was a collective understanding in Legal of the issues which carried the greatest risks, and which needed to receive the highest level of attention and be on the radar for senior managers. Lawyers involved in the drafting of legislation knew that it would be heavily scrutinised both during and after its development. They were at the forefront of the increased scrutiny of the civil service imposed following devolution which Kirkpatrick and Pyper (2001) refer to. In these circumstances, people tended to try to look for tried and tested solutions which had the least prospect of causing difficulties because their internal conversations had led to them concluding that this was the most likely way of achieving an acceptable outcome. This indicates that learning in this context was, arguably necessarily, focused on how to deliver a safe result – rather than on looking for innovative solutions which are sometimes seen as the product of OL. This is an important example of public sector workers engaging in knowledge exploitation rather than exploration in the way anticipated by Crossan and Berdrow (2003), and Levinthal and March (1993), because – as Rashman et al (2009) point out – it is considered to be tried and tested and, therefore, less risky.

Although these differences were prevalent among the case study areas, there was across the board generally little scope for making errors. Frese and Brodbeck (1989), and Strike and Posner (1985), argue that it is necessary for learners to make mistakes because it is only through errors that people can understand associations and principles. This research does not support this view as the opposite is more apparent which is that the need to avoid mistakes has created pressure to learn, certainly at the single loop level, which goes some way to endorsing Bovens' (2010) observation that accountability mechanisms can induce learning. It might be the case that trialling more innovative ideas requires space for mistakes and that seemed possible as long as something would not be considered to be an error among the constituencies staff involved were aiming to satisfy.

Some of the organisation-wide learning influencers interviewed during the preliminary phase of the research recognised that there could be both positive and negative effects of scrutiny mechanisms on learning, but taking more risks as advocated by one of the learning influencers interviewed during the preliminary phase of the research would not appear to be an easy endeavour for many staff who were operating within boundaries they recognised – for example, laws or ministerial preferences – and who were unlikely to move outside of the civil service practices they were immersed in. However, for some those boundaries did not prevent broader thinking to identify wide ranging options – but they constrained their actions when the consequences of implementing options were deliberated internally.

The difference between some of the success measures to which public sector workers are exposed, compared with those working in the private sector, marks one of the most important differences between the two sectors. A fuller illustration of how these impact on OL is, therefore, very important to furthering understanding of the dynamics underpinning OL in the public sector.

These findings contrast with LaPalombara's (2001a) conveyance of a situation where all public sector officials are worried about, and allow themselves to be guided by, numerous stakeholders and where all public sector organisations are prophylactic - rather than innovative. This study has shown that people working in the public sector

tend to have a sense of where successful challenges to their activities are likely to emerge from as a result of their internal conversations. This study supports Smith and Taylor's (2000) suggestion, which is based on a limited empirical study of the UK civil service, that the impact of accountability on OL is overstated in the literature. However, the key point which has been unearthed here is that the impact on people's actions is not significant where an assessment has been made that the scrutiny is either unlikely to happen or where a credible 'excuse' for any errors can be formed.

Development structures

The development opportunities and/or requirements associated with people's roles also created structures affecting OL. As members of professional bodies, lawyers in Legal were required to accumulate a minimum of sixteen Continuous Professional Development (CPD) points each year - only four of which had to be obtained through accredited courses - and this provided an impetus for learning. Typically, lawyers tended to seek to acquire all of their CPD points from accredited courses and the requirement to accrue CPD points contributed to a sense that ongoing learning was part of working life. Lawyers did not have power to avoid engaging in activities to accrue the CPD points as their ongoing membership of professional bodies depended on them doing so.

Staff in all three case study areas had access to the same suite of generic training courses provided by the Welsh Government's contracted training provider, but it was only in Legal that technical training specific to work undertaken had been developed and made available in a structured way. There was both a requirement, in order to acquire necessary CPD points, and an expectation that staff in Legal would attend the training made available. This had clearly led to staff concluding in their internal thoughts that they needed to engage and this more formal learning which had been well received. This can be contrasted with the other two case studies where very little structured formal training relevant to work activities was available, and where participation in other generic training was optional and often not engaged with – particularly among staff in Rural. Therefore, as most of the learning needed to perform roles had to take place on-the-job, this research shows that the way in which OL practices can help informal unstructured learning can be valuable in the public

sector. This more basic need and rationale for embedding at least some OL practices has perhaps been understated in the literature by writers including Finger and Burgin Brand (1999) who have tended to focus on arguments for the widespread adoption of OL in the public sector to achieve grander transformational outcomes.

Although many of the organisation-wide learning influencers interviewed in the preliminary phase of the research appeared to understand what practices would be likely to be conducive to effective OL, they did not seem to be actively championing learning beyond that which could be undertaken through formal training interventions. However, given the lack of connectedness they had with the majority of staff in such a large and diverse organisation, there would be many difficulties in them making a positive impact on learning practices in specific work areas. In other large organisations also part of the UK civil service which are less functionally diverse, such as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, significantly more learning is achieved through formal training interventions. Therefore, while their influence on OL processes overall has been limited in this study, development structures are an important element when considering OL processes in the UK civil service and UK public sector more broadly and warrant being categorised separately from other structures.

Management intervention structures

While individuals with managerial responsibilities were embedded in workplaces alongside all other staff, it emerged that those with managerial responsibilities across the three case studies sought to intervene in learning practices to varying extents and in various ways. The interventions made presented structures which influenced both informal learning and more formal learning through the provision of training. However, as many staff were still left with considerable power to decide what learning they wished to engage with, what staff were themselves motivated to do often had a greater bearing on what was actually embarked upon than any prescriptions given by managers.

Among the three case studies, managers in Programmes generally endeavoured to directly influence staff's engagement in learning least. However, due to a high level

of self-motivation to learn among staff in Programmes and their personal decisions to seek progression, they tended to engage in the greatest amount of more formal learning – often in the form of longer-term leadership development programmes. As a result of them putting these programmes in place, this was one of the few ways in which the activities of the organisation-wide learning influencers interviewed in the preliminary phase of this research had influenced learning practices on the ground.

In contrast to the situation in Programmes, managers in Rural encouraged staff to dedicate two hours per week to learning activities but few staff did so. Rural staff's decisions to not use the time as advocated by managers were made taking account of managers' more audible messages about the importance of meeting targets which led to staff deciding that targets needed to be their overriding focus. This demonstrates that in order to stimulate OL managers need to pay attention to the broader organisation of work which impacts on individuals' ability to engage in learning activities not intimately bound up in work tasks and which, therefore, need additional time to undertake. This illustrates that Weber and Berthoin Antal (2001) are correct to emphasise the importance of leaders taking account of the various dimensions of time needed for shaping the processes of OL.

With a significant dedication of time, as has already been referred to in the discussion about development structures, it was in Legal that management's efforts locally had the greatest positive effect as a result of organising learning through the provision of an in-house training programme. This pull on the part of management was coupled with a push from staff who were keen to accrue their required annual CPD points which demonstrates that Child and Heavens (2001) are right to point out that efforts made by senior managers need to be combined with a degree of cognitive and behavioural initiatives on the part of organisational members for OL to be effective. It has already been mentioned that the requirement to accrue CPD points among staff in Legal had a significant positive impact on their internal deliberations about engaging with organised learning activities.

However, in all three case studies it was apparent that – for the vast majority of staff – their learning had occurred during the course of work and interactions on a day-to-day basis. Betts and Holden's (2003) assertion that formal learning through delivered

programmes, rather than OL, has been the vehicle for delivering reforms is not supported by this study and some organisation-wide learning influencers interviewed in the preliminary phase of this research suggested that insufficient efforts had been made to link skills development with strategic political priorities. It might have been the case that public sector managers have focused more on delivered programmes, but this study tends to suggest that people's knowledge and behaviours are by far most heavily shaped by their learning in their job roles – whether that is described as OL or not.

It follows that managers had a significant impact on learning activities by influencing day-to-day interactions in a positive way, including the general working environment and specific measures to stimulate interactions and knowledge-sharing. In the absence of the technical learning which staff needed to undertake in order to perform their roles being provided through centrally-driven training interventions, these influences on the part of managers locally were very important for enabling the acquisition of essential knowledge among staff. Although they often have overly optimistic views about the influence managers can have by displaying them, many writers (e.g. Senge, 1990; Reid and Barrington, 1999; Denton, 1998) argue that managers displaying positive behaviours can have a positive impact on OL and this study has demonstrated that their contributions on this point are potentially important but contingent.

In respect of managers' influence upon the general working environment, one of the most effective ways in which they could stimulate learning seemed to be to seek to open up communication among staff at all levels and enable people to communicate freely with anyone outside of the immediate work area who might be a useful source of advice or knowledge. Specifically, successful measures put in place by managers to stimulate interactions and knowledge-sharing included the establishment of mentors, virtual teams and convening effective team meetings. The greatest emphasis on mentors was in Rural where it was standard practice for new members of staff to be supported by a mentor. All of these measures reduced the power among staff to decide not to communicate with and share experiences with colleagues, but in many respects staff still retained power to not engage with others. This was partly down to people's willingness to form relationships, as has been mentioned earlier, and on the

outcome of internal deliberations they might have had about the likely value of the engagement weighed against any drawbacks in terms of – for example – time lost and any possible adverse reactions from colleagues.

While it was apparent that more experienced colleagues were able to share relevant knowledge with new members of staff in all three case studies, in Rural - due to the nature of the work - it was most likely to be the case that an experienced member of staff would know every aspect of the work that a new entrant would be required to perform. In other areas, there was much greater diversity among people's roles and challenges faced were regularly new or changing which reduced the usefulness of past experiences for dealing with current issues, and reduced the power differentiation – based on knowledge held – between experienced and non-experienced staff. Also, especially compared to Legal, the junior roles occupied by staff in Rural meant that a greater level of 'handholding' was expected and accepted which contributed to the success of managers' interventions.

The creation of virtual teams was a successful product of Legal managers' efforts. Such teams had clearly provided a platform for people normally based in subject-specific silo-like teams to communicate with colleagues across the department about common issues. The success of virtual teams in Legal was a result of the team structure and the situation whereby staff across teams had strong interests in certain issues which transcended team boundaries. These teams were also a way of overcoming the physical barrier to communication that permanent walls separating teams in their workplace presented. This resulted in their internal deliberations about engagement concluding that there was significant value in making the effort to engage. It is likely that such arrangements would be of more limited usefulness in working environments where these features are not prevalent.

It emerged that team meetings organised by managers could be an effective context for sharing information and experiences, and for collectively discussing possible solutions to problems. Examples of such positive interactions were apparent in areas within all three case studies. However, some senior lawyers did not seek to formalise such discussions through a series of regular scheduled meetings and this did not

appear to be to the detriment of learning as long as information flowed freely and regular interactions took place day-to-day.

Many of these positive communication experiences involved time being dedicated to sharing knowledge and information, and this – again - demonstrates the importance of Weber and Berthoin Antal's (2001) point about leaders needing to take account of time issues when attempting to facilitate OL. It is also clear that while managers had an important role in instigating communications and providing the space for them to occur, they only worked where staff engaged positively which is – again – in line with the dynamics described by Child and Heavens (2001). This is because staff had considerable power to decide whether or not to share information and experiences so, clearly, the prospects for regular interaction to take place on a day-to-day basis were largely dependent upon people's willingness to engage.

In all case study settings, managers did not appear to wish to blame staff for any mistakes made and staff did not cite examples of instances where they had been blamed by their managers. However, this certainly did not mean that people were working in a blame-free environment. Other possible sources of blame – including customers for Rural staff, politicians for Programmes staff and policy officials for Legal staff - were recognised and, in some instances, had apportioned blame. As sources of blame emerged largely from people outside of their immediate teams who people's actions affected, management's power to create blame-free working environments was partial. This reality has been somewhat overlooked by some writers, including Pedler et al (1991), who have recognised that blame-free environments facilitate OL and have indicated that it is possible for managers to create them. This study goes some way to supporting Vince's (2000) suggestion that a blame culture is endemic throughout the public sector, largely because of the accountability structures already discussed.

The impact which the prospect of being blamed had on innovative thinking was sometime compounded by incentives created. Staff undertaking processing activities in Rural were clear that managers at a number of levels above them would be aware of statistics quantifying their output and any complaints made. This shows that what constituted success in the eyes of those who people were aiming to satisfy could play

an equally significant part in stifling innovative thinking and learning as the prospect of being blamed could because staff internally deliberated what they needed to do to be perceived as being successful.

In terms of management's role in leading change, interview discussions with staff in Rural did not tend to move beyond people's experiences of changes to work processes and the lack of influence which many felt they had. However, whereas it was clear when speaking to the majority of staff in both Programmes and Legal that they had considerable influence over matters affected by their work, it was also clear that they felt that they had little power to influence issues associated with the management of their work areas or the organisation more widely.

Senior managers in Legal spoke about efforts they had made to consult staff on departmental changes, but some lawyers still felt that they had little influence. However, the greatest discontentment expressed by Legal staff was about the way in which a new electronic records management system had been implemented at organisational level. It was clear that the approach taken by managers elsewhere in the organisation had left staff feeling that they had made efforts to make suggestions, but that these had not been impactful. This illustrates how a normally influential group of people were prepared to pressurise managers to try to ensure that solutions took account of people's experiences and knowledge. Nevertheless, management ultimately demonstrated its power to impose the approach considered best and, if this was a regular experience, it is likely that those people who had been highly motivated to contribute ideas and suggestions would stop doing so because their internal deliberations would be likely to conclude that making efforts would be futile. This example shows that, even where management was trying to portray a willingness to draw from staff's experiences and knowledge, it ultimately imposed its held view. This was a departure from the normal position of managers allowing considerable scope for staff to influence matters and does go some way to demonstrating that Coopey (1995) is right to draw attention to the issue of the control boundary between management and other employees in OL, but this study shows that his assertion that the boundary is unlikely to be moved as far as some imply is not generally necessarily the case.

Moreover, it was apparent that the approach line managers took to managing staff in their spans of control had the potential to impact significantly on OL. Practices for staff in Rural were prescribed by managers and, due to the nature of the work, this was to a large extent inevitable. However, this led to staff mainly learning how to comply with processes - rather than learning alternative ways for performing job roles which they tended to not have the power to implement. Conversely, staff had considerable autonomy in Programmes and this - coupled with senior managers providing wide-ranging discretion to staff – allowed people considerable scope for developing their own ideas about how to deal with tasks and having the power to implement those ideas which was close to the required context described by Coopey (1995) in which OL can flourish.

However, in Rural and Programmes, many elements of managers' practices could be explained by the nature of the work being performed. It was in Legal that the effects of varying management approaches were most clearly identifiable because different styles could be seen in operation across broadly similar work areas. It was apparent that senior lawyers in their line management roles adopted different styles and organised work in different ways. As she considered it necessary for achieving order, one senior lawyer controlled all work activities closely - while another took a much more hands-off approach which he believed was an effective way of working. These different approaches led to the degree of independent learning lawyers needed to do varying. This indicates that a high level of support from managers can result in a lower level of learning. It also illustrates that individual power and discretion stimulates learning because people have to move from an internal dialogue concluding that something will be handled in a particular way because a manager has prescribed that, to a dialogue concluding that they ought to take steps to learn what would be the best way of dealing with an issue.

It was noticeable that people rarely mentioned any influences from organisation-wide initiatives or the Strategic Delivery and Performance Board. This indicates that people were influenced most significantly by features in their workplaces and endorses Tainio et al's (2001) point that there should be no assumption that boards do or can have real influence over OL. Moreover, it was not apparent that staff were even aware of the Welsh Government's Learning and Skills Strategy, nor did the

majority of actual learning even feature in people's performance management documentation because these tended to focus on formal training interventions only. Senior corporate actors and organisation-wide strategies were far removed from most people's day-to-day thinking, and associated internal conversations, which explains their lack of influence. This also demonstrates that structures not recognised by staff have little (if any) impact on their actions because they do not feature in their internal deliberations.

Workplace social structures

Workplace social structures influenced people in significant ways and had significant impacts on the manifestation of OL. This study has shown that these structures have the potential to influence the views, attitudes, beliefs and expectations of staff which influenced both the form and extent of OL practice. These aspects tend to be discussed in existing literature in terms of the broader notion of culture but, due to the ambiguities and varying interpretations surrounding the notion of culture, the term has not been used as an umbrella label here. However, due to the liberal use of the term in existing literature, references to what others have said about culture are inevitable.

While issues discussed in relation to social structures are crucial to understanding what facilitated or inhibited OL in the Welsh Government, this study does not support Weick and Westley's (1996) well argued assertion that OL is best understood in terms of organisational culture. Clearly, OL is affected by the other structures also referred to in this chapter and it does not seem reasonable to assert - as Likierman (1993) does - that rigidities all emerge from cultural traits. This study has, for example, demonstrated that work task-based structures create rigidities.

One of the key elements determining which social structures shaped behaviours was the team people identified themselves with and this was heavily influenced by the interactions physical structures facilitated. Therefore, how some features of physical structures already discussed emulated themselves in the shaping of social structures need to be explored in more detail here.

In Rural, staff - especially those working at more junior grades - considered their team colleagues to be the people they shared a walled room with and that shaped their conceptions of interactions with others. Similarly, lawyers in Legal felt that they had by far the strongest connection with the colleagues who occupied the same walled room as they did and extraordinary events tended to be needed for people to have effective engagement with colleagues more widely. In the Legal environment, team identities gained more prominence than individual identities and the upshot of this was that day-to-day learning experiences were, without engagement being stimulated through virtual teams or participation in training events, curtailed by team boundaries. This was a barrier to OL if, as sensibly suggested by Denton (1998), team learning can act as a bridge between individual learning and OL.

Within Programmes, staff also clearly felt a closer association with the people in their physical workspaces and, with some exceptions, whole divisions were located together with few physical separations. Because of this, the small teams and the flatter hierarchical structures in place, in Programmes staff tended to have a strong sense of connection with the whole division which they were part of. This meant that more junior staff did not consider senior staff to be extraneous to their team environments and this allowed communication and knowledge-sharing to occur among a wide range of staff grades through normal day-to-day interactions in the absence of internal deliberations being needed about whether or not to make a special effort to communicate with people operating at hierarchical distance.

As the vast majority of learning for individuals entering new roles took place on-the-job, new entrants benefited significantly from other individuals' efforts to share knowledge which – as has already been described – was done as part of embedded practice in all three case studies. Zollo and Winter (2003) identify the significance of the task attempting to be learnt or the operating routine as key influences on learning mechanisms, but the impact of the situations of individuals in terms of both their possessed knowledge and their newness to roles on their ability to share knowledge and their need for learning have been largely overlooked by those writing about OL. Put simply, people had concluded during their internal deliberations that they ought to seek knowledge where they knew they had a significant gap and were more likely to share knowledge where they knew that they had knowledge which someone else did

not have and which someone else would welcome receiving. Although these points are basic and obvious, overlooking them risks exaggerated claims about the generic need for OL and people's ability to engage in collective learning.

It was also apparent in Rural and Legal that, where individuals felt that seeking information or knowledge from a colleague would cause disturbance, they would be deterred from approaching them because they had to consider their need to maintain harmonious relationships with colleagues as well as their need for knowledge. There was also reluctance in Rural and Legal to approach colleagues because of a desire on the part of individuals to be perceived by others as being competent. There was a fear that seeking information or knowledge from colleagues would result in being perceived to be lacking knowledge which colleagues might expect an individual to possess, or would result in a perception of them being unwilling or unable to undertake some other form of research which they might otherwise do to acquire the information or knowledge. These important dimensions have not been given significant prominence in the OL literature, other than being implicit in discussions about political issues in cultures and relationship issues. They were not so relevant to staff in Programmes because the nature of much of their work allowed greater scope for people to exercise judgement than to have to draw from technical knowledge to determine an outcome. This is an example of where workplace social structures are bound up with structures emerging from work itself which are the subject of the next section.

Effective relationships were a key enabler of OL. In terms of relationships within teams, it was evident that the general position among staff in Rural did not appear to involve individuals' valuing offers of knowledge or suggestions from colleagues because they considered themselves to be knowledgeable in their field and not in need of receiving knowledge from others which they considered to be an affront to their credibility and standing. However, even with this generally being the case, it was apparent that some relationships were formed in Rural which led to a constructive imparting and receiving of knowledge – albeit that this was in the context of an experienced member of staff interacting with a new member of staff where there could be an easy acceptance of the differences in knowledge levels between the two people. It was where this knowledge gap between the imparter and receiver of

information or knowledge in Rural was not so easy to accept that barriers were erected.

Moreover, there was also a dimension - especially in Rural - of competition among staff. People knew that their outputs were quantifiable and would be known to both managers and colleagues. Also, as a group of staff undertaking the same processing activities, people felt qualified to make judgements about what others were doing. This partly explains the existence of an environment in Rural which created some barriers to learning because staff were not open to feedback from their colleagues. Again, the causes of these behaviours were rooted in people's beliefs about their possessed knowledge and credibility making them unlikely to be overcome - as Senge (1990) asserts - by establishing a shared vision. What management wanted staff to achieve was clearly understood by all staff in Rural.

This shows that competition among colleagues can sometimes be unhelpful to OL. As well as competition existing in Rural because it could, due to the nature of the work, it can also be partly explained by the insular nature of the working environment. Many people were not ambitious to progress and there seemed to be reluctance on the part of staff to move to other departments of the Welsh Government, even within the same building. Therefore, those staff who did wish to be promoted to a higher grade tended to see their opportunities to do so as being confined within Rural at Carmarthen and their competitors as being colleagues in their peer group. It follows that, unlike staff in Programmes - who tended to see their opportunities as being much more wide-ranging and could not know who all of their competitors might be so had to focus on developing themselves to maximise their prospects - staff in Rural would have thought that they only needed to be perceived by their managers as being better than colleagues in their own peer group. This appeared to influence decisions made internally by people about how they would interact with their colleagues.

While staff in Legal also - in the vast majority of cases - saw their promotion opportunities as being within the department, they often knew little about what other staff in their own peer group were doing so if they were minded to deploy negative behaviours while competing they might do so by limiting their willingness to share

knowledge with colleagues or - more positively - engaging in activities outside of their basic job role, such as participating in the work of groups or virtual teams, to make themselves stand out. There was more evidence of people doing the latter, rather than the former, which indicates that the hoarding of knowledge among doctors in the National Health Service identified by Currie et al (2007) was not so prevalent among these lawyers as a group of professionals. Also, in Legal all staff were working at relatively senior grades and many lawyers had decided not to pursue promotion into the senior lawyer grade because they did not wish to perform a line management role. These issues appeared to shape lawyers' internal thinking and decisions about how they would interact with their peers.

In terms of broader relationships, it was clear that participation in a Leadership Programme had helped one senior lawyer develop effective relationships with her peers which led to an internally-felt comfort with interacting with them. It emerged clearly from comments made by interviewees in Legal that knowledge and information sharing would occur much more freely where people knew each other and built mutual trust. One member of staff who appeared to have contacted counterparts in a Whitehall department to seek information without first developing a relationship found that there was little preparedness to share anything. However, in contrast, another interviewee in Legal had made considerable efforts to develop effective relationships with counterparts in a different Whitehall department and had benefited from a much more positive exchange.

Therefore, it can be drawn out that relationships providing for the effective transfer of information or knowledge need to involve people who are willing to facilitate the transfer, feel comfortable engaging with each other, trust each other and have respect for each other trust so that a possible recipient of knowledge welcomes what is being offered or is available and considers it to be credible. Such relationships were clearly more valuable in practice than the Memorandum of Understanding which had been agreed among the three devolved administrations and the UK Government which gave prominence to the importance of good communication. This supports Fulop and Rifkind's (1997), and Downe et al's (2004), contributions which focus respectively on the value of good relationships within workplaces and the inter-OL which can occur in the public sector when links are made between similar organisations. Also, this

study supports Hartley and Allison's (2002) assertion that comparison with other organisations in the sector is an important element of learning in public sector organisations. As Darr and Kurtzburg (2000) point out, the conditions for learning within an organisational field should be most propitious and - in the public sector - opening up effective dialogue with counterparts elsewhere should be facilitated by the absence of competition for profit.

It was clear that staff had considerable power, both individually and collectively, to shape their social interactions. These dynamics seen at play give credence to Giddens' (1979) analysis that it is the impact of power, or lack of it, which stimulates political behaviour. It follows that this study demonstrates that this is a credible explanation for the causes of political behaviours which can impact on learning which needs to be understood if any change is to be influenced. In contrast, this study demonstrates that Senge's (1990) assertion that creating a sense of common vision and values is the only way to move people beyond self-interest under-emphasises the underlying complexities and the way in which behaviours manifest themselves from people's interactions with the structures in which they reside.

Work task-based structures

Against the background of existing literature in the field, the directness and profoundness of the impact of work task-based structures on both the opportunities and necessity for OL was surprising. This was because work tasks dominated the options people could consider internally and set frameworks within which they had power to exercise choice. This is a key finding which extends and challenges existing literature in the OL field.

The three case studies have provided an insight into the enormous diversity of work undertaken within the Welsh Government and illustrate how this diversity impacts on OL. It has been shown in Chapter 4 that some scholars have discussed how characteristics of the public sector impact on OL, albeit usually with a narrow rather than comprehensive interpretation of what typifies public sector organisations, but there has been little acknowledgement of how the vast diversity of work within the public sector - or the private sector for that matter - impacts upon OL. Rather, there

has tended to be an assumption that one size fits all and words of caution about how characteristics to be found in part of the public sector – such as high levels of bureaucracy or political scrutiny – might affect OL. This study has surfaced how the work undertaken in the three diverse case studies, which each embody characteristics prevalent across large swathes of the public sector, affects OL practices.

It emerged that the work undertaken by staff in Rural was, although sometimes technical in nature, repetitive and process-driven. This led to people's learning focusing largely on memorising prescribed procedures and developing an understanding of what they needed to do in order to meet or exceed targets while minimising mistakes. The processes meant that people had little power to exercise their own discretion and, therefore, for most people this appeared to have resulted in them having concluded that it was not worth even contemplating how work tasks might be performed differently. They believed that they would be rewarded for meeting or exceeding targets through prescribed work processes.

Many staff in Legal were also working in a demand-led environment, but their work tasks were not repetitive and often highly complex. Further, Legal staff had a broad legal framework – rather than a prescriptive process – which they could work within and they had varying degrees of latitude within that framework. In this context, Legal staff needed to undertake a large amount of technical learning which they were largely powerless not to do if they were to be effective in their roles. This was ongoing, not least because of frequent changes to the law, and lawyers needed to - in respect of each piece of advice being prepared or legislation being drafted - apply their technical knowledge to a given situation. Therefore, when having any internal deliberations about learning, lawyers would have in most instances concluded that they had to learn to perform effectively and that there was a practical value to doing so.

Another dimension of significance to how the form of work tasks impacted upon learning was the extent to which work was routine business or project-based. In the routine-business working environment within Rural, efforts were required to convene pause and review exercises in order for reflection to be undertaken in a formalised way. Where in the other case study areas staff's work was project-based, natural

points – either when reaching key milestones or at the project closure stage – occurred for reflection and these sometimes provided prompts for people to consider what had gone well and not so well. That said, it was not always the case that reflection occurred at these points and it was clear that - whatever form work tasks took - time was not dedicated to reflection unless the people concerned made the effort to do so and had the necessary time available to them. It seemed that, in order to engage in reflection activities, people needed to see a benefit of engaging in them which in their minds outweighed the cost of not using the time to do something else.

Then, in Programmes, while some staff had to acquire a technical knowledge base of for example constitutional issues or UK legislation making processes, many staff had to learn how to deal with matters which were new. In these situations, the learning for Programmes staff had been more concerned with the identification of possible options and drawing from experience to assess what might be acceptable and effective. In this environment, learning had to be coupled with the exercising of good political judgement – which some felt could not be learnt - and latitude was often available because there was no clear right and wrong way of doing something. The power Programmes staff possessed to exercise discretion in how they undertook work tasks and the requirement for them to handle new situations regularly appeared to stimulate learning.

It is clear from this study that change is an important stimulant for learning and the amount of change staff were exposed to was strongly linked to the work they undertook. Many staff in both Programmes and Legal were not only exposed to change, but were themselves at the forefront of shaping it. Against this backdrop, staff could not function by limiting their learning to the detail of established practices and processes so to be effective, as already mentioned, they had to engage in thinking of the type required to develop options for change and to test ideas. This was helped in Programmes by a willingness on the part of management to engage staff at all levels. Therefore, the task-based requirement to learn supplemented by managers encouraging engagement was a combination which appeared to stimulate effective learning.

Because expectations of involvement in change were well established among staff in Programmes and Legal, on the occasions when less senior staff felt excluded from decisions affecting the functioning of their work areas - in terms of developing staffing structures and organising work - most felt uncomfortable. For Legal staff this had tipped over to feelings of annoyance and frustration when they felt that the organisation was imposing a new electronic records management system on them. Nevertheless, they continued to express their opinions – based on their experiences – of how the new system should operate for them. This determination to share learning and ideas in an attempt to influence change seemed to stem from habit, confidence, lack of fear and – in the case of the lawyers – seniority which seemed to contribute to feelings in people’s internal deliberations that they had a right to contribute and a valuable contribution to make. This can be contrasted with staff in Rural, whose work did not instil such inner feelings in staff, who seemed to consider change to be something that was handled by others and accepted that this was the situation. This was to a point where, for example, few staff volunteered to take advantage of the limited number of opportunities which arose for them to engage in pause and review exercises. All of this shows how, as McHugh et al (1998) suggest, open learning requires having people involved.

Moreover, in the context of their work, staff in Programmes benefited from not being so straightforwardly associated with mistakes because what constituted a mistake was less clear cut. Even if something was clearly an error, in some instances staff would have the flexibility to remedy the situation without their immediate colleagues or managers being aware of what had happened. Because of the formality of legal advice and legislation development, there was usually less scope for mistakes to be invisible to managers and colleagues in Legal - and the scope for any mistakes to be remedied without others being aware was very limited in Rural due to all processing activities being logged in electronic systems. While it is important not to exaggerate the effects of these variations, because in all areas there seemed to be an acceptance on the part of management that mistakes happen, these differing contexts certainly resulted in differing possibilities for trialling new approaches and learning from any resultant mistakes – especially for people, including most interviewees, who were concerned about how they were perceived by their colleagues. Where there was a belief that mistakes could be remedied with ease, there was a greater likelihood of

people concluding that they could afford to be less risk averse when deliberating how to approach work tasks.

This illustration of the different types of learning possible and/or required among the three case studies shows us that learning of an order which involves identifying and assessing new ways of doing things is not practised or required among all staff in all areas of the Welsh Government. It is clear that all job roles required a degree of knowledge acquisition when people entered them for the first time, but ongoing learning for many staff - especially in Rural - was heavily influenced by what needed to be done to achieve required outcomes. However, these findings show that Furubo's (1994) claim that single-loop learning far outpaces double-loop learning in the public sector is not necessarily true. Certainly, it is true that the claim applies to Rural – and large swathes of the public sector are comparable with Rural – but this study has shown that other areas of the public sector's effective functioning depends on workers engaging in learning of a higher order.

All staff were working under considerable pressure to deal with their workloads and this resulted in a lack of time to dedicate specifically to learning. However, perhaps because they were working in a less target-driven environment and because of their own motivation to learn, a number of staff in Programmes managed to find time to undertake longer-term accredited training programmes. Also, in Legal many staff dedicated time specifically to off-the-job learning on a regular basis. Although other features - including personal motivation and the requirement for Legal staff to acquire CPD points - were important stimulants for individuals' learning, the absence of a target-driven environment was an important enabler for staff to pursue off-the-job learning above what was required to fulfil a specific job role.

Further, the nature of work tasks undertaken by many staff in both Programmes and Legal meant that a significant amount of ongoing learning occurred during the course of daily activities. Longer serving Rural staff, especially, did not learn so much from undertaking their daily activities because they were in most instances repeating something they had done previously. It was no surprise that people needed to learn more when starting a new job role than they would later on, and this study has illustrated how the amount of learning upon entry to a new role was very much

dependent on a person's past experiences and the nature of the work. In roles in Rural and Legal where knowledge of technical issues was required, a person's previous exposure to the technical issues was most important. In Rural, it would be easier for someone to start in a new role if they had previously fulfilled another role there which had given them an experience of relevant overarching systems and processes. Likewise, a person starting in a new role as a lawyer in Legal would have less learning to do if he/she had previously practised as a public law lawyer.

For some of the roles in Programmes involving dealing with new issues, it was apparent that a knowledge of frameworks would be needed - if not already possessed - but other more generic skills such as the ability to work in a political environment and exercising good judgement were as, if not more, important as acquiring a new technical knowledge base. The roles fulfilled by staff in Programmes were more typical of what many understand the work of civil servants in the UK to be – such as Greer and Jarman (2010) who explain that, as generalists, civil servants are trained to apply general skills of policy and politics rather than in the detail of their policy sector or any one academic discipline. However, this commonly held view does not apply to large swathes of civil servants who, as in Rural and Legal, do need to acquire specialist knowledge.

The nature of people's activities across the three cases can also be seen to be associated with people's temporal agentic orientations as exposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and the associated behaviours outlined by Dorado (2005). It is possible to recognise an element of routine behaviour across all three case study areas which Dorado (2005) connects to a focus on the past and, where the focus tended to be on the present in Rural and Legal, sensemaking behaviours of the kind discussed by Dorado (2005) emerged. It was in aspects of Legal's work and more so in Programmes where a focus on the future was prevalent that strategic behaviours were apparent in line with Dorado's (2005) analysis. These behaviours have clear connections to learning levels.

Moreover, the nature of work tasks undertaken across the three case studies provided varying opportunities for engaging with people outside of an immediate team. As well as needing to have opportunities to start with, people had some power to decide

who they would seek to engage with and were guided by what would enhance their ability to perform their roles effectively. In Rural, staff met other colleagues from within the division if they volunteered to take part in technical training activities, pause and review exercises, or had cause to contact a person in a different geographical location to discuss a work-related issue. Staff in both Programmes and Legal sometimes had less contact with colleagues within their divisions or department than was the case in Rural, but engaged on a regular basis with other staff across the Welsh Government and ministers – as well as with counterparts in other UK administrations and, in the case of a very small number of senior managers in Programmes, countries outside of the UK.

Wider engagement opportunities facilitated learning from others' experiences and opened up greater opportunities for having established ways of working challenged. Numerous examples emerged of where this had delivered benefits, sometimes for those on both sides of a communication. However, although there were examples of people engaging with colleagues outside of the organisation, inter-OL was certainly not part of day-to-day working life for the vast majority of people. This study goes some way to understanding why in the context of a limited amount of literature on inter-OL (Rashman et al, 2009), despite the importance to learning in the public sector of being able to make comparisons with other organisations (Hartley and Allison, 2002; Rashman and Radnor, 2005), people did not routinely engage. Clearly, opportunities were not available for many staff to engage with colleagues externally as part of their daily working lives and the benefits of creating separate dedicated time for this was not – for many – considered to be worthwhile in the light of time and target pressures.

Moreover, it emerged that the possibilities and usefulness of capturing knowledge in organisational repositories was linked to the nature of work tasks being performed because such materials containing historically acquired knowledge were clearly of more limited use in environments where new issues were arising constantly and which were not directly linked to past activities. This supports the point made by Fear (2001) that questions need to be asked about what exactly is being remembered and for what reason an organisational memory legitimises a process of learning or unlearning.

Rural repositories were by far the most comprehensive reflection of the knowledge held in people's minds, but even then staff felt that the instructions were only of limited practical use. Staff in Legal had produced detailed guidance on how constitutional issues should be handled and had identified a need to further develop knowledge management practices. Similarly, staff in Programmes had developed guidance on legislation management processes and staff across the three case study areas had developed training materials and been involved in delivering training to other staff. It was apparent that staff who had had the opportunity to develop guidance or training materials had themselves been able to consolidate their own learning while doing so, as well as being able to impart their knowledge to others. These activities illustrate how staff were making their individual tacit knowledge explicit to create organisational knowledge in the way Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) advocate, but no examples emerged of collective learning becoming independent of individuals through corporate systems and memories in the way Hedberg (1981) argues it can.

One of the key barriers highlighted for not embedding more learning and knowledge in organisational systems or documents was a lack of time and, as has already been intimated, staff needed to see a clear value or purpose for making efforts to do so. It was perhaps because no two scenarios tended to be the same for Legal staff that they had made greater efforts to establish virtual teams to discuss the handling of novel issues arising in specific fields and why some Programmes staff had convened a community of practice focusing on certain legislation procedures which were better suited to these more dynamic environments. It was apparent that people were taking approaches which they considered to be both feasible in the context of restraints they faced and beneficial in the light of the nature of their work. Also, having the experience of losing knowledgeable colleagues contributed for some to a realisation of the vulnerabilities resulting from having large quantities of valuable knowledge retained only in people's memories and had prompted attempts to also capture it in other repositories.

Summary and conclusion

This chapter had three aims which were to (1) compare and contrast the data emerging from the three case studies, (2) explain the findings with reference to the interviewees as agents in the context of six key structures and (3) evaluate how the findings relate to existing literature.

An outline of the analytical framework deployed was firstly provided. This has been based on a critical realist stance arising from a belief that every action performed by human agents requires the pre-existence of some social structures (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000) with a concern for the sense people have of being constrained or enabled by their circumstances (Ackroyd, 2004). Archer's (1995) view that structure and agency are radically different entities possessing different emergent properties has been accepted and, in accordance with Archer (2003), the concept of the 'internal conversation' has the basis for considering how structures and agents were mediated.

When considering the factors being taken into account by agents in their internal conversations, some significant dimensions arising from others' work have been taken into account. These include actors' temporal agentic orientations exposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and behaviours associated with these outlined by Dorado's (2005), and the fundamentally important issue of power as conceptualised by Giddens (1979).

The analysis started with a consideration of the matters relevant to OL associated with the individuals interviewed. This illustrated that people's effectiveness at engaging in OL can be influenced by a number of individual attributes – including educational background, motivation and enthusiasm levels, drive to realise own purposes and ability to form effective relationships. Then, the focus turned to the six key structures relevant to OL which – through considering how individuals interacted with them – enabled understanding of the facilitators of and barriers to OL to be developed. It became apparent that there were key differences among the groups of individuals in each case and among the features of the structures prevalent in each case which impacted significantly on OL processes. These key differences are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Key differences among groups of individuals and among features of structures across the three cases

	Issue	Rural	Programmes	Legal
Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher education achievements • Promotion aspirations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority possessed higher education level qualification • Minority wished to be promoted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority possessed higher education level qualification • Majority wished to be promoted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All possessed higher education level qualification • Mix of wishes among staff about being promoted
Physical structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical distances • Physical wall boundaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant geographical distance from senior managers, politicians and many learning opportunities • Physical walls contained large teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographically close to learning opportunities, senior managers and politicians • Few physical wall separations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographically close to learning opportunities and senior managers, but little direct interaction with politicians • Physical walls contained small teams
Accountability structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrutiny impacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low impact from external scrutiny, high impact from internal scrutiny 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High impact from external scrutiny, low impact from internal scrutiny 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of both external and internal scrutiny varied depending on nature of issue
Development structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training access • CPD requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to generic skills training • No requirement to accrue CPD points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to generic skills training • No requirement to accrue CPD points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to tailored task-based in-house training, as well as to generic skills training • Required to accrue CPD points as professionals
Management intervention structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prescription levels • Interventions in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High level of prescription • High intervention in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of prescription 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed level of prescription • Direct intervention in

	<p>learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target achievement • Support measures 	<p>staff learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High focus on target meeting • Establishment of mentors for new staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low intervention in staff learning • Low focus on target meeting • No specific measures 	<p>staff learning through in-house training programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low focus on target meeting • Virtual teams created
Workplace social structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team boundaries • Knowledge seeking • Feedback reception • Competition among staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influenced by large team boundaries • Some reluctance to seek knowledge from colleagues • Feedback and offers of knowledge generally not welcomed • High level of competition among staff based on high level of knowledge about colleague performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not influenced by team boundaries • Comparatively little need to seek knowledge from colleagues • Diversity of work among colleagues inhibited scope for feedback • Focus on developing self to maximise own prospects with competitors perceived to be organisation-wide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influenced by small team boundaries • Some reluctance to seek knowledge from colleagues • Diversity of work among colleagues inhibited scope for feedback • Moderate level of competition among staff based on low level of knowledge about colleague performance
Work task-based structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature of work tasks • Role in change • Reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetitive and process-driven work tasks • Few opportunities to shape change • Pause and review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-repetitive work tasks • Many staff at the forefront of shaping change • Points arose in projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-repetitive and highly complex work tasks • Many staff at the forefront of shaping change • Little time for reflection

	<p>opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mistake remediation • Ongoing learning requirements • Opportunities for engagement with others • Role requirements 	<p>exercises undertaken</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little opportunity to remedy mistakes without others being aware • Low level of ongoing learning required among established staff • More engagement with internal than external colleagues • Knowledge of processes, systems and rules 	<p>to review performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some opportunities to remedy mistakes without others being aware • High level of ongoing learning required among all staff • More engagement with external than internal colleagues • Good political judgement required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little opportunity to remedy mistakes without others being aware • High level of ongoing learning required among all staff • More engagement with external than internal colleagues • High level of technical knowledge
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The first of the structures to be considered was physical. This analysis highlighted the impacts of geographical and hierarchical distance on OL, drawing a contrast – in particular – between junior staff in Rural in Carmarthen located far from the organisation’s centre in Cardiff and Programmes in Cardiff where staff sat together regardless of grade at the heart of the organisation. It also became apparent that open plan office environments facilitated OL. A key point arising from the analysis was not that certain physical structures prevented OL, but that they presented barriers which had to be overcome by people with considerable time constraints who – in order to make the effort required - needed to see that the benefits would outweigh the cost in lost time.

The second set of structures to be considered was accountability. It emerged that these structures impacted on learning in highly nuanced ways. It has been apparent that staff in Rural tended to act with caution and in the interests of self protection because there was no ‘hiding place’ for them due to the systems for logging all processing activities. Staff in Legal were better able to predict where sources of scrutiny were likely to focus which allowed them to invest greater efforts in areas likely to attract scrutiny. Some mistakes made by Programmes staff had the potential to be unnoticed which resulted in more scope for trialling different approaches and they were closer to ministers so could better predict ministerial tolerances. Most significantly, it emerged that scrutiny had the potential to stimulate single loop learning and that double loop learning flourished where ‘cover’ for innovative thinking and practices was known to exist.

Thirdly, development structures came into focus and it was evident that learning through more formal training channels flourished where encouragement from management was coupled with motivation and enthusiasm to engage among staff. However, this study has demonstrated very clearly that the vast majority of people’s learning in all three case study areas took place on-the-job and that effective OL practices had the potential to facilitate that more informal learning very significantly.

The analysis next moved on to the fourth set of structures which was management intervention. Here the effectiveness or not of the various approaches taken by managers across the three case study areas was seen and across the board it was

apparent that staff's motivation to learn had a more significant impact on outcomes than any prescriptions managers sought to make. Control boundaries between management and employees could not be easily moved towards managers and it was apparent that giving discretion to staff stimulated learning. In particular, managers' encouragement of learning was not found to be effective where they were also giving other more audible messages which prevented staff from engaging in learning – especially in relation to meeting targets. Staff were astute at focusing their efforts on those things which they believed would ultimately result in them being perceived as being successful. It emerged that managers could make more positive impacts where they sought to influence day-to-day interactions in positive ways by - for example - establishing mentors and virtual teams, and by arranging team meetings, which was significant given that the majority of learning took place through those interactions.

The fifth set of structures then considered were workplace social. While these were shown to be significant, their impact was not shown to be as profound as some writers have argued when discussing issues in this area usually using the label of 'culture'. The teams that people identified themselves with and, subsequently, the boundaries associated with those teams were shown to be important features shaping the nature and scope of social interactions. Moreover, the possibilities for social interactions which could result in learning were influenced by the level of knowledge possessed by the people involved and sometimes by people's newness to job roles. There tended to need to be an underlying purpose for engaging in a knowledge-sharing encounter, with people seeking knowledge where they recognised a gap in their knowledge and with people seeking to share their knowledge with others where they identified that others had a knowledge gap and – importantly – where they felt that there would be a willingness by others to receive knowledge.

It was clear that knowledge-sharing would be less fluid if a difference in knowledge levels between an imparter and receiver of knowledge was not easily accepted. People were also concerned about approaching colleagues to seek knowledge when this might lead to them being perceived unfavourably either because there would have been an expectation that they should have held that knowledge or because of the disturbance not being welcomed. Competition among staff could often fuel such concerns. Good relationships were fundamental to effective knowledge-sharing

through social interactions which needed to involve people who were willing to engage and facilitate knowledge transfer, a feeling of comfort among the people involved, and levels of trust and respect that would lead to knowledge being welcomed and considered credible. Staff had considerable power to choose and shape their social interactions so a context conducive to willing engagement was crucial.

The last and very significant set of structures to be analysed were work task-based, and these were found to have a profound impact on OL processes. In particular, the diversity of work tasks had direct consequences on the nature and level of learning. In Rural, staff continually repeated activities so had little scope for exercising discretion which stifled their opportunities to engage in learning at the double-loop level. In Legal, staff had to learn to be effective which led to them constantly needing to engage in a variety of learning activities to keep themselves abreast of the latest legal developments. In Programmes, staff had considerable discretion in their roles and were often dealing with new issues which stimulated considerable learning about possible solutions. In the Programmes environment, because of working close to politicians and on politically sensitive issues, political awareness and the ability to exercise good judgement were as – if not more – important as attributes for staff than the possession of technical knowledge.

It was apparent that learning involving identifying and assessing new ways of doing things was neither practised nor required in all of the case study areas, but this study has also shown that it is not necessarily true that single-loop learning far outpaces double-loop learning in the Welsh Government nor probably the wider public sector either. However, engagement in change during the undertaking of day-to-day work activities was a stimulant for learning and created a mindset which led to staff displaying a determination to engage in wider organisational change activities. Different work tasks also presented different possibilities for making and remedying mistakes in a non-problematic way. Also, the absence of a target-driven environment was shown to be an important enabler for staff to pursue off-the-job learning beyond what was required for the undertaking of their specific roles.

Moreover, the different work tasks that staff were undertaking across the three case study areas presented varying opportunities for engaging with people outside of

immediate team environments with whom learning could be shared. Engagement with people tended to happen only when staff felt that it would result in them being able to perform their roles more effectively and, where it did occur, wider engagement had facilitated learning. However, inter-OL was not generally part of working life.

The possibilities and usefulness of capturing knowledge in organisational repositories were variable, principally depending on how useful information or knowledge about past experiences were for dealing with present or future issues. Efforts did not appear to be made to capture knowledge unless there was a clear purpose or value seen in doing so, and staff in Programmes and Legal tended to instead invest time in establishing more dynamic knowledge-sharing mechanisms such as virtual teams and communities of practice.

The overriding conclusion is that the context for OL in the Welsh Government has been shown to be localised and manifested from individuals' engagements with a number of relevant structures. The discussion has exposed a number of tensions evident in the Welsh Government and thought to be conceptually inherent in OL. It has been demonstrated that OL was operationalised within a pluralist context in which individuals were sometimes seeking to realise purposes other than the organisation's. In addition to this expectedly bringing into focus this general and well understood tension, the analysis has made it possible to recognise more clearly where other sources of tension exist in the mediation of actions between agents and each of the six structural categories. As Weick and Westley (1996) intimate, learning is a disorganised process which will inevitably be inhibited by organisational constraints. This study makes it possible to provide much greater clarity about where the key tensions are and Table 7 outlines them.

Table 7: Key tensions in the organisational learning process

	Key tensions
Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own interests ↔ Organisation's interests
Physical structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large geographical distance from organisation centre ↔ Exposure to learning opportunities • Utilisation of accommodation presenting physical barriers to communication ↔ Optimising communication
Accountability structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigorous assessment of compliance ↔ Innovation
Development structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximising efficiency ↔ Investing time and money in formal learning interventions
Management intervention structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting targets ↔ Investing time in informal learning • Openness to stakeholders' involvement in service delivery ↔ Enabling a blame-free environment • Providing clear direction ↔ Consulting staff • Providing clear direction ↔ Innovation
Workplace social structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of close-knit teams / silos ↔ Looser teams engaging more broadly • Seeking knowledge from others ↔ Developing own solutions • Peer competition ↔ Free flow of information among staff
Work task-based structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetitive work tasks ↔ Innovative thinking • Accountability for mistakes ↔ Ease of learning from mistakes • Delivering results ↔ Undertaking non-essential learning • Dealing with the present ↔ Focusing on the future • Focusing internally ↔ Focusing externally • Delivering short-term results ↔ Recording knowledge in organisational repositories

It is now time to consider in more detail the overall conclusions and implications of this study in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 11 - CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Having considered matters associated with agents and structures relevant to OL, and the mediation between them, this chapter moves on to provide some overall concluding observations in relation to each of the four research questions underpinning this study. The theoretical and empirical, and policy and practice, implications of this study are then considered. Finally, the study's contributions and limitations are set out – as well as suggested areas for future research.

Overall concluding observations

At this stage, consideration is given to how the empirical research undertaken in this study enables the research questions to be answered. Taking each question in turn, the following can be said.

1. In what form does any OL occur in the UK civil service?

The question which needs to be revisited before attempting to answer this question is that of 'what constitutes OL?' It has been shown in Chapter 3 that there is much debate and confusion in existing literature about what OL is, and that this is largely because of the multi-disciplinary nature of the concept and the piecemeal way in which most writers - especially those taking more analytical approaches - have considered matters associated with OL. Consequently, it is important to reiterate that there is no single model which any OL in the UK civil service can be assessed against – but the existing literature has been useful in guiding lines of enquiry and in developing some of the focuses for analyses of the data gathered.

Against this backdrop, it is felt that the inductive approach taken throughout this study has enabled a deeper understanding of OL in the UK civil service to be developed than would have otherwise been the case. In basic terms, for the author, OL concerns learning undertaken by individuals either on their own or as part of groups using knowledge available to them as individuals or groups and drawing from information

or knowledge held in any organisational repositories. Having undertaken learning, OL might then involve the learning being transferred to others and/or into repositories.

Considering OL in these terms, it is clear that people's functioning depended on OL as the majority of learning took place on-the-job during the course of day-to-day activities. However, the nature and level of the learning undertaken were the products of mediations between agents and the structures in which they resided which resulted in OL being localised and contingent. Individual attributes – including educational background, motivation level and ability to form effective relationships – affected people's engagement in OL process across the board, but six key structures have been identified as being relevant to OL within the Welsh Government. These are (1) physical, (2) accountability, (3) development, (4) management intervention, (5) workplace social and (6) work task-based. Key differences among the groups of individuals and structural features prevalent among the three case study areas have been identified and are set out in Table 6.

The full complexity of people's mediated interaction with each of these structures was the subject of analysis in the previous chapter so this does not need to be resurfaced comprehensively here. However, some key points are worthy of note in terms of answering this first research question. In terms of physical structures, it was found that staff located at the centre of the organisation, who sat within open plan office environments with colleagues at all levels within the hierarchical structure had the most enriched experience of OL. If one or more of these conditions did not apply to staff, achieving effective OL was more challenging. Rather than physical structures preventing OL, they presented barriers which had to be overcome by people who had varying levels of ability and willingness to do so. Therefore, the form of OL practised was shaped by physical structures which varied significantly within the Welsh Government.

In relation to accountability structures, this study has shown that these impacted upon OL in nuanced ways. Where there was no 'hiding place' across people's activities, staff tended to act with caution and in the interests of self protection, but staff were able to target their efforts where it was possible for them to predict likely sources of

scrutiny. It also became apparent that having some ability to make mistakes without them being noticed and being in tune with ministerial thinking provided scope for trialling different approaches in the knowledge that any resultant mistakes would be within the tolerance boundaries of ministers. The most significant upshots for the forms of OL occurring were that scrutiny had the potential to stimulate single loop learning and that double loop learning flourished where 'cover' for innovative thinking and practices was known to exist.

Moreover, it became apparent that development structures, in the shape of more formal training interventions, flourished where encouragement from management was coupled with motivation and enthusiasm to engage among staff. However, while influences from these structures were significant, it was clear that the vast majority of people's learning in all three case study areas was in the form of on-the-job learning.

Turning to management intervention structures, most notably it emerged that staff's motivation to learn had a more significant impact on outcomes than any prescriptions managers sought to make. In particular, managers' promotion of learning was not effective where they were also promoting messages – especially around meeting targets – which conflicted. It was apparent that staff tended to focus their efforts on those things which would result in them being perceived as being successful so the form of learning practised was to this extent shaped by managers' actions. It also came to light that managers made positive influences on the establishment of day-to-day learning forms by introducing specific measures such as mentors, virtual teams and team meetings in circumstances where the measures were suitable.

In terms of workplace social structures, an important finding has been that - while these were significant - their impact was not as profound as some writers have argued where they have implied that OL is embedded in cultural practices only. The nature and scope of social interactions have been shown to be shaped by teams identified with and boundaries associated with teams. Also, it was clear that social interactions which could facilitate OL were inevitably influenced by the level of knowledge possessed by the people involved and sometimes by people's experience in job roles. In practice, knowledge-sharing encounters between or among people happened where there was an underlying purpose for such encounters and good relationships were

found to be key to effective encounters being realised in situations where people could often choose whether or not to engage with others.

The last set of structures, which are work task-based, were found to have a profound impact on OL processes. These are considered in greater detail when answering the second research question, but it is important to make the point here that the diversity of work tasks had direct consequences on the nature and level of learning. It has become apparent that repetition in work activities stifled opportunities to engage in learning at the double-loop level, that the need to keep abreast of ongoing developments in order to be effective in a role stimulated learning, that having discretion in a role and dealing with new issues stimulated learning about possible courses of action, that opportunities for external engagement varied considerably and that motivation levels to capture knowledge in organisational repositories was low where past knowledge was perceived to be less useful in the present or future.

Therefore, overall, OL has been shown to be localised and manifested from individuals' engagements with a number of relevant structures overlaid by various conceptually inherent tensions which have been set out in Table 7. However, some commonalities emerged across all three case studies. Significantly, efforts to engage in learning tended only to be made where there was a clear purpose for doing so and a purpose could be stimulated either by a structural influence or an individual's own motivation. Also, across the board it was apparent that the vast majority of knowledge was retained in people's memories and that learning was – therefore - driven predominantly by cognitive and social processes, rather than formal training or technology-based systems. Although the organisation itself had information repositories, these were not particularly valuable for storing knowledge in or accessing knowledge from.

2. What impact does the diversity of work tasks in the UK civil service have on OL?

It was recognised at an early stage in this study that not only is the UK public sector very diverse, but so is the UK civil service both as a whole and at the individual organisation level. Because of this, it was considered to be more effective to focus on specific workplace settings in order to gain a deeper understanding of relevant

practices. This was part of the reason for adopting a case study approach and selecting three diverse cases so that they could be juxtaposed in the overall analysis of the data. While the three case studies do not collectively reflect all significant elements of diversity within the UK civil service, and certainly not the wider public sector, they do individually and collectively encapsulate many characteristics which are prevalent in large swathes of the public sector so – therefore – provide important insights into how certain differences in the work undertaken and workplace practices impact upon OL across the public sector.

This concern to ensure that the research design was able to investigate the significance of work task diversity has made it possible to now reach important conclusions about the impact of this diversity on the OL process, the significance of which are surprising when considered in the context of existing OL-related literature.

The varying needs for learning arising from work tasks had profound impacts on both the nature and the amount of learning undertaken by staff individually and collectively. It has been illustrated that staff in Rural needed to learn processes and mistake-avoidance techniques, while staff in Legal needed to acquire a substantial knowledge of subject-specific laws and the wide range of skills needed to practice as public law lawyers, while staff in Programmes needed to acquire a knowledge of operating frameworks but – most importantly – they needed to learn how to exercise good judgement and operate in a political environment. It was clear that the significant differences among the work tasks performed across the three case studies affected learning in direct ways.

The repetitive nature of work in Rural meant that historical knowledge was more relevant and useful because very similar tasks to those undertaken in the past were being undertaken in the present. In Programmes, staff did have some processes to follow but the main focus for many was on dealing with new issues which meant that learning about historical practices would need to be done with a questioning mind and with a view to developing something different for the future. In Legal, most lawyers were either working with policy colleagues to develop new legislation or they were dealing with questions which had usually not arisen before and which needed to be advised upon with reference to the relevant legal framework. In contrast to Rural, the

work undertaken in Programmes and Legal led to learning being ongoing – rather than being something done mostly by new staff – and the learning was often of the double loop variety. Further, the degree of change associated with work tasks had a significant impact on OL – change certainly stimulated learning.

It was also apparent that the nature of work being undertaken by staff, especially in Programmes, meant that regular communication with a wide range of people across the Welsh Government and sometimes externally was necessary as part of day-to-day activities. Staff in Legal had opportunities to engage regularly with policy colleagues and could – if desired – contact counterparts in other UK administrations, but contact with any colleagues outside was not a feature of daily working life for many staff in Rural in Carmarthen. Generally, dialogue with people outside of immediate work areas happened where it was required - or desirable - as part of undertaking work tasks. It was clear that staff who had engaged in communications with others had shared or received knowledge, and had sometimes been challenged by that dialogue to look at issues differently. Overall, this study has shown how dependent the dialogue that facilitates learning is upon the nature of work tasks being performed. As with learning itself, dialogue has to have a purpose and when it is sparked by a purpose unexpected learning can occur.

It has also emerged that behaviours and practices supported by working practices manifest themselves in broader views and expectations about engaging in learning. In Rural, the lack of change embedded in work activities appeared to have led to a mindset that change was something handled elsewhere and then – even when there was an opportunity to engage in change – many staff did not see that they should have a role to play. Conversely, in Legal where shaping change was part of working life, strong attempts were made to influence change even when their ideas were not being taken on board by managers at the centre of the organisation. Generally, the experiences and expectations of staff in any of the workplaces formed collective mindsets which tended to act as frameworks in which people thought and behaved. Therefore, the impact of work tasks themselves on OL was profound and the tensions they present have become apparent in this study.

3. How do factors unique to the UK public sector impact upon OL?

While considering this question, it is most appropriate to discuss the characteristics which are highly relevant to large parts of the public sector while recognising that they often arise in different ways in the private sector - rather than recognising them as being unique. Starting with bureaucracy, which is one of the factors most scholars writing about OL in a public sector context have identified as an inhibiting factor, the Welsh Government was not found to be highly bureaucratised throughout. Bureaucracy of the type which appeared to impact upon OL most significantly was found to emerge from work task-based structures which varied significantly from case study to case study. Certainly, Rural was bureaucratised and data show that the procedures in place were the principal cause of learning being mainly limited to the single-loop type. Also, elements of Programmes and Legal were process-driven – especially in areas focused on legislation development. However, it has also been shown that lawyers involved in providing advice and staff in Programmes focused on developing constitutional arrangements and maintaining inter-governmental relations operated within broad frameworks and had high levels of discretion about how to approach their work. Therefore, where work tasks were heavily bureaucratised, bureaucracy inhibited higher-level learning being undertaken – but the Welsh Government is an illustration of the public sector not being uniformly bureaucratic throughout as some writers have suggested it is.

As has already been intimated, accountability structures were found to be unique to the public sector in type - rather than existence - with a significant feature being that the structures and their associated tensions prevalent could only be influenced by managers in either limited ways or not at all. It has been illustrated how some - especially in Programmes and Legal - had sophisticated understandings of how they would be likely to be held to account and would then apply those understandings by being innovative or taking risks where they were confident that they were acting within the bounds of ministerial tolerances, or by targeting their efforts to ensure that they got right the things which mattered most. This often had the effect of stimulating learning, rather than stifling it, which is not a possibility many writers have recognised. For Rural staff, despite sometimes recognising that they would be able to form acceptable ‘excuses’ for mistakes made, they did tend to focus on mistake-

avoidance at all times and this led to compliance trumping innovation. Clearly, this stimulated single-loop learning but stifled double-loop learning. This study has illustrated that accountability and scrutiny mechanisms in the public sector are numerous and that transparency has to be allowed in the face of them.

Also, as has been mentioned previously, a mistake can cause a political problem which is not acceptable for civil servants to cause and which could, in more serious instances, open up questions about whether or not individuals have complied with one of their fundamental responsibilities set out in the Civil Service Code which include serving ministers effectively. Therefore, the accountability and scrutiny faced by civil servants can lead to a preference for tried and tested solutions – rather than to innovative approaches being tried and tested – but it is also important to remember that impactful accountability and scrutiny mechanisms can stimulate a form of learning (i.e. single-loop) in order to achieve compliance.

The other factors of large organisation size and highly hierarchical structures, which are characteristics of many public sector organisations, were also found to impact upon OL. However, as OL was localised, these became significant where they manifested themselves in the forms of physical structures – including geographical and hierarchical distance from senior managers, and segregation emerging from office design. There were examples in Programmes of small teams containing staff working at several grade levels up to Senior Civil Service which – coupled with roles involving people in regular dialogue with others throughout the organisation – resulted in an absence of inhibiting physical structures. It has come to light that the factors of large organisation size and highly hierarchical structures do in most instances make the achievement of OL more challenging and even make it difficult for people to recognise organisation-wide connectivity where they are working in silo-like teams and especially when located far from the decisional centre.

Certain factors which are unique to the public sector, including elements of accountability structures, have also been shown to be significant in respect of OL. Some civil servants work closely with politicians, and are exposed to outputs generated by the machinery in place for developing and agreeing arrangements within a political arena. It has emerged that the accountability and scrutiny mechanisms

existing within this arena have the potential to apportion blame and hold people to account for their actions – the latter of which is viewed positively within such an arena. Although ministers were responsible for the actions of their officials, it did not transpire that this cover always provided a safety shield for staff – especially in Programmes where people were working in the most politicised environment among the three case studies. Even if staff were not blamed directly by external sources, any minister blamed would be likely to – in turn – blame the staff responsible.

Therefore, it was apparent that staff working close to politicians and/or exposed to political scrutiny mechanisms were at considerable risk of being blamed and it was the case that these political pressures were all but impossible for managers to influence. However, it tends not to be acknowledged by others that many civil servants – such as those working in Rural – are not generally exposed to these influences. Across all three case studies, low levels of blame apportionment on the part of management appeared to be prevalent so not all workplaces focused on were characterised by tendencies to blame. However - while not evident in this study - if individual managers sought to apportion blame in environments which are exposed to blame from political sources, the resultant environment created would be likely to significantly inhibit learning.

A positive influence on OL emerging from workplace social structures likely to be most prevalent in public sector organisations came to light. A number of lawyers in Legal who had previously worked in the private sector contrasted that experience with the environment they had entered in the Welsh Government. They referred to the benefits in the Welsh Government of not being in such direct competition with colleagues to achieve maximum income from work activities which, in their experience, had in the private sector deterred people from spending time sharing their knowledge with others.

4. What possibilities are there for enhancing OL practices in the UK public sector?

This study indicates that there is some scope for enhancing OL practices in the UK public sector, but that embedding ongoing transformational learning throughout is unlikely to be either desirable or practicable. This is largely because the vast majority

of people's learning is shaped fundamentally by the work task-based structures they are subjected to. Consequently, it has emerged that many people's job roles do not require or provide scope for regular double-loop learning if staff are to deliver what the organisation requires of them. Organisations exist first and foremost to deliver the functions for which they are responsible and fundamental shifts in how they operate can happen. However, for the requirements set for staff to change in significant ways, there is likely to need to be a belief that those changes would enhance the delivery of outputs. This study has surfaced some of the key tensions in the OL process – as set out in Table 7 - which managers can consider the possibilities for reducing in this context. It is clear from this study that, while learning and delivery are reciprocally supportive concepts, delivery was dominant in the Welsh Government and there is little prospect of this changing because the benefits to OL of doing so would almost certainly not be outweighed by the removal of mechanisms crucial for ensuring the delivery of services.

It has been shown in the analysis of management intervention structures that managers in the Welsh Government were less able to stimulate learning practices than staff themselves. Also, there is little likelihood of engaging staff in learning where they do not see a clear purpose to the learning and where they are not motivated to engage. Therefore, above all, it appears that managers could make a positive influence if they can encourage learning for instrumental purposes rather than as a general principle.

The possibility of enhancing OL practices exists if greater connectivity can be established among individuals who could learn something from each other and if, as a result, effective working relationships are forged. Specific development structures which have the potential to enable this include off-the-job learning interventions in the form of training sessions, community of practice meetings, engaging in discussions with colleagues who undertake relevant activities either internally or externally, time for group reflection and participation in virtual team activities. However, it would be important for decisions to use any of these interventions to be made taking account of the workplace social and work task-based structures in play.

The impacts on learning of accountability structures have been shown to be both positive and negative. It has been illustrated that the negative effects can be minimised where staff have an in-depth understanding, insofar as it is possible to, of precisely what any scrutiny would focus on and the aspirations of ministers. Where these understandings are established, staff can be clear about what latitude they have to be creative and to risk trial and error, but where staff do not have a clear understanding they tend to focus on risk and mistake avoidance. Therefore, more double-loop learning would be likely to be stimulated if a greater understanding of these issues could be instilled among all staff.

Finally, as it has been clear that staff do tend to focus on what gets measured, it seems that OL would be enhanced if management intervention structures demonstrate that efforts to learn and share learning are acknowledged. Also, facilitative to learning would be more regular less formal communication between senior managers and other staff during which managers listen and respond positively to views and ideas expressed by staff as actors in and shapers of workplace social structures.

Theoretical and empirical implications

The analysis of the data gathered in this study provides further support for Easterby-Smith's (1997) conclusion that the creation of a comprehensive theory of OL is an unrealistic aspiration because of the multi-disciplinary nature of the concept. The ways in which data emerging from this study support, or not, the plethora of ideas and assertions made by others have been set out in the previous chapter and there would be little value in summarising those out of context here.

However, this study has further exposed how OL practices can function and the consequent implications for theoretical considerations in the field. Firstly, it is clear that both structures and agents are fundamental to OL which results in it being essential for any further theoretical developments in the field to take account of both. As has already been mentioned in this chapter, many writers appear to have not always recognised that organisations' – especially in the public sector - primary purpose is to perform functions so OL is inevitably immersed in those functions which have been described and analysed in this study using the label of 'work task-

based structures'. While it is inevitable that some will raise ontologically-based objections, it is argued here that OL practices can only be adequately investigated in a setting if the research methodology applied is underpinned by an approach which focuses on both structures and agents, and if the analysis of data gathered considers how these are mediated. In this study, utilising the notions of the 'internal conversation' and 'power' has been found to create a useful framework for understanding the mediated interplay between structures and agents. Overall, it is thought that a critical realist approach has led to it being possible for a much deeper understanding of OL to be formed.

Secondly, this study has demonstrated that the tension inherent in the relationship between managers and other staff in the public sector is an important consideration when considering how OL works and what the possibilities for enhancing it might be. Far too many writers have made assumptions which appear to be guided by unitarist ideas, and this has led to unrealistic expectations being embedded in their work as a result of not adequately engaging with the complexity inherent in negotiated orders. Additionally, this study has surfaced a number of tensions – as set out in Table 7 - which affect OL through actions arising from the mediated interplay between agents and structures. The clarity subsequently created provides an empirically established basis for assessing where scope exists in any organisation for reducing or removing factors inhibiting OL while having regard for what would be appropriate within a given organisational context.

Thirdly, many writers have tended to focus narrowly on one or a small number of structures influencing OL. This has, most significantly, led to a lack of attention being given to the impact of physical and work task-based structures. This study has found that there is a high level of inter-connectivity among structures and, in turn between structures and agents, so the full range of dynamics need to be considered in order to seek to achieve deep understanding. This study has aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of OL dynamics, and has developed an empirically-based structural framework for understanding OL as a local and contingent concept. The key differences among individual groups and among structural features across the three case study areas focused on have been summarised in Table 6 which allows for greater understanding of context-specific impacts to be gained.

Whilst all practices emerged from mediations between agents and structures, not only were some structures (especially work task-based) found to have more profound influences but it was also apparent that certain structures had shaped others. The most significant influences can be summarised with a focus on each in turn as follows:

- *Physical* – Staff working in close proximity to scrutinisers felt more accountable to them and could be more readily scrutinised by them through day-to-day interactions. Therefore, physical location sometimes shaped both the way in which accountability structures were perceived and how they existed. Also, more straightforwardly, geographical location and office layout shaped the interactions people had with each other and – therefore – the workplace social structures prevalent.
- *Accountability* – The scrutiny to which managers were subjected shaped how they acted and influences arising from scrutiny sources impacted upon managers’ power to influence both the activities of their staff and working practices.
- *Development* – These structures were not found to have any key influences on other structures.
- *Management intervention* – Managers were able to develop and/or implement development structures. Also, managers had varying degrees of scope to influence how work tasks were undertaken and had an impact on the workplace social environment at least as people working within it and usually more significantly because of their positions as managers.
- *Workplace social* – In the same way as managers could influence the workplace social structures, workplace social structures could also shape the interventions of managers as parties themselves embedded in the workplace social environment.
- *Work task-based* – The nature of work tasks were a key driver of workplace social interactions as people tended to speak to those people they needed to in order to acquire the knowledge needed to perform their roles effectively.

The surfacing of these key inter-structural influences is another important contribution to the development of a holistic understanding of OL. It is also thought to provide a platform for the future development of critical realist thinking which has hitherto

focused predominantly on mediations between structures and agents and less so on inter-structure mediations. One response might be that structures should not be defined separately if they are intimately bound, but there is a need to categorise structures for the purpose of analysis and this study has shown that no structural category defined within this study is isolated from all other structural categories.

Implications for policy and practice

The implications for policy and practice within the Welsh Government have been largely addressed above in the ‘overall concluding observations’ section of this chapter when focusing on the fourth research question relating to the possibilities for enhancing OL practices within UK public sector which was answered drawing on a Welsh Government-based analysis.

This study demonstrates that those managing or studying the public sector should continue to promote OL practices and that, where work task-based structures are of the kind required, OL practices can underpin transformational change. It has been apparent that the organisation which is now the Welsh Government has transformed itself from a department of the UK government to a devolved administration during the first decade of the twenty-first century and insights provided illustrate how OL practices facilitated the central development of that change. It is important to note that these OL practices occurred because the work tasks supported them and those seeking to develop OL practices need to recognise the extent to which they are embedded in work task-based structures.

It is important for managers to recognise the implications of how they define success for staff and explore opportunities for enhancing OL practices, rather than aspiring to achieve an unrealistic ideal. For example, Rural managers have scope to stimulate more learning but the likelihood of them being able to stimulate learning of the kind seen in Programmes is improbable. Managers also need to accept that effective OL practices develop within the context of a range of structures and that their influence if they were to seek to make changes in a top-down way would be limited, within negotiated orders prevalent. Managers need to seek to provide space for learning

(both on and off-the-job) and communicate what that space is, articulate a clear purpose for any learning and reward good practice when it occurs.

As it has been shown that politicians have a tendency to seek to apportion blame, it is important for public sector managers to ensure that they do not add to the negative effect of this if they wish to encourage OL practices. It has been shown to be very difficult for managers to influence political pressures and, where there was a strong connection with ministers, the views of managers were secondary. In these circumstances, ministers committed to promoting practices which have the potential to influence OL positively could go some way towards counteracting any negative effects of management practices.

The more specific interventions which could enhance OL practices mentioned above in the context of the fourth research question have wide applicability with the caution that a decision to use any of them would need to be made while taking account of the agents and structures existing in any specific workplace setting.

In terms of learning policies developed by organisations, this study has demonstrated how what was in place in the Welsh Government had no bearing on the vast majority of learning which actually occurred because they tended to focus on formal training and their existence was not known by the vast majority of people. Therefore, policies need to recognise the significance of on-the-job learning and could draw from this work to outline the factors managers need to consider locally to make positive influences on learning.

More generally, it would be valuable for any managers wishing to enhance OL to consider what scope exists for reducing the inherent tensions summarised in Table 7. For many, this is likely to involve considering whether any benefits of a rigidity outweigh the adverse impact(s) on OL processes. However, any organisation wishing to continue to exist as an organisational form cannot disorganise itself for the purpose of achieving uninhibited OL in a way which would be necessary to eradicate all of the tensions set out in Table 7.

Contributions, limitations and areas for future research

In this final section consideration is given to the contribution this study makes to literature, its limitations and how it might inform future research in the field.

In terms of the study's contributions, it has been demonstrated how a critical realist-based research methodology can be used to investigate OL and how this can lead to a fuller and deeper understanding of OL practices in a specific context. Most significantly, having concern for both structure and agency issues in this study has made it possible to develop greater clarity about the full range of structures relevant to OL and how they are mediated with agents. These important considerations have generally not been brought to the fore in a comprehensive way by others writing about OL. Further, the critical realist approach has also enabled an enhanced understanding to be established of inter-structural influences relevant to OL.

More specifically, this study makes a significant contribution to literature by providing an empirically-based understanding of what and how OL practices occur in a public sector context. Although the study focused on one organisation only, the three case study areas collectively encapsulated characteristics which can be found in large swathes of the UK public sector. Those working in the field can now benefit from a better informed understanding of the existence and relevance of diversity in the public sector, and how pertinent factors embedded in public sector organisations' structures can impact upon OL. Other contributors have tended to focus on a narrow set of these factors and/or make assertions about impacts in a general way while applying non-empirically based assumptions. In addition, this study has provided a deeper appreciation of the relevance of OL to the public sector and the possibilities for enhancing beneficial practices while taking account of existing structures. The characteristics of groups of individuals and structural features prevalent have been shown to change the possibilities for the range and form of any OL practices in a given context. How differences among these impact have been conveyed and provides an addition to existing literature. Also, this study contributes an outline of the key tensions inherent in the OL process which makes it possible for practical consideration to be given to where these can be reduced in order to enhance scope for OL.

Turning to the study's limitations, the three case study areas which could be selected within the scope of this study are not entirely representative of all areas of the UK public sector. It is believed that the three case study areas collectively reflect a significant spectrum of factors existing across large areas of the public sector which impact upon OL in significant ways, but it is possible that other important impacts would emerge elsewhere because of different organisation-wide policies or practices developed internally – or different politically-driven agendas. It is important to note that the Welsh Government is likely to be more similar to other civil service organisations than to – for example - certain operational areas of local government, the National Health Service and other public sector organisations outside of the UK. Therefore, as with all case study-based research, care needs to be taken when drawing upon this work to facilitate any analysis of circumstances elsewhere.

Another limitation is that, while some documentary analysis was undertaken, this study relied heavily on semi-structured interviews. However, the researcher believes that the research design was the most suitable to adopt within the scope of this study as the nature of OL required in-depth discussion and flexibility to gain the insights required to answer the research questions which formed the basis for the investigations. As the researcher was himself employed by the Welsh Government, although not in any of the case study areas, he was well placed to understand the meaning of data and analyse them with reference to an understanding of the broader context. The researcher believes that a limitation does not arise as a result of not using any quantitative-based methods, but future researchers might wish to consider their use based on the understanding of OL which has emerged from this study.

Lastly, in terms of areas for future research - while this study is thought to have made a significant contribution - there is still plenty more work which could be done to further develop understanding of OL practices and, in particular, their applicability in a public sector context. In terms of the Welsh Government, it would be beneficial to undertake a similar investigation in a more routine policy area and to carry out a further study focusing on the same areas as have been focused on here to establish whether or not any changes have occurred and, if so, to consider what caused those changes.

As has already been acknowledged, it is likely that other areas of the UK civil service, wider UK public sector and even more so public sectors in other countries will have contextual differences which would be likely to impact on OL. Therefore, further research in other public sector organisation contexts would enable a fuller understanding to be developed of the issues associated with applying OL more widely in the public sector. It would be particularly useful to test whether or not the structures outlined in this study – as well as the inter-structural influences described and the key tensions set out in Table 7 – are equally applicable in other contexts.

This study has found that physical, accountability and workplace social structures are likely to be different in the public sector. Further research with a specific in-depth focus on these structures and their mediations with agents in other public sector contexts would be useful to gain a broader and fuller understanding of the bearing they have on OL practices. Accountability structures have been found in this study to have both positive and negative effects on OL practices (e.g. they can stimulate single-loop learning, but inhibit double-loop learning – or vice versa), which indicates the complexity of their impacts. Further research would be useful, probably by way of longitudinal studies, to assess how OL practices change in the same workplaces as attention given to work areas by ministers or the actors undertaking scrutiny shift to and from subject areas.

In relation to OL more widely, given that certain non-fixed structures have been identified here as having a profound affect on the possibilities for any OL, it would be valuable to undertake longitudinal studies in areas where changes are proposed to assess how specific differences made facilitate or hinder OL practices. This could include scenarios where changes are deliberately made to stimulate greater OL. Such studies could provide valuable insights into the scale of any benefits which could be realised as a result of enhancing OL practices which is an important area in which little empirically-based evidence exists.

APPENDIX 1

Specimen preliminary phase interview questions

1. What is your role and how long have you been performing it?
2. How do you interpret organisational learning in the broad sense? And at the individual level? Examples?
3. Are there any external pressures on the Welsh Government to develop OL?
4. What types of workplace learning are you promoting within the Welsh Government?
5. How do you think most people in the Welsh Government presently learn?
6. In your experience, what initiatives or practices have most successfully enabled learning?
7. Do you think there are any characteristics of the Welsh Government which inhibit learning?
8. Do you feel that the way in which the Welsh Government is held accountable and is scrutinised affects the way in which people think and act?
9. Do you think the Welsh Government learns from other public sector organisations and from the private/voluntary sector?
10. What do you think should be developed or promoted in the Welsh Government in the future to enhance learning at the organisational and individual levels?

APPENDIX 2

Specimen main phase pilot study interview questions

1. What is your role and how long have you been performing it?
2. How long have you worked for the organisation?
3. What is your career background?
4. When you started to perform your role, what things were new to you?
What did you do to deal with those new things?
How did your colleagues or the organisation support you?
5. What has been the biggest change or innovation for your team?
How was it managed?
Was it easy to implement?
Do you think anything should have been done differently?
6. Can you think of a time when you or your team have looked back and considered what went well and not so well after completing a large task?
Who was involved in this?
What came out of it?
7. In general terms, how could you influence change?
8. If you do something well or not so well, who would notice or be interested?
When and how would they communicate their thoughts to you?
9. Can you think of a time when you or your team made a mistake?
How was it dealt with?
How did people react to it?
Was it easy to talk about?
Was anything done to try to avoid a similar thing happening in the future?
10. If you were faced with a problem, who would you seek advice from?
11. Has anything provided significant personal development for you in the last year or two?
How did it work?
Has it made a difference to how you do your job?
12. Do you think it is easy to develop in this organisation?
What could the organisation do more of?

APPENDIX 3

Specimen main phase interview questions

Questions for managers

1. What is your role and how long have you been performing it?
2. How long have you worked for the organisation – including Assembly and former Welsh Office?
3. Are there any external pressures on [name of division/department] to develop organisational learning?
4. What types of workplace learning are you promoting within [name of division/department]?
5. How do you think most people in [name of division/department] presently learn?
6. In your experience, what initiatives or practices have most successfully enabled learning?
7. Do you encourage staff in [name of division/department] to influence change?
8. Do you think there are any characteristics of [name of division/department] which inhibit learning?
9. If somebody in [name of division/department] is faced with a problem, who do you think they should seek advice from?
10. Who would notice if somebody in [name of division/department] does something well or not so well?
11. What do you do when you notice that somebody should have done something differently?
12. Do you feel that the way in which [name of division/department] is held accountable and is scrutinised affects the way in which people think and act?
13. Do you think [name of division/department] learns from other areas of the Welsh Government and/or anywhere more widely (e.g. other public sector organisations and the private/voluntary sector)?
14. Do you think it is easy for [name of division/department] staff to develop?

Questions for other staff

1. What is your current job role and how long have you been performing it?

2. How long have you worked for the organisation – including Assembly and former Welsh Office?
3. What job roles have you performed in the past, either in this organisation or elsewhere?
4. When you started to perform your current job role, what things were new to you?
What did you do to deal with those new things?
How did your colleagues or the organisation support you?
5. What has been the biggest work-based change or innovation for your team?
How was it managed within the team?
Was it easy to implement?
Do you think anything should have been done differently?
6. Can you think of a time when you or your team have looked back and considered what went well and not so well after completing a large task?
Who was involved in this?
What came out of it?
7. How have you been able to influence change?
8. If you do something well or not so well, who would notice or be interested?
Do you think you would be likely to change your actions as a result of comments made?
9. Can you think of a time when you could or should have dealt with something differently?
What was the situation?
How did people react to it?
Was anything done to try to avoid a similar thing happening in the future?
10. If you were faced with a problem in work, who would you seek advice from?
11. Has anything provided significant personal development for you in the last year or two?
How did it work?
Has it made a difference to how you do your job?
12. How easy or difficult is it to develop in this organisation?
What could the organisation do more of?
What would motivate you to be more concerned about your development?

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