

**TO WHAT EXTENT DO ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS HINDER  
OR SUPPORT WORKPLACE LEARNING?  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA CASE**

**Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Social Sciences  
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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis has identified a number of effects of political behaviour that hinder or support workplace learning. The work adds to knowledge since, whilst a small amount of literature exists regarding the relationship between organisational politics and learning, there is very little knowledge concerning the effect of micro-politics on workplace learning. Existing literature is primarily concerned with the general effect of politics on work performance and how these are perceived by the employees.

Evidence was gained from 35 participants who were undergoing some type of workplace learning, through participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The study employed a qualitative research design and research data was extracted from the fieldwork notes and interview transcriptions of the participants who related the effect of political behaviour they were having (if any) on their learning.

A methodology based on an inductivist approach was used to explore the participants' experiences, thoughts and opinions, since the study involved social processes and behaviours. Collected data which was transcribed and converted to text was analysed by using the N-VIVO Qualitative Data Analysis software.

The research clearly showed that interpersonal political behaviour may have an intense effect on the employees' learning, particularly informal learning. The effects can be inhibitive and distressing for some, and supportive and profitable for others. In a minority of cases, workplace politics seemed to have had no effect on individual learning, as some respondents consciously chose to distance and isolate themselves from such behaviours.

The research included in this thesis has made a new contribution to the existing literature on politics and learning since it identified the type of effects that particular political behaviours have on the learning of the individual at the place of work. The effects may be learning-supportive or learning-inhibitive and these effects were completely unknown before this research took place.

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## **CONTENTS**

<b>Abstract</b> .....	2
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	3
<b>Contents</b> .....	4
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	10
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	11

### **Chapter 1 - Introduction: Exploring the Effect of Organisational Politics on Workplace Learning**

Introduction.....	12
1.1 Research Problem.....	13
1.2 Purpose & Justification of the Research.....	14
1.3 About the Researcher.....	15
1.4 Methodology.....	18
1.5 Outline of the Thesis.....	19
Conclusion.....	22

### **Chapter 2 - The Relationship Between Organisational Politics & Workplace Learning: A Literature Review**

Introduction .....	23
2.1 Defining Workplace Learning .....	24
2.1.1 Categories of Workplace Learning that Involve Intervention .....	26
2.1.2 Informal/Unconscious Workplace Learning .....	28
2.1.3 Lave & Wenger's Situated Learning .....	29
2.1.4 Obstacles to Workplace Learning .....	31

2.2 Defining Organisational Politics .....	33
2.2.1 A Few Words Regarding Power .....	34
2.2.2 Causes of Organisational Politics .....	35
2.2.3 Types of Individual Political Behaviour in Organisations .....	40
2.2.4 Political Behaviour as a Collection of Games .....	44
2.2.5 The Positive Side of Organisational Politics .....	50
2.2.6 The Negative Side of Organisational Politics .....	55
2.3 The Effect of Organisational Politics on Workplace Learning .....	60
2.4 The Contextual Analysis: Organisational Politics & Workplace Learning at the University Of Malta.....	62
2.4.1 Work, Management & Politics within Universities: A General Note...	62
2.4.2 Malta – Background Information .....	64
2.4.3 Malta & Its General Culture .....	66
2.4.4 The Maltese Work Culture .....	67
2.5 Main & Secondary Research Questions .....	67

### **Chapter 3 - Research Methodology: Researching the Effect of Organisational Politics on Workplace Learning**

Introduction .....	70
3.1 Theoretical Position, Approach to the Methodology & Research Strategy .....	72
3.1.1 Reflexivity.....	72
3.1.2 Social Science vs. Natural Science.....	74

3.1.3 Reason for Adopting the Qualitative Method.....	74
3.2 The Research Method: Participant Observations & Semi-Structured Interviews.....	77
3.2.1 Participant Observations .....	78
3.2.2 Why Ethnography? .....	82
3.2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews .....	84
3.3 Targeted Participants & Sampling .....	88
3.4 Research Design & Developing the Guide for the Data Collection Methods....	90
3.5 Collecting the Data .....	93
3.6 Analysis & the Qualitative Data Management Software .....	98
3.7 Ethical Considerations .....	104
3.7.1 Subjectivity vs. Objectivity .....	105
3.7.1.1 Ethical Reflexivity.....	107
3.7.1.2 The Data Presented in this Thesis.....	108
3.7.2 Confidentiality & Anonymity .....	109
3.7.3 Setting Boundaries .....	111
3.8 Limitations & Weaknesses of the Research Design .....	112
 <b>Chapter 4 - Analysing &amp; Discussing The Participants' Workplace Learning</b>	
Introduction .....	116
4.1 Initial Analysis: Participants' Details .....	118
4.2 Further Analysis: Inductively Surfaced Categories Concerning Workplace Learning.....	119

4.2.1 Types of Workplace Learning.....	119
4.2.1.1 Prominent Issues Regarding the Type/s of Workplace Learning...	121
4.2.2 Most Important Part of the Participants' Job & Ease of Learning the Relevant Task/s.....	122
4.2.2.1 Prominent Issues Regarding the Most Important Part/s of the Job & Ease of Learning the Relevant Tasks .....	123
4.2.3 Feedback .....	128
4.2.3.1 Prominent Issues Regarding Feedback .....	129
Conclusion .....	131

## **Chapter 5 - Analysing & Discussing The Political Behaviour Identified**

Introduction .....	133
5.1 Political Behaviour Identified .....	134
5.2 Political Tactics Exhibited by the Participants .....	139
5.3 Reasons for the Political Behaviour .....	141
5.3.1 Prominent Issues Regarding the Reasons for Political Behaviour .....	143
5.4 Effect of Politics on Workplace Learning .....	146
Conclusion .....	149

## **Chapter 6 - Discussing the Effects of Organisational Politics on Workplace Learning**

Introduction.....	151
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6.1	Attacking or Blaming Others.....	152
6.1.1	Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect.....	154
6.1.2	Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only.....	158
6.1.3	Participants with a Supportive Effect Only.....	159
6.2	Counterinsurgency Game.....	162
6.2.1	Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect.....	163
6.2.2	Participants with a Supportive Effect Only.....	164
6.3	Episodic Power.....	165
6.3.1	Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect.....	166
6.3.2	Participants with No Effect.....	167
6.4	Expertise Game.....	168
6.5	Insurgency Game.....	171
6.5.1	Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect.....	172
6.5.2	Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only.....	173
6.6	Rival Camps Game.....	174
6.6.1	Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect.....	175
6.6.2	Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only.....	178
6.6.3	Participants with No Effect.....	180
6.7	Line vs. Staff.....	182
6.7.1	Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect .....	183
6.7.2	Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only.....	184
6.8	Other Political Behaviours with No Effect on Learning.....	185
	Conclusion.....	187



## **Chapter 7 -Findings & Concluding Remarks**

Introduction.....	189
7.1 The Findings.....	190
7.2 The Kind of Learning Explored .....	191
7.3 The Types of Political Behaviour Observed.....	192
7.4 Causes of Organisational Politics.....	193
7.5 The Effects of Politics on workplace Learning.....	194
7.5.1 Political Behaviour Concerning Authority.....	196
7.5.2 Political Behaviour Concerning Power.....	199
7.5.3 Political Behaviour Concerning Rivalry.....	200
7.6 A Summary of the Research Findings & the Key Factors.....	204
7.7 Implications for Theory.....	207
7.8 Implications for Policy & Practice.....	208
7.8.1 Reflections on Professional Practice.....	212
7.9 Further Research.....	219
Conclusion.....	220
<b>Appendix A – Consent Form English Version .....</b>	<b>221</b>
<b>Appendix B – Consent Form Maltese Version .....</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>Appendix C – Letter to Heads of Department .....</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>Appendix D – Permission Letter from University of Malta .....</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>Appendix E – Participant Observation Guide.....</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>Appendix F – Semi-Structured Interview Guide .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Appendix G – The University of Malta.....</b>	<b>232</b>
<b>Bibliography and References .....</b>	<b>235</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table No.</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Page</b>
4.1	Participants' Overall Details	118
4.2	Types of Workplace Learning	120
4.3	Most Important Tasks & Ease of Learning Them	123
4.4	Feedback	129
5.1	Political Behaviour Identified	136
5.2	The Departments & Their Political Tactics	137
5.3	Total Political Tactics Identified in Each Department	138
5.4	Reasons Behind the Political Behaviour as Provided by the Participants	142
5.5	Emotional Responses to the Political Behaviour	148

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure No.</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Page</b>
5.1	Effects of Politics on Workplace Learning	147
6.1	Effects of Attacking or Blaming Others	153
6.2	Effects of Counterinsurgency Game	162
6.3	Effects of Episodic Power	166
6.4	Effects of Expertise Game	169
6.5	Effects of Insurgency Game	171
6.6	Effects of Rival Camps Game	175
6.7	Effects of Line vs. Staff Game	183

# **CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS ON WORKPLACE LEARNING**

## **Introduction**

This research examines the effect that organisational and interpersonal politics may have on workplace learning. According to Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun (2005), the identification of and attention to organisational politics reached its peak in the 1990s (2005: 252) but the examination of the effect of politics on workplace learning have not resulted in much empirical research. According to Fenwick (2008a) out of nine core journals between 1999–2004, a mere 15% of published articles tackled the area of politics, and these were almost purely theoretical (2008a: 228). This could represent an important gap in the workplace learning literature. For example, Rubenson (2011) argues that organisations are perceived as places of inner conflicts and philosophical effort among those who manage the production resources and individuals whose work and information are oppressed (2011: 228).

As Rubenson goes on to observe, analyses of work conducted from an adult education perspective are indeed increasingly inclined to feature the fundamental and personal politics perceptions of power (2011: 229). However, this is a relatively new trend in the literature, and there is still much that we do not know about the impact that workplace and inter-personal politics have on learning. As such, further studies in this area are necessary

to illustrate the association of politics with learning. These debates take place against a background of increasing importance attached to the development of employee capabilities in order to enhance job quality and performance (Rubenson, 2011: 229). Thus, the investigation and elaboration of contextual factors – such as the micro-politics of organisational life – that assist or hinder such learning is particularly pertinent.

Therefore, this research identifies a number of aspects from the related experiences of employees who encounter political behaviours within their workplace: in doing so, it is argued that the study enhances existing knowledge and can contribute to the understanding of how organisational politics may affect the learning of individuals. The data for this research was collected through observations of and qualitative interviews with employees working at the University of Malta who were undergoing some kind of workplace learning either as new employees, or due to a promotion, or due to a new job or transfer within the same organisation. All the participants in this research are still employed at the University of Malta except one. This research set out to study this area of political activity with particular emphasis on those who were undergoing some type of workplace learning.

## **1.1 Research Problem**

As mentioned above, there have been several developments in the academic literature on organisational politics in the last decade however the relationship between organisational politics and workplace learning is still understudied. Hence the literature in this regard is

also lacking. Some writers have begun to address this issue. For example, according to Lawrence *et al* (2005) learning is successful when employees are adequately politically skilled. Such research, whilst being helpful in determining the skills required by employees, does not really tackle in detail the effect that political behaviour might have on the employees' learning.

The problem at the core of this work asks the question: "To what extent do organisational politics hinder or support workplace learning?" and seeks to establish what effects, if any, can contribute to or damage the workplace learning. More specifically, the research focuses mainly on the competitive interpersonal micro-politics of self-interested individuals, and what effect this might have on the employees' learning at the workplace. As such, the primary focus does not fall on macro-scale industrial politics or structural power struggles, though such issues are of course an important part of the context and are attended to where appropriate.

## **1.2 Purpose & Justification of the Research**

There are debates concerning whether workplace politics are of benefit or an impediment to workplace learning but as yet there has been no authoritative answer to this. According to Meriac & Villanova (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), studies presented to date have paid more attention to the general perceptions of politics rather than observable political behaviours (2006: 17). Meriac & Villanova also suggest that more research is required to

investigate the individual differences of employees and their behaviour in a political climate, specifically the interactions that take place (2006: 27). As will be seen, studies in this area have been mainly inclined to put organisational politics in a negative light. In response to this, Fenwick (2008b) argues that there has been relatively little empirical or conceptual research into the relationship between organisational politics and learning, and that there is therefore a need for more work that explores this issue. It is this need that the thesis aims to address.

### **1.3 About the Researcher**

I chose to study the topic of organisational politics and their effect on workplace learning within the University of Malta because I have personally encountered what I have perceived as instances of political activities during my 18-year work experience at the University of Malta and I wanted to know more about the subject. As a human resources professional, a mature post-graduate sociology student, and at the time I started the doctoral studies, I was starting new projects at the human resources department concerning the workplace learning of employees, I found myself looking back over and evaluating my own work experiences, while at the same time looking forward to the new opportunities and experiences that were being offered to me.

Therefore, I started *a priori* from a position of examining those who probably are going through similar learning experiences and perhaps are encountering some political activities

in the department in which they are situated. This made the prospect of re living my experiences and perhaps the shared experiences of others both exciting and at times distressing. It was not however, the intention of this research to explore and explain my own experiences as an individual, but rather to explore and explain the experiences of a particular group of employees. In fact, I have endeavoured to exercise reflexivity regarding the methods used in the study, especially concerning my own pre-existing values, perceptions and organisational knowledge, which may have shaped my own interpretation of the impact of organisational politics on workplace learning. In addition, I followed Gilgun's (2010) suggestion to adopt reflexivity in the three most important areas of this research, namely (i) the topic being investigated, (ii) the perspectives and experiences of the participants, and (iii) the audience to whom the research findings are directed (2010: 1).

Reflexive writing involves acknowledging the dispositions and personal experiences of a researcher, who finds a way to place himself or herself 'outside' of his or her subject matter and balances objective and reflexive methods. This enables the researcher to convey an analytical cognizance of how he or she is writing about the subject. Of course, reflexivity is also an ethical issue in regard to participants and an accountability concern in terms of quality (Gilgun, 2010: 7), as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Yet, according to Mills (1959) *"neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both"* (1959: 3). This means that we cannot understand ourselves as individuals unless we grasp the involvement of our own experiences within the historical developments of an organisation. A major benefit deriving from my own



experiences was my ability to understand the political activity going on at the University of Malta in relation to the terminology of Mintzberg's political games and Allen *et al*'s political behaviour. In view of this I was able to relate easily with the participants and interviewees but I was also able to keep some 'distance' in the role of academic researcher between myself and the participants.

My career at the University of Malta, like those of the participants in this research, has left a permanent influence on me as a person and undoubtedly this will have influenced my analysis. Particular agendas along the years such as the way people were promoted and developed, my understanding of the values that the employees hold to date, such as job security and recognition, as well as how people react to changes in policies and procedures, may have shaped this research in terms of its aims and the way I collected, analysed and interpreted the data. Bearing this in mind, total separation from the influence that this experience has imparted would be an unrealistic claim. However, in acknowledging that influence and making it transparent, a measure of objectivity is possible. In addition, it is important to recognise that the participants in the study are subject to similar influences, and that the responses they give are therefore similarly embedded within the context of the circumstances they work in. I believe that this *a priori* position that my own personality had been shaped both by my experiences and my work at the University of Malta, has also added positively to my approach to this research.

Recognising the subjectivity of the research – in terms of the effects of both my own pre-existing knowledge and dispositions and those of the respondents – highlights the importance of seeing the data and the findings as products of this context. The data do not therefore represent some objective truth about learning and politics within the case study organisation; but the production of such a truth (if indeed that were to be possible) was not an aim of this research. Rather, the primary interest lay in illuminating the ways in which respondents, as inhabitants of this particular context, perceived political behaviours within the workplace, and how in turn that shaped and influenced their learning behaviours.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

This study is of a qualitative nature and used an inductivist approach, since it involved obtaining a thorough understanding of social processes and behaviours. Moreover, this research was concerned with social phenomena, namely social processes and social relations, and aimed to explore the experiences of those who were undergoing some kind of workplace learning and the organisational micro-politics that may be present. Therefore, the research design took the form of a qualitative ethnographic case study and the data collection was carried out in two stages via participant observations and semi-structured interviews.

The following methodologies were used:

- a. Defining and selecting a target research population of at least 35 employees who were undergoing some type of workplace learning;
- b. Obtaining data regarding the type of political behaviour and how learning is carried out by organising and conducting participant observations with the use of a guide (see **Appendix E**) where the individuals carry out their work;
- c. Obtaining further data by organising and conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the participants with the use of a guide (see **Appendix F**);
- d. Answering the main research question by (i) assembling, coding and analysing the categories identified from the literature, the inductively surfaced categories and other collected data, (ii) evaluating and linking the analysis to the literature review, (iii) accomplishing a set of findings; and (iv) illustrating the conclusions.

## **1.5 Outline of the Thesis**

This section delineates the contents of the remaining chapters. A review of the literature related to the problem is presented in Chapter 2; this reinforces the argument that there is a lack of literature concerned with the effect of organisational politics on workplace learning. The literature review explains the type of workplace learning and political behaviour, mainly Mintzberg's (1985) collection of games, Allen *et al*'s (1979) individual political tactics, and Lawrence *et al*'s (2005) types of power. This Chapter also discusses the causes

of political behaviour, as well as the positive and negative sides of politics. This section evaluates and harmonizes the theories described and sets up their application to the politics and their effect on workplace learning, which is the background of this research. The Chapter concludes by providing a set of research questions and by describing the context in which the study took place.

The methodology section in Chapter 3 describes how a methodology appropriate to the problem was chosen and developed. A participant observation guide as well as an interview topic guide were designed and used for all methods of data collection for this research. These were structured in such a way that the researcher could identify what type of political behaviour is prevalent in the relevant departments: Reflexivity played an important part in the methods used. The guide also encouraged participants to relate their experiences in connection with their learning at the workplace and the effect of the political behaviour that goes on in the department they are situated.

Chapter 4 contains the analysis and discussion of the inductively surfaced categories relating to workplace learning, which surfaced from the observations and interviews. Global biographical details are also presented. This Chapter is mainly designed around four main categories which surfaced from the reading, coding and analysis of the data. These categories deal with the types of workplace learning, the most important part/s of the participants' job, the ease of learning the relevant task/s and the feedback that the

employees receive. Each category is supported by representative quotations from the fieldwork and the participants, and prominent issues regarding the categories are analysed and discussed in detail.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis and discussion regarding the political behaviour identified from the participant observations and semi-structured interviews. A total of four categories are presented and include the political behaviour identified from the literature according to Mintzberg (1985), Allen *et al* (1979) and Lawrence *et al* (2005), the political tactics exhibited by the participants, the reasons for the political behaviour, and the effect of the politics on learning, namely whether negative or positive or both. Each category and political behaviour is supported by representative quotations from the fieldwork and the participants. The details of the effects are described in Chapter 6.

As stated above, Chapter 6 covers in detail the effects of politics on workplace learning. Each political tactic and its effect on workplace learning are analysed and discussed in detail. Here as well, the analysis and discussions are supported by quotations taken from the fieldwork and the participants. The issue of frustration is very much echoed throughout the discussion, which is one of the effects of several political tactics.

Chapter 7 presents the findings of the research and includes a discussion on how the research will contribute to existing knowledge and suggestions for further research. The following findings emerged from the research: organisational politics may hinder or enhance workplace learning depending on the specific type of behaviour, the context in which it is played out and how it is perceived by different individuals; organisational politics may have no effect whatsoever on an individual's learning by choice of the individual to stay detached from the political behaviour; the presence of bureaucracy seems to motivate individuals to engage in political behaviour; part of the political behaviour is caused by the structure of the organisation; individuals in a managerial or supervisory role may need to be politically skilled in order to attain their goals; there seems to be rivalry between two groups of staff; and, subordinates also need to learn to play political games more effectively.

## **Conclusion**

This first chapter has given details on the nature of the research problem tackled by this thesis, described the methodology appointed and presented a summary of the findings and conclusions. The next chapter is a review of the literature concerning workplace learning and organisational politics. This stage manifested the basis for determining the research outline, identified what research had already been undertaken and specifies the theories which sustain and enlighten the discussion of the problem and the findings.

## **CHAPTER 2 - THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS AND WORKPLACE LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Workplace learning is conventionally seen as a means of improving the skills of employees and enhancing their knowledge, and the learning involved may be either formal or informal. Formal learning, which consists of qualifications and certified training, is no longer seen as the sole method of learning. Formally-acquired qualifications are becoming viewed more in terms of a wider structure that concerns workplaces and the employees, educational institutions and various communities within organisations. At the same time, informal learning at the workplace is becoming an increasingly important tool for training employees. Both formal and informal learning may benefit either the organisation or the individual or both (Crouse *et al*, 2011; Lancaster, 2009). However, such benefits are not automatic. According to Silverman (2003) organisations do not always benefit from workplace learning and the progress features of workplace learning must be taken into consideration that can be hindered by careerism, apprehension, pressure, obsequiousness and unsolved divergences (2003: 15).

While the literature on the connection between workplace politics and learning is as yet still under-developed, it is an area that is starting to attract some attention. For example, according to Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010), when in an organisation a culture of openness

is present and there is minimal political behaviour, workplace learning is more likely to occur, even though organisational politics may be a normal entity (2010: 195). On the other hand, Lawrence *et al* (2005) argue that without political behaviour, organisations cannot learn (2005: 190). Similarly, Butcher & Clarke (1999) suggested that management development programmes should include topics on how to manage political behaviour rather than avoiding it (1999: 12). Some argue that politics are rooted in the wider configured environment (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498), while others argue that politics are a result of interpersonal antagonisms (Vince, 2001) or emotional matters (Vince, 2002). However, as already indicated in Chapter 1, the research in question will focus mostly on the competitive interpersonal micro-politics of self-interested individuals, and the effect that these might have on the individual's learning at the workplace.

## **2.1 Defining Workplace Learning**

Learning is often defined as the route in which any type of knowledge is attained (Eraut, 2000: 4; Lave & Wenger, 1991: 47). The workplace can be an important place for learning and development, and in which knowledge can be created (Avis, 2010: 171). Working is interconnected with learning and consequently, workplace learning is the way in which skills are upgraded and knowledge is acquired at the place of work. The literature concerning workplace learning offers different definitions. Broadly speaking however, it can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge or skills by formal or informal means that occurs in the workplace. According to Collin *et al* (2011) learning in the workplace is



perceived as an ever-present practice that occurs through customary work systems (2011: 303).

Workplace learning mostly occurs through work-related interactions, and is generally described as contributing to the learning of both the individual employee and the organisation as a whole (Collin *et al*, 2011: 303; Doornbos *et al*, 2008: 131; Felstead *et al*, 2005: 360, 363; Fenwick, 2008a: 228). Fenwick (2008b) defines workplace learning as occurring through the relations and dynamics between ‘individual actors’ and ‘collectives’ (2008b: 19). Moreover, workplace learning can enhance skills that may lead to formal qualifications, as well as informal narrowly focused skills (Stroud & Fairbrother, 2006: 458). Research shows that 80% of the work-related learning occurs informally and this includes self-directed learning, networking, coaching and mentoring (Yeo, 2008: 318). Therefore, workplace learning can include formal elements but is predominantly informal in nature, and is often incorporated into workplace social interactions and everyday practices.

According to some authors, workplace learning is also ‘culturally bound’, meaning that the skills that an employee learns represent the requirements of his or her tasks within the organisation (Muhammad & Idris, 2005: 65). Moreover, much evidence shows that people learn more from each other and through finding solutions for their day-to-day problems at the workplace (Felstead *et al*, 2005: 368; Hager & Johnsson, 2009: 497; Silverman, 2003: 15). In this regard, it is often argued that the most important source of information, from

which one can learn, is the existing job predecessor. An experienced person is commonly described as the best source of information about a new job wherein he or she can inform about the challenges of and changes required to a task (Silverman, 2003: 14). In addition, workplace learning can be identified as a two-way representation in which employers and employees can mutually address skills development through a process of social discourse in relation to the workplace.

### ***2.1.1 Categories of Workplace Learning that Involve Intervention***

Workplace learning is more concerned with informal learning rather than formal education and qualifications. However, methods of workplace learning may take many forms and, according to Silverman (2003), these can be categorised into three types that involve a learning intervention of some sort: in-house training, experience-based learning opportunities and training through coaching and mentoring, and continuous learning (2003: 2).

In-house training involves planned learning activities that take place near the job or outside work. Here, the organisation provides either short training courses at the workplace setting or information and communication proceedings that have a learning element. Trainers are usually from the organisation itself or from external entities.

According to Silverman (2003), experience-based learning is an on-the-job learning activity that is supported and evaluated, mostly through coaching and mentoring (2003: 4). However, Eraut (2000) states that experience-based learning often occurs in an either unplanned or in an unaware manner during the usual day-to-day tasks (2000: 115). In the case of learning that is supported and evaluated, one or more employees are identified as people who trainees and other employees can go to for advice. Experience-based learning may also take the form of job rotation and increased autonomy. Here an employee is given a somewhat straightforward task and then gradually shifts to more intricate tasks along with the relative responsibility and autonomy.

In their study, Bishop *et al* (2006) hypothesized that the belief that once employees are empowered, they will use that increased autonomy in a responsible way, could be an important part of a learning-supportive culture. Other studies show that lower level employees are often ready for greater autonomy than they usually exercise and are eager to learn how to participate in decision-making related to their tasks (Silverman, 2003: 17). It is often argued that mentoring provides opportunities for peers to help novices become experts (Yeo, 2008: 318). In this regard a skilled employee guides the learner in carrying out particular tasks. Another method would be for a trainee to work beside an experienced employee to observe and learn.

Experience-based learning may also push employees to learn informally through discussions with customers, suppliers and other external stakeholders of the organisation. Eraut (2000) mentions the 'reactive' kind of learning in which learning is explicit but takes place impulsively in response to recent, current or forthcoming situations without any time being specifically reserved for it (2000: 115). This type of learning, which is not supported or evaluated, is a process that occurs normally involuntarily and continuously.

Continuous learning may include a group of employees working together to identify how to improve certain processes, either formally or informally. Accounts such as those above promote the view that continuous learning occurs where the work environment is all the time focused on the learning of new skills and knowledge and largely free of political conflict. In this scenario employees are continuously encouraged and provided with resources to learn for themselves from e.g. books, manuals, videos and computer-based learning. In addition, the study of Fuller & Unwin (2003) on expansive learning illustrates that organisations that offer an open approach to apprenticeship are more expected to form learning opportunities (2003: 412).

### ***2.1.2 Informal/Unconscious Workplace Learning***

According to Doornbos *et al* (2008) and Mallon *et al* (2005) workplace learning is predominantly informal or unconscious and is a purely situated, tacit, informal, and social process (2005: 4; 2008: 130). Likewise, Yeo (2008) argues that informal learning is

usually unintentional and it may occur with or without the encouragement of the organisation (2008: 318). Doornbos *et al* (2008) further argue that people can learn implicitly and are able to distinguish the changes in their thoughts and behaviours at a later stage (2008: 130).

The notion of '*Spontaneous learning*' is identified by Doornbos *et al* (2008) wherein learning occurs when actions are executed with another objective in mind other than learning (2008: 131). This occurs when the related action is itself unintentional, or when an action is intended but not with the precise objective of learning. Doornbos *et al* (2008) describe the changes in knowledge and skills as a result of such actions as '*by-products, discovery, coincidence, or sudden realization*' (2008: 131). In their study, Rowold & Kauffeld (2009) identified that constant informal learning activities assisted employees most in increasing their relevant work-related competencies (2009: 97). Therefore, the results of their study highlight the significance of informal workplace learning.

### **2.1.3 Lave & Wenger's Situated Learning**

Maybe the most common theory of the meaning of learning at work stands with Lave & Wenger's (1991) book on situated learning, which has guided and helped researchers understand the meaning of workplace learning and apprenticeships. In their book, Lave & Wenger emphasise two concepts, namely 'Communities of Practice' and 'Legitimate Peripheral Participation', wherein they provide insights on the meaning of workplace

learning, mostly apprenticeships (Fuller *et al*, 2005). The ‘Communities of Practice’ concept relates to the action of participating in social practices that leads to a sense of belonging within a community (Avis, 2010: 173; Clarke, 2005: 191; Fuller *et al*, 2005: 4; Fuller & Unwin, 2003: 3; Lave & Wenger, 1991: 98; Yeo, 2008: 318). These communities may include some sort of uniformity or diversity in their structure and may also be either organised or made up voluntarily (Chang *et al* 2009: 409).

Employees are able to learn from their participation in the everyday activities of a community (Fenwick, 2008b: 20) and it is argued that communities of practice aid individuals to learn and consequently to perform better at the workplace (Chang *et al*, 2009: 410-11). Several critiques were presented regarding this concept such as the lack of analysis on the politics, comradeship, and form of a community, the lack of attention on the development of the knowledge within the community during periods of change that are expeditive and, the lack of consideration on the innovation offered by the community and the agency/structure actions within (Fenwick, 2008a: 235; Fenwick, 2008b: 21; Fuller *et al*, 2005: 15-16). Therefore, communities of practice are regarded as very important since they create a link between the individual and organisational learning (van Winkelen & McKenzie, 2007: 531). In this regard Newman (1985) suggests that trust and openness should be fostered between the different departments of an organisation (1985: 208). Thus, if an organisation is to succeed, it is important that communities of practice are fostered within, and that these share the knowledge by allowing these information flows to continue (Coakes & Clarke, 2006: 75).

#### **2.1.4 Obstacles to Workplace Learning**

Organisations consist of individual agents of organisational learning, of which behaviour is shaped by the social systems they are embedded in (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2000: 787). These social systems are also learning systems that can inhibit learning due to the organisational politics, which may result in lack of shared knowledge as illustrated by Newman (1985). According to Collin *et al* (2011) social relations also include power issues to some extent (2011: 303), which are also politically based. In his study, Newman identified “*invisible walls*” between different units in organisations that hindered the learning and sharing of information (1985: 208).

Collin *et al* (2011) argue that learning processes are central to the use of power and control since workplace learning is seen as linking individual and social realms (2011: 302). As such, learning and power become linked during the tangential doing and shared custom through which workplace culture become mutual, both in isolation and as a group (Collin *et al*, 2011: 303). Organisational politics can impede learning and as such, workplace learning is not a neutral process for the organisation or the worker (Mallon *et al*, 2005: 8).

An example illustrated by Silverman (2003) states that, in organisations, managers are rewarded for the possession of a skill, knowledge and understanding, and not for disseminating these important resources to their subordinates (2003: 16). Therefore, organisational politics may influence how these are accessed and controlled. Undoubtedly,

this is not only applicable to managers but also to lower level employees who may feel the need to protect and control their skills due to the status and influence that the same skills give them. Some other forms of barriers for workplace learning, especially informal learning, may include lack of respect from the new employee towards an experienced employee, individuals who hold back information from their colleagues out of fear of being seen as a surplus and passing erroneous information to new employees with the aim of harming them (Billet, 1995: 24-25).

It is interesting to note that Lave & Wenger's theory does not explore in depth the issue of hindrance and politics and thus, this is a major limitation of their theory in connection with the current research being carried out (Fuller *et al*, 2005: 15). In this regard evidence shows that learning situations may have considerable power inequalities (Collin *et al*, 2011; Malcolm *et al*, 2003: 5). In addition, if employees lack trust in the organisation they work with, they would tend to keep the skills and knowledge acquired to themselves in order to protect their job and position within the organisation (Ashton & Sung, 2002: 21; Fenwick, 2008a: 233; Kirwan, 2009: 117).



## 2.2 Defining Organisational Politics

Aristotle (1934) portrayed the idea of politics as a '*master-craft*' and thus is a tolerable and practical social phenomenon (Provis in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 98). However, in general, organisational politics is often defined as the behaviour that is aimed at safeguarding the self interest of an individual at the cost of another (Allen *et al*, 1979: 77; Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195; Ferris *et al*, 1989: 145; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498; Latif *et al*, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 252), and this behaviour often conflicts with the organisational goals (Ladebo, 2006: 259; Sussman *et al*, 2002: 314; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007: 665). Consequently, according to Beugré & Liverpool (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), organisational politics is an '*antisocial*' behaviour (2006: 124).

It is argued that the overt tendency for politicking is a human nature aspect that is a consequent of evolution, and the human nature drive for politicking is associated with power endeavouring, and derives from the interaction between the distribution of tasks and rank delineation (Vredenburg & Shea Van-Fossen, 2010: 33). Meriac & Villanova (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argue that some people ought to benefit from the political tactics or else there would be no reason for them to engage in political behaviour (2006: 17). Liu *et al* (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argue that individuals who benefit from political behaviour may go through feelings of pleasure and even exhilaration, especially when favourable results are only achievable through illegitimate strategies (2006: 168)

Organisational politics can also be viewed as a group phenomenon where people do not necessarily engage in politics just as individuals. Informal groups are often created within the workplace and various types of coalitions have a tendency to grow among individuals (Romm & Pliskin, 1997: 96; Seo, 2003: 11). James (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argues that group politics may be encouraged or weakened by the organisational cultural values, which may also mould the route that the group politics will take (2006: 56). Among the many types of groups, these may consist of either managers and subordinates in a department, employees that fall in the same hierarchical level, or employees that fall in the same social circle. Political behaviour may also be present between other stakeholders of an organisation, such as unions and employers (Romm & Pliskin, 1997) though these macro-scale politics are not the primary focus of this thesis' particular study. According to Romm & Pliskin (1997) the amount of politicking intensifies as the issue concerned is presumed as significant from the concerned group's position.

### ***2.2.1 A Few Words Regarding Power***

Samuel (2005) argues that “*power is one of the foundations of social life among the human species, as it is for other living creatures of all kinds*” (2005: 1). According to James (in Vidoga-Gadot & Drory, 2006) an individual and a group of employees absorb themselves in political behaviour because of their need for “*sense-making direction, social support, resources and power*” (2006: 54). Both individuals and groups play politics mainly to contest for power, and some researchers argue that when conflicts are present, people engage in an opportunistic role and behaviour that maintains power (Butcher & Clarke,

1999: 10; Romm & Pliskin, 1997; Samuel, 2005: 1). This is mostly seen in managers who have a high need for power, and consequently are provoked to engage in political behaviour so as to augment their power (Rosen *et al* in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 31).

Power competition subsists at two stages - individuals compete for power within organisations and organisations compete for power within the broader governmental framework (Cavanagh *et al*, 1981: 363). Power is seen as appealing because it bestows the capacity to influence decisions regarding who acquires which resources, what objectives are practiced, what values the organisation embraces, what procedures are in use, who is successful and who does not succeed (Latif *et al*, 2011: 201). Thus, power may offer a feeling of control over results, especially where decision making matters are difficult. Collin *et al* (2011) view power relations as being constantly repeated and reassigned during human activity and between individuals (2011: 303). Moreover, when people function in a political way to obtain power they may alter the authority structure of an organisation (Cavanagh *et al*, 1981: 364). Therefore organisational politics can be a very intricate process and may differ from one organisation to another and also from one department of an organisation to another.

### **2.2.2 Causes of Organisational Politics**

According to Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen (2010), some research has identified organisational conditions that cause employees to engage in workplace political behaviours.

They argue that the origins of individual attributes and the nature of their interactions with organisational conditions that foster political strategies in work organisations come from the evolution of an individual's hereditary genetic structure (Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 27). According to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, there is a distinction amid species and a change method of natural selection, which focused on the relationship between a being and its milieu, wherein a competitive effort for resources is acknowledged (Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 28). This means that key attributes and behaviours have evolved as a result of the process of natural selection, in which better adapted organisms outlive those less in shape despite several challenges (Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 29). Therefore, from this biological evolutionary perspective, human beings have inherent behavioural tendencies to engage in politicking (Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 31).

However, Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen (2010) also argue that not all traits or behaviours are entirely genetic in origin, since some are derived interactively from biological elements and cultural circumstances (2010: 31). Nevertheless the consequential traits and behaviours can surface in various individual surroundings, including workplaces, in which they could encourage organisational politics (Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 31). According to Beugré & Liverpool (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) if employees perceive that they are being manipulated or their interests are ignored, then they will end up engaging in self-serving behaviour (2006: 130). Similarly, Nicholson (1997) argues that humans have an innate predisposition towards power striving, which can cause

workplace political behaviours where it comes into tension with the division of labour and status segregation. In the same kind of vein, Lubit (2002) argues that, narcissism, a facet which constituted the first stage of human species development, is another aspect of the human nature that enhances organisational politics (Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 35).

In view of the above, a number of studies have promoted the view that some degree of predisposition towards politicking may be an innate part of human nature, but that this predisposition becomes most visible in workplaces where the objectives of the organisation are unclear, there is a limitation of resources, there is a fast changing technological and environmental aspect, and the decisions are unplanned (Curtis, 2003: 293; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498; Ladebo, 2006: 256; Latif *et al*, 2011: 199; Poon, 2003: 138; Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 42). The larger the difficulty in such cases, the more sensitive is the political behaviour in which conflicts arise and ambiguity abounds (Ladebo, 2006: 261).

Beugré & Liverpool (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that individuals engaging in political behaviour often treat others with disrespect and try to thwart formal procedures, especially when these procedures are not clear (2006: 129). As such, research has identified several areas in which employees engage in political behaviour, namely pressures for economy, management and subordinates relationships, structural power struggles

between configured groups such as unions and employers, conflicts between the workforce and management for construing agreements, uncertainty about standards and strategies of promotion, difficulty in linking reward with productivity, and policies and procedures (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Latif *et al*, 2011: 203).

Indeed, individuals are more likely to engage in political behaviour when there is uncertainty involved in decision-making procedures and performance measures, and when competition is present among individuals and groups for limited resources (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Othman, 2008: 43; Poon, 2003: 142). Moreover, according to Vigoda-Gadot (2007) the lack of nominal integrity and equality in these systems is a main root of higher perceptions of organisational politics (2007: 665). In organisations that adopt clear decision-making processes and where competitive behaviour is less, a high level of political behaviour is not likely to be present.

According to James (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) the increase of internal organisational politics may be due to the external competitive demands experienced by organisations, resulting from globalised economies and technological transformations (2006: 62). James also mentions the example of Tilly (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) wherein it is identified that severe and explicit negative politics are mostly present in low-resource countries (2006: 62).

Last but not least, according to Buchanan (2008), politics may also be caused by structural relationships within an organisation (2008: 54); one group of employees may have particular performance indicators and tasks to fulfil that are very different to those of another group. Jehn (1997) refers to these diversities as task-focused conflicts. According to Jehn, these types of conflicts may be beneficial to an organisation since they improve the decision-making results and output through constructive criticism (Jehn, 1997: 532). However, it is also likely that these task-related conflicts change into relationship conflicts, resulting into one group or individual disliking another group or individual and attach these task-related conflicts to personality issues (Jehn, 1997: 532).

In her study, Jehn also identified a process conflict, which includes a “*responsibility disagreement*”, meaning that incongruities occur regarding who is responsible for what; these also can lead to personality issues (1997: 540). It is therefore unavoidable that the agenda of each group or individual will differ or even conflict on some issues, and this shows how much political behaviour takes place due to the structural tensions within an organisation. Therefore politics is not just something that surfaces out of personal differences; it is often produced by tensions that exist between one function or category of employees and another; tensions which can often create irritation and frustration (Jehn, 1997).

### **2.2.3 *Types of Individual Political Behaviour in Organisations***

Sussman *et al* (2002) argue that political behaviour in organisations often conveys a normative, unethical implication (2002: 314). They confirm this through their quantitative study which they carried out regarding seven types of political behaviour in organisations as illustrated by Allen *et al* (1979), and their influence on communication media. The types of behaviour used in the study include: (1) Attacking or blaming others, (2) Using information as a political tool, (3) Creating a favourable image (impression management), (4) Developing a base of support, (5) Praising others (ingratiation), (6) Forming power coalitions with allies, and (7) Creating obligations (reciprocity). As will be seen, these types constitute an important part of the analytical framework of this study, and so merit some further explanation here.

Attacking or blaming others is a tactic that includes both reactive and proactive behaviours. Allen *et al* (1979) state that the reactive behaviour involves scapegoating: more specifically, the individual concerned in this behaviour avoids his or her involvement with a detrimental or failing situation at work (1979: 78). On the other hand, proactive behaviour involves an individual making a rival look bad in the eyes of significant members of the organisation (Allen *et al*, 1979: 78). Using information as a political tool includes individuals who engage in preserving, twisting or using information to devastate another individual.



Impression management involves an individual building and enhancing his or her self image by developing a reputation of being liked and being enthusiastic, to mention a few characteristics (Allen *et al*, 1979: 79). Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010) argue that impression management behaviour is one of the key strategies of organisational politics and is affected by cultural differences (2010: 198). In addition, Drory & Zaidman (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that impression management is beneficial and critical for career advancement, since merit alone is not sufficient (2006: 76). Drory & Zaidman further state that individuals who are likely to engage in impression management are often seeking to increase their compensation, preserve their self-esteem, and obtain limited available resources by ingratiating their boss (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 77).

Developing a base of support happens when a manager gets others to understand his or her ideas before making a decision and makes his or her subordinates feel as if the idea is theirs to guarantee their dedication (Allen *et al*, 1979: 80). Ingratiation occurs when an individual praises another in order to create a good rapport. In their study, Allen *et al* (1979) state that lower level employees use more 'colourful' expressions like "*buttering up the boss*" to explain this tactic (1979: 80). Meriac & Villanova (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) refer to ingratiation as that 'friendliness' which endeavours to transform the notion a target has of the influencer so the target may be leaning towards providing the influencer with what he or she wishes (2006: 16). Forming power coalitions with allies is a tactic which is used by individuals that associate themselves with influential persons in an organisation or in social situations to gain popularity or feel important. Last but not least, reciprocity

involves performing services or favours to create obligations – a very applicable expression is “*You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours*” (Allen *et al*, 1979: 80).

The findings of Sussman *et al* (2002) indicate that political tactics are both channel and sender specific. Moreover, attempts to influence others through self-serving messages are more likely to be sent through certain channels than others and are more likely to come from certain organisational roles than others (Sussman *et al*, 2002: 325). In this regard, Allen *et al* (1979) argue that politicking occurs more frequently at higher managerial and professional levels of an organisation, whilst supervisors may be less able to practice politics successfully due to their minimal power (1979: 82).

Others argue that organisational politics are highly culture dependent (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010), may be a natural phenomenon in organisations (Poon, 2003: 138; Zaleznik, 1971) and research on organisational politics has always treated politics as an emotional assemble (Othman, 2008: 46). Vince (2002) states that organisations are ‘*political containers*’ that include individual and collective emotions (2002: 75). Likewise, Zaleznik (1971) refers to organisations as ‘*political structures*’ in which the careers of employees, especially managers, are developed (1971: 53). Gotsis & Kortezi (2010) argue that political concerns can make up an inextricable part of organisational life due to the inevitable power systems within (2010: 497).

In general, a political climate establishes some ethical dilemmas to employees and eventually spawns various forms of actions that can be both unjust and unfair (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 502). However, it is important to note that culture affects how an individual comprehends and differentiates between actions and therefore, what is considered politically negative in one culture may be considered otherwise in another (Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller in *Vigoda-Gadot & Drory*, 2006: 343).

The often informal nature of organisational politics has been highlighted by several writers (Latif *et al*, 2011: 199; Mintzberg, 1985: 134; Poon, 2003: 139). In organisations, individuals often rely on informal means to make decisions, especially where there is uncertainty involved, which presents them with an opportunity to engage in political behaviour (Ferris *et al*, 1989: 151; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Othman, 2008: 43; Poon, 2003: 138). As mentioned in the previous sections, politicking among members of an organisation may also occur due to the bare minimum resources available. This means that key people in organisations often ‘bulldoze’ to have what they perceive as a fair share of the limited resources available in the organisation for themselves or the group they belong to (Ladebo, 2006: 258). Zaleznik (1971) states that these lack of resources are mostly visible in capital budgeting (1971: 56).

Vredenburg & Shea Van-Fossen (2010) draw an analogy to Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest’ account of evolution to illustrate how the case of limited resources in organisations,

those individuals who are highly politically skilled end up being more successful in acquiring and controlling the same limited resources (2010: 28). According to Liu *et al* (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), people who are politically skilled experience the perceptions of organisational politics less negatively than others, and may see politicking as a rewarding experience and as a sense of proficiency and achievement to their line of work (2006: 175).

Therefore, political behaviour is characteristically conflict-ridden, often setting individual or group employees against the power that is official, established principles and expertise, or against each other. Mintzberg (1985) argues that political behaviours may become amplified due to the lack of other systems of influence (1985: 134). As such, political behaviour is mainly concealed and subject to differing perceptions (Curtis, 2003: 293). Employees are sensitive to political decisions made in their organisations and individuals may react in different emotional and behavioural ways (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 258).

#### ***2.2.4 Political Behaviour as a Collection of Games***

Henry Mintzberg (1983) is one of the main business leaders, particularly in the strategy dominion. Mintzberg (1983) was found to be important for this thesis since in his research he presented an extensive review of political behaviour in organisations. His analysis assisted a time of awareness in the empirical study of the phenomenon of organisational

politics (Meriac & Villanova in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), and thus, I found his types of political behaviours as ‘illuminating’ as a heuristic tool for understanding political behaviours. According to Mintzberg (in Lemieux, 1998), some of the political games, such as the rivalry games between organisational and support staff, may characterize persistent patterns of organizational behaviour (1998: 59). In view of this, the answer may be to first identify, as clearly as possible, the particular type of political organisation with which one is dealing and then determine the kinds of political games that have been occurring within it.

Mintzberg (1985) presents organisational politics as a Darwinian influence system that is exploited by politically skilled individuals to hasten their progression into leadership positions (Vredenburg & Shea Van-Fossen, 2010: 27). Mintzberg (1983) also states that political behaviour is a collection of games that fall into the following four categories: authority games, power base games, rivalry games and change games (Curtis, 2003: 295-6). These four categories of games are similar to the types of political behaviour identified by Sussman *et al* (2002).

Mintzberg identifies two types of authority games: those that resist authority, also referred to as ‘insurgency games’, and managers that attempt to increase their control over the subordinates, also referred to as ‘counterinsurgency games’. An example of ‘insurgency game’ presented by Thoenig and Friedberg (1976) is that of French government engineers

against a minister who tried to restructure their department (in Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The ‘counterinsurgency game’ is played by people with power who retaliate with political or legitimate means (Mintzberg, 1985: 137).

Power base games are actuated in order for an individual to increase his or her organisational power – in this case Mintzberg illustrates six types of power base games; (i) the ‘sponsorship game’, (ii) the ‘alliance building game’, (iii) the ‘empire building game’, (iv) the ‘budgeting game’, (v) the ‘expertise game’, and (vi) the ‘lording game’.

The ‘sponsorship game’ involves a person attaching himself or herself to a rising or established star and is usually played by those who wish to construct their power base, and they do so by using their superiors to acknowledge loyalty in return for power (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The ‘alliance game’ involves peers agreeing to support each other, and is often played by line managers who bargain hidden deals of support for each other in order to move further up in the organisation (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The ‘empire building game’ involves a person to engage in more responsibility in decision making, hence increasing his or her power and is also played by line managers who wish to build power individually with subordinates (Mintzberg, 1985: 137).

The ‘budgeting game’, which is similar to the ‘empire building game’ but is less conflict-ridden since it concerns the fight for resources, is played openly with clear specific policies by line managers (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The ‘expertise game’ is played by staff specialists wherein experts in a field flaunt the expertise or try to keep the information to themselves, while non-experts attempt to have their work seem as expert to be viewed as a professional so as to be able to have control over it (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The ‘lording game’ involves people using legitimate power in illegitimate ways with others who lack it and is mostly played by line managers and professionals (Mintzberg, 1985: 137).

In the case of power, Lawrence *et al* (2005) provide an explanation of two types of power in organisations: episodic power and systematic power. These forms of power offer guidance on how organisational politics affect the flow of information between individuals, groups and the organisation (Lawrence *et al*, 2005: 182). Episodic power refers to distinct and premeditated political behaviour that is initiated by self-interested actors who are most able to influence organisational decision making (Lawrence *et al*, 2005: 182). On the other hand, systematic power is directed throughout the social systems within organisations, and includes socialisation and accreditation processes. Some argue that the attention to power stems from the fact that social relations and learning processes do not happen in a vacuum but take place in a setting of interests and different power positions (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2000: 793).

The 'rivalry games' involve persons or a group ignoring the expertise of another in order to make him or her or the group less powerful. Mintzberg (1985) identifies two types of rivalry games, namely 'line vs. staff' and 'rival camps' (1985: 136). The 'line vs. staff' game is described as the game that increases personal power and overpowers a rival wherein each side is likely to abuse rightful power in illicit ways (Mintzberg, 1985: 138). The 'rival camps' game transpires when the alliance or empire building games result in two main power troops and can be the most conflict-ridden game of all, since it can portray conflicts between departments or two opposing goals (Mintzberg, 1985: 138). Vince (2002) provides an example of a rivalry game in his action-research of 'Goodwill Company'. Here Vince illustrates how two sub-systems of the company think that their development initiative is of benefit to the company and both find ways to criticise each other's work, whilst trying to avoid working together (2002: 81).

'Change games' are designed to induce organisational change and include 'whistle blowing', 'Young Turks' game and 'strategic candidates' game (Mintzberg, 1985: 136). The 'whistle blowing' is a simple game played mostly by lower status employees to try and affect an organisational change in a different way wherein one reports a wrong doing of another in the hope to bring about change (Mintzberg, 1985: 138). Employees in this case may go outside the boundaries of the organisation and attempt to involve outsiders (Latif *et al*, 2011: 202). Likewise, the 'Young Turks game' is usually played to replace the people in authority while maintaining the system of authority intact, in which a group of revolt employees try to cause the downfall of the existing leadership of an organisation



(Mintzberg, 1985: 139). Similar to this is the ‘Obstructionism’ which entails a tactic by employees in a lower level of an organisation that opposes top management policy making decisions (Latif *et al*, 2011: 203). The ‘strategic candidates’ game occurs when individuals or groups seek to affect change by campaigning for their own planned contenders through political means by coalescing others games such as empire building, alliance building, and rival camps (Mintzberg, 1985: 138).

In his study, Burawoy (1979) refers to the ‘space for games’ concept wherein he identified the games played by subordinates to be impulsive, independent and malicious construction of workers to breed power contests and divergence with management, though games are synchronized, sometimes coercively, by management (Burawoy, 1979: 85-6). However, Burawoy (1979) shows that confrontation between managers and subordinates is not the sole form of conflict (1979: 65–73). In this regard, Koski & Järvensivu’s (2010) study identified that struggles to introduce new rituals caused tensions between managerial levels as well. The study of Koski & Järvensivu (2010) also identified that games may give subordinates more control over work processes, however, on a positive note, the games kept the process ongoing and effective, and the workers had the opportunity to show their professionalism through these same games (2010: 352).

Organisational politics, as argued by various researchers, can be either positive or negative (Othman, 2008: 44). Othman (2008) mentions these two types in his paper on the role of

justice, trust and job ambiguity (2008: 44), namely the negative side, which involves convenient and illegal behaviour, and the positive side which is a social function that is important for organisations to survive (2008: 44). Negative organisational politics are disapproved of because of the ethical dilemmas encrusted with them and the workplace conflicts that are generated, whilst positive organisational politics results from the amalgamation of shared goals and stimulating collaboration (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 196; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 509).

Consequently there are two ways of viewing organisational politics: either as a symptom of social influence processes that benefit the organisation, or a self serving effect that goes against the organisational goals (Mintzberg, 1985: 148; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498). Nevertheless, the concept of organisational politics is a key social influence process that can be either functional or dysfunctional to employees and organisations (Allen *et al*, 1979: 82).

### ***2.2.5 The Positive Side of Organisational Politics***

Organisational politics and their processes are often understood to be the organisational defensive routines that alter and filter legitimate information (Seo, 2003: 11). However, organisational politics do not have to be about power manipulation, trust issues and hidden agendas. Organisational politics can also be functional in ways that are beneficial for more than just a politically-skilled and politically motivated minority (Vredenburg & Shea-

VanFossen, 2010: 41). The person-based interactionist approach empirical study of Rosen *et al* (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), regarding the understanding of personality traits in politics, demonstrates that organisational politics may not always direct towards negative effects, since different personalities may perceive politics more positively than others (2006: 47).

Positive organisational politics may provide the basis for competitive advantage, especially when people are appropriately politically skilled. It has been suggested that politically skilled management successfully manages those organisational environments that are under stress – a political skill that includes an aptitude to employ actions that support feelings of trust, confidence and sincerity (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 504). This means that positive politics are mainly visible when individuals know how to use positive influence behaviours and strategies, and evade negative behaviour. Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010) argue that when one develops a set of positive political skills, an effective political environment is created that does not suffer from injustice, unfairness and inequity (2010: 197).

Some view organisational politics as a means for working through conflicts in organisations, and employees use their perception of organisational politics to make sense of the environment they work in (Ladebo, 2006: 256). Others argue that being politically skilled may improve an individual's and the organisation's success, and can facilitate

organisational change and adaptation to the environment (Ladebo, 2006: 256, 259; Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 41). Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argue that political behaviour is positive when it serves the organisation's vision and objectives, develops teamwork and confidence, and is ethically well-balanced (2006: 337). Moreover, positive or constructive political behaviour can be advantageous to greater organisational equality (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 505). This is because constructive political behaviour is seen as a necessity to bring together the dissimilar interests of stakeholders, depending on the ability to set in equilibrium the competing motivations and views of organisational members.

Extending this line of argument, Butcher and Clarke (2006: 297) argue that managers who are keenly aware of the political environment in their workplace are more likely to be able to manage those political behaviours in order to promote equality. This is also because, according to Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), organisational politics is a key leadership concern taking into account the prospective influence of political behaviour on the environment and efficiency of an organisation (2006: 331). Consequently, if political behaviour is perceived to be a natural and constructive thing in organisations, then political strategies may be viewed as affiliation, setting up of connections, alliance-creation or even guidance (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498). Moreover, according to Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), those connections and alliances that are shaped on trust and conformity, and are as well in line

with the organisation's goals and objectives, may be considered as "*politically positive*" (2006: 341).

Coopey & Burgoyne (2000) argue that a liberal form of politics may have a positive effect on learning, regardless of the role and status of individuals in their organisation (2000: 869). More specifically they argue that an open form of politics stimulates individuals of an organisation to become more persistent towards learning ideas (2000: 879). Coopey & Burgoyne (2000) use the institutional theory to illustrate that learning throughout an organisation is a function of open political processes at group level that involves various individuals. They also state that organisational politics might enhance the flexibility and innovativeness of organisational forms. This would allow the interconnectedness within communities of practice to disseminate learning (Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000: 882). Similarly, Engeström (2001) claims that some conflict, as well as the process of finding ways to resolve that same conflict, may promote workplace learning.

Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun (2005) provide a set of positive outcomes of politics, namely "*career advancement, recognition and status, enhanced power and position, attainment of personal and organisational goals, successful accomplishment of a job or policy implementation, and feelings of achievement, ego, control and success*" (2005: 256). This means that political behaviour may be necessary in all of the cases mentioned above,

especially if someone wants to advance in an organisation or needs to be acknowledged by his or her co-workers (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195).

Mintzberg (1985) presents several positive aspects of organisational politics in relation to his identification of games (in Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 41). He states that organisational politics can sometimes be used to pursue rightful ends, for example, when one uses the whistle blowing and Young Turks games, it could be beneficial to correct irresponsible or inefficient behaviours or even to effect beneficial changes that are otherwise resisted (Mintzberg, 1985: 148, 149). Also, politics can provide alternating routes of information and promotion, as when the sponsorship game enables a manager to rise over a weaker manager. In this case, political games may provide an insight on the potential for leadership.

According to the findings of Luthans *et al*'s study (1985) there is a relationship between successful managers and the frequent use of organisational politics (Vigoda-Gadot & Dryzin-Amit in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 7). Infact, Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that leadership is "*a political art rather than a strategic science*" that involves human management and political skills (2006: 331). Organisational politics may also encourage a variety of voices to be heard that may be beneficial to the organisation (James in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 53; Mintzberg, 1985: 150).

### ***2.2.6 The Negative Side of Organisational Politics***

Although organisational politics are widely accepted to have positive potential, studies show that individuals still predominantly perceive these as negative (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195; Othman, 2008: 44; Poon, 2003: 138). A famous and interesting statement presented by Block (1988) states that *“If I told you, you were a very political person you would either take it as an insult or at best as a mixed blessing”* (1988: 5). Therefore, usually political work environments are perceived negatively by individuals and may induce a sense of unfairness, deprivation and inequity (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Harris *et al*, 2009: 2669; Ladebo, 2006: 256; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 258). Consequently those employees who perceive their organisation as being politicized will tend to withhold useful information (Beugré & Liverpool in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 125).

Organisational politics may mute and warp the voices and opinions of individuals, facts that spawn defence mechanisms and uphold uncertainty (Vince, 2001: 1344). Within political environments, employees tend to feel threatened by the uncertainty, ambiguity and the self-interest actions that occur with individuals (Harris *et al*, 2009: 2680). Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen (2010) argue that genetic tendencies such as forcefulness, power and control need, manipulation, rank rivalry, and egotism can all materialize in response to common organisational circumstances of uncertainty, resource shortage, and disagreement (2010: 35).

In fact, several researchers found that organisational politics have a negative affect on the job performance and organisational commitment, especially to the lower status employees (Drory, 1993; Ferris *et al*, 1989: 158; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 258). Others propose that organisational politics are the source of stress and conflict at the workplace (Ladebo, 2006: 263; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 259). Cropanzano & Li (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) mention Ferris *et al*'s study of 1993, in which it transpired that politics were strappingly related to job anxiety for those with less perceived control (2006: 143). This means that employees with a lower level of power feel more stressed when they perceive politics in their work environment.

As a result, organisational politics may cause an individual to detach either physically or mentally from the workplace (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 260). Therefore, whilst people may be present at the place of work, their mind could be elsewhere and may lack concentration. Studies that focus on the notion that organisational politics refers to the strategic behaviour that promotes self-interest, offer a negative image of workplace politics, and thus individuals continue to enforce their negative perspective of organisational politics (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007: 662).

Some state that political behaviour restricts information sharing and communication (Curtis, 2003: 296; Poon, 2003: 138) and thus inhibits learning. In this case, Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that communication and



information are the key players in political practices and their control is of huge significance to the political processes in organisations (2006: 339). This is because both information and communication are the ways for producing and making aware those issues and actions taking place at work.

Political behaviour is included in the cultural factors that may also inhibit learning. Bishop *et al* (2006) state that cultures that give importance to the attainment and hoarding of technical skills that are used independently by individuals are less likely to support knowledge-sharing networks (2006: 20). Likewise, cultures that are distinguished by a lack of trust will probably not encourage the transfer of knowledge from the individual to the group or the organisation (Bishop *et al*, 2006: 20). Albrecht (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) notes that when employees feel that they cannot trust other employees and the procedures of an organisation, they tend to reduce their dedication, put in less effort, and engage in withdrawal behaviour (2006: 109). Moreover, different groups or jobs inside the same organisation may have completely dissimilar views about which knowledge is valuable or applicable (Bishop *et al*, 2006: 19). An example of this is the study by Fuller & Unwin (2003) in which three different organisations and their type of apprenticeships were considered.

Fuller & Unwin's study shows that one organisation enabled apprentices to accomplish a quick passage to full participation, but at the expense of moving beyond its boundaries to

meet new learning potentialities (2003: 417). Another organisation demonstrated an unclear function and path of the apprenticeship, which weakened the learning process, even when the apprentice was allegedly given the opportunity to participate in a new community of practice within the company (Fuller & Unwin, 2003: 417). Both these companies presented a learning horizon for apprentices, which were truncated by the lack of opportunities built into their apprenticeships to belong to communities outside the organisation. Here the apprentices were deprived by being engaged as novices to companies where there was no tradition of apprenticeship prerequisite (Fuller & Unwin, 2003: 417). This means that the learning opportunities in these two companies have been restricted.

Organisational politics is also linked with the issue of trust. Trust often affects the behaviour of individuals, and employees are more likely to be suspicious of the intentions of others if they work in a low trust climate (Othman, 2008: 45; Poon, 2003: 142; Zaleznik, 1971: 58). This results in informal highly political behaviour. In addition, Cropanzano & Li (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that political climate can have negative consequences even for those who are not directly affected by the primary political activity (2006: 146). This is because according to Vigoda's (2002) study, politics create anguish which in turn generates violent behaviour, causing more anguish among colleagues (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 146).

Some individuals tend to be more highly political than their counterparts due to differing characteristics. Curtis (2003) mentions the ‘Machiavellianism’ and ‘locus of control’ as examples of particular characteristics of highly political individuals (2003: 293). People who tend towards Machiavellianism are portrayed as being rational rather than sensitive, do not value camaraderie, and like to manoeuvre others and lie in order to accomplish personal objectives (Rosen *et al*, in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 32). Other writers comment that organisations often become crippled by these so called organisational politics or ‘workplace toxins’ as referred to by Chircop (2008: 9). In her article, Chircop argues that leaders with awareness of and expertise in the management of workplace politics are needed.

Adding to the above arguments, it is often assumed that ‘good’ learning only occurs in organisations with a culture of openness (Rebelo & Gomes, 2008: 302; Easterby-Smith *et al*, 1999: 13; Senge, 1990: 273-274) and low political behaviour. Provis (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argues that the ‘unitary’ notion of organisations affirms that the members of an organisation work towards common goals and objectives in a pleasant setting wherein political action can be seen as anomalous (2006: 95). This may not be the case since organisations are a combination of various individuals and a plurality of interest groups (Smith, 2001), and thus internal politics may be a natural thing. Of course, one cannot ignore the possibility that people with certain personality types are more likely to engage in organisational politics, such as those with Machiavellian orientations and those with a ‘grand’ need for power (Curtis, 2003: 293).

### **2.3 The Effect of Organisational Politics on Workplace learning**

The recognition of and interest in organisational politics reached its peak in the 1990s (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 252), however, the literature concerning the effect of organisational politics on workplace learning is somewhat lacking. Even though further developments have been made on organisational politics in the last decade, the relationship between organisational politics and workplace learning is still understudied.

Lawrence *et al* (2005) argue that in order for learning to occur, employees need to be appropriately politically skilled in order for ideas to flow from one process to another. They also argue that managers must understand that organisations need active actors who are willing to engage in political behaviour that pushes ideas forward in order for learning to be successful (Lawrence *et al*, 2005: 190). Kirwan (2009) provides examples of the obstacles that hinder workplace learning, such as the manager's approach towards subordinates learned new skills (2009: 118). In this regard, Kirwan explains that managers may feel threatened by the new skills learned and consequently may feel a sense of loss of control. The political action here may be the manager's lack of feedback to the employee or passing an idea as his or her own.

Vanderburgh & Shea-VanFossen (2010) argue that learning programmes may show to be a successful remedy to dysfunctional politicking, however there also needs to be present the top management support by participating in the programmes and in non-political behaviour

(2010: 38). Bishop *et al* (2006) state that there are strong indications that cultures put forth a great influence on the amount and kind of learning that takes place (2006: 21). This is especially concerned with assumptions about what comprises 'valuable' knowledge, dealing with the latest knowledge, the appropriate 'location' of knowledge in an organisation or group, and the shape and role of social interactions (Bishop *et al*, 2006: 21). All these appear to have a deep effect on workplace learning. Additionally, in their study, Fuller & Unwin (2003) identified that the expansive or restrictive learning approaches of the organisations they studied are the result of an innate chronological, socio-cultural, organisational and economic practices that are hard to imitate (2003: 424).

The above discussions defined the various types of workplace learning and how individuals learn, leaving issues of conflicts almost untouched. With regards to organisational politics, the literature presents various types of political behaviours, and research to date tackled the area of politics mostly in a purely theoretical manner. Moreover, studies presented to date have paid more attention to the general perceptions of politics rather than the observable political behaviours. As such there is minimal literature on the effects that micro-politics might have on workplace learning. This shows a gap in the relation between organisational politics and the workplace learning literature and there is still much that is not known about the impact that workplace and inter-personal politics have on learning. Thus, further studies in this area are necessary to illustrate the link of politics with learning. More specifically an investigation and elaboration of the micro-politics of organisational life that assist or hinder such learning is particularly relevant. Therefore the research of this thesis identified a

number of aspects from the related experiences of employees who encountered political behaviours within their workplace during their learning. In doing so, the study enhances the existing knowledge and can contribute to the understanding of how organisational politics may affect the workplace learning of individuals.

## **2.4 The Contextual Analysis: Organisational Politics & Workplace Learning at the University of Malta**

### ***2.4.1 Work, Management & Politics within Universities: A General Note***

The study is a case study of a particular type of organisation, namely a university (see **Appendix G**), where the nature of work and working organisations promote tensions and politics between groups or categories of staff in some areas (Del Favero, 2003: 904). According to Kuh *et al* (1997), decision making approaches, the institutional culture and the nature of relations among academics, administrators and students, are all variables that are of great importance when the economy, competitiveness and public support threaten the viability of an institution, and therefore these organisations adopt a certain type of structure such as centralisation of functions and autocratic decision making (Kuh *et al*, 1997: 257). In addition, Rashford & Coghlan (1992) argue that the obligations of an employee in a university setting consists of three different forms namely the relationship between the university and the (i) academic staff; (ii) administrative staff; and (iii) students (1992: 65). Therefore it is somewhat inevitable that academic and support staff has different agenda to

some extent, because their performance is evaluated against diverse measures (Del Favero, 2003: 904; Hoffman & Summers, 2000: 45). For example, some of the roles of the administrator include managing activities and co-ordinating the day-to-day operations, whilst the role of the academic staff is to be immersed in teaching and research of a specific discipline (Del Favero, 2003: 904-5).

Academic employees often see their job as an indefinite type of employment and their task would be to belong and see the university as the centre of their life and career goals, mainly to excel in teaching and research (Rashford & Coghlan, 1992: 65). The administrative employees are most insightful of the general organisation of employees in an institution and their issues are career and skill development and a sense of belonging (Rashford & Coghlan, 1992: 65). According to Rashford & Coghlan (1992) the most critical issue between the academic and administrative staff arises from the rigorously limited career paths, wherein within a university, it is difficult to move from middle to top administration since the management of a university is usually restricted to the academic group (1992: 65).

These different interests and goals inevitably promote tension and conflicts between the two (Del Favero, 2003: 903). Out of this context much of the political behaviour may originate from the structural arrangement of the organisation, and the structural relationships that people find themselves in. This may refer to the “*contested terrain*” mentioned by Edwards (1979), which refers to the workplace and the pattern of control and

resistance as essential dynamics in an organisation (Koski & Järvensivu, 2010: 348). Koski & Järvensivu (2010) argue that unavoidably different groups of employees enter into conflict due to the different goals and objectives that these may have (2010: 348). As such, political behaviour cannot be viewed in a vacuum: the broader drivers of, and reactions to such behaviour may be embedded in the fabric and construction of the organisation, as also argued by Buchanan (2008). Consequently political activity may be present due to the organisational structure.

#### ***2.4.2 Malta – Background Information***

Malta is a country in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea and has an area of approximately 316 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of approximately 413,000 inhabitants (National Statistics Office, 2010: 1, 8). It has been politically independent since 1964, became a Republic in 1974, and became a full member of the European Union in 2004. Due to its geographic position and the harbours' location, Malta has been a key attraction to the world's nautical authorities. This resulted in the country being ruled by various foreign authorities, starting with the Phoenicians and ending with the British (Department of Information, 2001). As a consequence Malta was in permanent touch with various cultures, which significantly developed the country's archaeological, historical and cultural legacy, including the 7,000 year history with prehistoric temples older than the pyramids of Egypt and the Stonehenge of Britain (Department of Information, 2001).



Since Malta lacks natural mineral resources, the Maltese labour market gives major importance to the economic policy and the management of economic performance (Camilleri, 2003: 49). To this respect, Baldacchino (1999) argues that people are Malta's natural resources and it is vital to keep them active in order for the economy to grow (1999: 34). Over the years, the Maltese economy has shifted from a manufacturing based economy towards a service-oriented industry. The increase in the services sector is mainly due to Malta's large human resource potential. The expansion of the tourism industry has prompted the origin of hospitality and entertainment businesses, which reflect a sturdy move towards a service-oriented economy (Cassar, 2003: 12). Recent years have also seen a fixed escalation in the provision and enhancement of financial, information and communication technology services. Hence, Malta is pushing forward to become a regional leader in these areas. Undoubtedly this would not be possible without the help of the education sector.

Malta has one University, which dates back from 1592, of which courses are highly internationally recognised, in particular engineering, pharmacy, computer science and medicine (Malta Enterprise, undated: 9). For practical skills, Malta has the College of Science, Arts & Technology (MCAST) which works hand-in-hand with the industry (Malta Enterprise, undated: 10). This means that where a skills shortage is present, courses are introduced to satisfy the need. It is a known fact that the Maltese are multi-skilled, well educated and experienced with technology and 90% of the workforce in Malta is fluent in

English (Malta Enterprise, undated: 9), as English is a major language in the country alongside the Maltese language.

#### **2.4.3 *Malta & Its General Culture***

According to Azzopardi (2003) Maltese society displays high power distance, meaning that it is risk averse and prevents uncertainty in life (2003: 358). The society is also more masculine than feminine with a high division of labour and social positions. When people in Malta feel that they have mutual enemies and must connect, they feature collectivism, but in general they are cautious and individualistic (Baldacchino, 1994: 518). Their behaviour is distinguished by social distance and traditional status demarcations with the conformist ‘them and us’ segregate (Borg Bonello, 1994: 564). Maltese society has a long-term outlook, preferring sacrifice in the short-term in order to have a better life in the future. Such an attitude is portrayed by the religious Catholic realm (Baldacchino, 1994). In this case, Cremona (1997) argues that the ritualistic culture of Malta is based on events that are ‘*display-oriented*’ with a religious justification. Moreover, the lives of the local people are ‘tangled’ and privacy is often desecrated and for this reason, rumours and social pressure are dynamic and effectual (Azzopardi, 2003: 359).

#### **2.4.4 The Maltese Work Culture**

The Maltese work orientation as identified by Zammit (1996) includes a social camaraderie with colleagues, a personal identification with one's job, a paternalist, compliance-based relationship between management and employees, as well as the Maltese work ethic that stresses respect, parsimony and solemnity. Mifsud (2003) argues that the traditional Maltese work orientations are likely to set the basics for a power culture and thus the management culture is a crossbreed indigenous culture whereby social status is achieved by exerting personal and positional power (2003: 37-38). Mifsud (2003) also argues that senior managers in Malta are inclined to seek status by making a distinction and estranging themselves from others in the hierarchy to create a status uniqueness based on disparate associations with others (2003: 38).

### **2.5 Main & Secondary Research Questions**

The following questions have been identified from the above discussions and these will be used during the data collection stage as guidance, and will seek to draw out whether organisational politics hinder or support workplace learning:

#### ***Main Questions:***

- Do organisational politics hinder or support workplace learning?
- What are the effects of micro-politics on the workplace learning of individuals?

***Secondary Questions:***

- Are the whistle blowing and young Turks games used to correct irresponsible or inefficient behaviours during workplace learning or the engagement of new responsibilities? Or are these games used to carry out changes involved in self-interest and to keep the authority intact?
- Is there enough feedback from the line manager or supervisor regarding an employee's new role/responsibilities?
- Is the head of department/line manager/supervisor engaged in self-interest and not allowing the new subordinate to not properly learn his or her tasks/new responsibilities? Or is the subordinate learning just the same? Is there reciprocity or ingratiation (or both) involved?
- Are there groups of employees engaging in rivalry games with new employees or an employee with new responsibilities?
- Are new employees or employees with new responsibilities being attacked or blamed for something another person has done? How is this affecting their learning?
- Is information being used as a political tool? In other words, is there a twisting of information present? How is this affecting the learning of new employees and employees with new responsibilities?
- Is the sponsorship game being played by new employees or employees with new responsibilities? More specifically, are any employees attaching themselves to a rising or established star? How is the relationship affecting their learning?

- Are there any alliance games apparent among employees that hinder or support the learning of new employees or employees with new responsibilities?
- Are there any employees engaging in an empire building game which involves a person to engage in more responsibility in decision making, hence increasing his or her power over a new employee or another employee with new responsibilities?
- Are there employees who are forming power coalitions with allies and is there any impression management involved? How is this affecting the learning of new employees and others with new responsibilities?
- Are there any managers/supervisors/heads that are developing a base of support and are getting others to understand and indulge in their ideas to guarantee their dedication? Is this having an effect on workplace learning?

Other range of questions that emerge during the data collection methods may be asked to the participants regarding past experiences that are based on the above enquiries. According to the literature, organisational politics may negatively or positively affect workplace learning, but this area is still understudied and no one is able to fully determine the effect. For the research site, permission has been granted for the study to be carried out at the University of Malta and to mention the title of the institution in this thesis, as per **Appendix D**.

# **CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: RESEARCHING THE EFFECT OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS ON WORKPLACE LEARNING**

## **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the theoretical position of the research and explains the measures taken to identify and select participants, plan the data collection instruments and, collect and analyse the data, which includes reflexivity. The chapter ends with an explanation of the ethical issues and the limitations of the research design. This study is of a qualitative nature and used an inductivist approach, since it involved obtaining a fine-grained understanding of social processes and behaviours. According to Silverman (2006), a researcher ought to try to obtain ‘naturally occurring’ data in order to acquire satisfactory understanding that leads to thoroughly established policy intercessions (2006: 392). The study in question focused on the political behaviour that is present amongst employees of the University of Malta.

A set of questions emerged from the literature review regarding the various types of political behaviours and these were used as guidance during the data collection. The study has been restricted to employees who are undergoing some kind of workplace learning activities or are engaging in new responsibilities following a promotion or transfer. This is because the aim of the study was to determine whether organisational politics hinder or

enhance workplace learning. In this case purpose sampling was used and participants were identified from the Human Resources database, which was available to the researcher. The research design took the form of a qualitative ethnographic case study (Collin *et al*, 2011: 305) and the data collection was carried out in two stages via participant observations and semi-structured interviews. According to Silverman (2006) it is quite common for case studies to coalesce observation with interviewing (2006: 19). Silverman (2006) adds that experimental, statistical and survey data may simply be unsuitable to some of the work involved in social science since they overlook the observation of “*naturally occurring*” data as carried out by ethnographic case studies (2006: 302).

Therefore, the methods of participant observations and semi-structured interviews were used in the study. The participant observations served to clarify what kinds of political issues are common within the University. These were then used to inform the data collection tools of the second stage, which involved semi-structured interviews. These interviews served to strengthen and validate the data collected via the participant observations by referring the feedback of the observations to the interviewees. This approach is often referred to as “*member validation*” or “*member checks*” (Boeije, 2010: 177). In this way, any misinterpretations that may have taken place could be removed following the interview (Boeije, 2010: 177). According to Boeije (2010), in participatory research, the findings are formed with a dynamic input of the individuals concerned and the results should be conversed (2010: 177).

### **3.1 Theoretical Position, Approach to the Methodology & Research Strategy**

This research was concerned with social phenomena and aimed to explore the experiences of those who were undergoing some kind of workplace learning and the organisational politics that may be present. Social phenomena consist of behavioural processes that are carried out by human beings. These human processes include both behavioural and experiential aspects that are accessible through the examination of linguistic and humanistic symbols (Mennell, 1989: 181).

#### **3.1.1 *Reflexivity***

The researcher explicitly exercised reflexivity in view of her knowledge of the organisation being studied. Reflexivity requires the researcher to be aware of his or her effect on the development and the results of the research based on the foundation that knowledge cannot be separated from that of the researcher (Bryman, 2004: 22; Gilgun, 2010: 1), however knowledge should not be incorrectly confused with pre-notions (Tsekeris, 2010: 30; Tsekeris, 2012: 14). Emphasis is often made upon the objective nature of social life and upon the endeavour to acquire a quantitative account of social phenomena (Elias, 1956: 240). In this sense, being objective means that social interaction is externally visible to a great extent and not entirely restricted within the individual. However, when carrying out qualitative research in a setting that is knowledgeable to the researcher, it is difficult for the researcher to remain completely ‘outside’ the subject matter and the researcher’s presence will have some kind of consequence (Oliver, 2008: 21). Therefore, by being reflexive



during the process of the study, the researcher's involvement and knowledge derived from a reflexive locus is taken into account, which knowledge and involvement is always a replication of the researcher's position in time and societal space (Bryman, 2004: 500). On the other hand, by being reflexive, the researcher can provide rich, readable and clear data (Mason, 2002: 194).

The notion and exercise of reflexivity have been defined in many ways. According to George Herbert Mead (1934), reflexivity is the revolving of the experience of the participant upon the researcher (1934: 134). Additionally, Tsekeris (2010) argues that reflexivity entails the intricate process of sensibly taking the observer back into his or her observation, the narrator back into his or her narrative (2010: 30). Thus, in view of the above discussion, reflexivity may discard the notion that participant observations and narratives are somehow separated from the methods of observing and describing. Therefore, the researcher for the study in question exercised reflexivity by: (i) reflecting upon the field notes during and after the data collection wherein her personal experiences were syndicated with serious thought and observation; (ii) using a worksheet method that entails including the participants' words in one column and the researcher's responses and analysis in another column. A detailed explanation is presented in Sections 3.5 and 3.6 of this Chapter.

### ***3.1.2 Social Science vs. Natural Science***

Both natural and social science are similar in a way that they both consist of development, roles and structures that are unknown to human beings (Elias, 1978: 244), but social science is dissimilar to the natural science. In other words, where the natural science includes objects that stand still and can be ‘controlled’, subjects of social science are much more complex, as these are always in motion and consist of intermingled structures and mechanisms (Nash, 1999: 447; Sayer, 2000: 19; Elias, 1956: 233). Unlike subjects of social sciences, which are human beings, investigative objects of the natural sciences cannot add meaning to their actions and settings (Bryman, 2004: 279; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 16). Contrary to positivism, which postulates that the social world can be studied by applying the same methods of the natural science (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000: 6), the phenomenological approach broadly adopted here dictates that in order to study adequately human beings, a simple experiment would not be enough, as human beings are subjects that differ from one another (Bryman, 2004: 13).

### ***3.1.3 Reason for Adopting the Qualitative Method***

In view of the above discussions, the research in question was addressed by the qualitative method since, as will be explained, the questions to be answered promoted a qualitative approach. According to Silverman (2006) the core potency of qualitative research is its aptitude to study phenomena that are not available elsewhere (2006: 43). However, there lies a criticism of the qualitative research with respect to validity, which is often referred to

as '*anecdotalism*': This term relates to how reliable the explanations are following the researcher's account (Silverman, 2006: 47).

According to Boeije (2010), the qualitative research design has an emerging character, and data collection methods are used that allow 'an intimate' connection with the field of research (2010: 13). Patterns of political behaviour emerged following the observations and interviews, and the thorough analysis of the topic. Moreover, contextual findings were discovered with the topic in question and not sweeping generalisations. This method of producing findings is basic to the philosophic foundation of the qualitative approach. In addition, according to Cresswell (1994), a qualitative study is an investigation method of understanding a social problem based on structuring a multifaceted and holistic picture of the views of informants that is conducted in a natural setting and reported in writing. According to Silverman (2006) & Boeije (2010), one of the strong points of qualitative research design is that it frequently permits larger flexibility, which is theoretically informed, than most quantitative research designs, such as in the case of emerging new factors during a qualitative research process (2006: 309; 2010: 13).

How is the effect of organisational politics on workplace learning measured by other researchers? Easterby-Smith *et al* (2000) argue that some researchers use a survey method for measuring learning and, studies who adopt this macro perspective stance regard organisations as the primary units (2000: 788). Easterby-Smith *et al* (2000) also indicate

that, others that are more interested in the communities of practice take a different approach and adopt a phenomenological stance by using, for example, in-depth interviews (2000: 789).

To date research on organisational politics has always treated politics as an emotional conception and the perception of organisational politics is the result of subjective evaluation (Othman, 2008: 46). Behavioural observations have not been extensively used in this research topic (Cropanzano & Li *in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory*, 2006: 151). The quantitative method has been mostly adopted, mainly questionnaires have been used to understand politics in organisations, such as the work of Othman (2008), Vigoda-Gadot (2007), and Sussman *et al* (2002), to mention a few. While the quantitative method may be useful in terms of enumerating types of pre-defined behaviours, it can obscure basic and emergent, unforeseen social practices (Silverman, 2006: 43, 303).

Politics have been mainly described on the proviso of objective procedures but have been premeditated in terms of perceptions (Cropanzano & Li *in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory*, 2006: 151). In order to be able to obtain a detailed understanding of how to deal with organisational political processes and how these affect workplace learning, a deeper study had to be actuated. Therefore, the researcher provided an alternative approach to the study of organisational politics and workplace learning by using the qualitative method, as

this method does not aim to count or measure behaviour, but relatively to offer a rich depiction of it and to obtain an understanding of it.

This method was also useful to obtain the tacit evidence by carrying out participant observations and semi-structured interviews. More specifically the research in question adopted an inductive approach, meaning that theory was built following the research findings. According to Boeije (2010), inductive thinking in qualitative research is vital, meaning that social phenomena is investigated in order to find pragmatic models that can be utilised as the foundation of a theory (2010: 5). In addition, Bernard & Ryan (2010) postulate that the less one understands about a research problem, the more important it is to adopt an inductive approach (2010: 265). They add that the study of a social phenomenon is constantly exploratory, and thus is best carried out inductively (2010: 266).

### **3.2 The Research Method: Participant Observations & Semi-Structured Interviews**

Participant observations and semi-structured interviews are commonly used methods for collecting data in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews are mostly undertaken with individual respondents whilst the method of participant observation normally is a technique of collecting data from a group of individuals. Even though both methods adopt different approaches, the purpose of each is to obtain a deep understanding of the cases

being studied, mainly how individuals act and think (Goodwin & Horowitz, 2002: 35; Lee, 1993: 120). As Thompson (2000) puts it, researchers have to '*immerse themselves in the field like embryo anthropologists*' during the study. Hence, the usefulness of semi-structured interviews and participant observations aids researchers involved in qualitative studies to stay as near as possible to the phenomena they study, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of individuals (Goodwin & Horowitz, 2002: 36).

### **3.2.1 Participant Observations**

Participant observation, also known as 'fieldwork' (Boeije, 2010: 59; Cousin, 2005: 423), is a qualitative method with ancestry in ethnographic research, of which the aim is to help researchers learn the perspectives held by study populations, in this case the employees of an organisation (Bryman, 2004: 167). According to Boeije (2010) participant observation is a traditional research approach in both cultural anthropology and sociology (2010: 59). The key stages of this research method include: selecting a site for the observation, observing, recording information in detail, formulating hypotheses, repeating observations, and establishing a saturation point (Kemp, 2001: 528), and the data collection, hypothesis construction and theory building are linked together (Silverman, 2006: 98). According to Silverman (2006) it does not always seem sensible for researchers carrying out observations to initiate with prior hypotheses (2006: 273), and such is the case of the research in question. Moreover, participant observation takes place in community sites and locations that have relevance to the research question.

The method is unique because the researcher approaches participants in their own natural environment (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 41) wherein the researcher observes and learns issues of insiders whilst remaining an outsider. Silverman (2006) adds that the data obtained from observations can largely make a contribution to the understanding of how organisations operate (2006: 78). In fact, for the study of organisational politics and their effect on workplace learning, the participant observations served as a foundation wherein a set of topics based on the participants' experiences came into view. This is because participant observations include casual conversations, which are the most important means through which social interaction occurs.

Participant observation is a matter of '*interpersonal interaction*' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 171) and a way of studying by observing the ways in which individuals operate as 'active agents' in their day-to-day life, which goes further than the revelations from structured or planned discussions (Watson & Watson, 1999: 487-8). In addition, the method has been mostly associated with the focus of building structures that are explanatory, following analysis of data that has been documented in an objective way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 165). In other words, the researcher immerses himself or herself in a social setting to observe the behaviour, listens to the discussions going on between individuals and asks questions there and then (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 41; Bryman, 2004: 542; Mason, 2002: 84).

Similarly, Becker (1958) provides a classical definition of this method, namely that the researcher gathers data by participating in the daily life of the subjects being studied, watching them and conversing with them during their normal situations, and discovering their interpretations of the events that are being observed (1958: 652). Therefore, one can affirm that the methodology of participant observation offers unswerving empirical and observational admission to the insider's world of meaning (Jorgensen, 1989: 15). Organisational politics are involved with the sense making of organisational life, managerial behaviours and employees' perceptions (Ladebo, 2006: 255). In order to obtain a fruitful account of how organisational politics affect workplace learning, it is important to apply an empirical approach. Moreover, some type of informal learning is difficult to detect without extended observations (Eraut, 2000: 119).

The relationship between the participant as observer, people at the location where the fieldwork is taking place and the interactions within are all significant mechanisms of the method, in order to collate accurate data (Jorgensen, 1989: 21). Defining a problem for participant observation can be a rather intricate process wherein the issues to be studied are developed while the researcher is participating and collecting information on site (Jorgensen, 1989: 34). However, since participant observation seeks to understand action, especially how and why practices and relations change, it is one of the positive characteristics of the suitability for usage in organisational studies. In fact, modern-day researchers believe that in order to understand human behaviour directly, one must participate rather than just observe people from the background (Boeije, 2010: 59;



Silverman, 2006: 68). This is one of the reasons why this method was adopted for researching the relation between organisational politics and workplace learning.

In addition, with the use of participant observation, another research method, such as interviewing, can be strengthened and the data collected can be validated (Tellis, 1997). This is mainly suitable where a grounded theory approach is used for analysing a study. Participant observation is one of the methods used to gather information when the grounded theory approach to a research project is undertaken (Barker *et al*, 2002: 230-231). Yet, according to Boeije (2010), not all research, and as a result, not each and every analyses and coding stages have to be directed to a grounded theory (2010: 95). The research in question is not really 'grounded theory' in its strictest sense however it is still broadly inductivist in its approach.

The ethnographic approaches of an observer offer the possibility of observing social and political behaviours in their 'natural' organisational setting (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007: 3). The approach should make sense of the organisations that are being observed during the study and a method would be useful if it is linked to the concerns of professionals who are dealing with actual organisational problems that include organisational politics. Indeed, with the method of observation, it is more prolific for the social scientist to become a participant observer in the organisation being studied. As such, in order to understand

organisational politics and their effect on workplace learning, the researcher has to traverse real precincts of organisational politics.

Of course, this is not an easy task however, it is essential in order to develop a deep understanding of organisations in this respect. According to Marshall (1995), researchers should not ‘keep a distance’ from the participants or the subjects they study in order to gather information (1995: 24). However, one should not be too involved with the subject matter as the closeness might hinder the objectivity of the study. To this effect, quantitative researchers often argue that observation is not a very ‘reliable’ data collection method since different observers may interpret the same situation differently (Silverman, 2006: 19). This is an important point, but in the context of the research questions posed at the outset of this project, the need to maximize depth and validity of the data collected – and hence the use of a qualitative approach that would enable this – was considered more important than maximizing reliability. It is certainly true that, observational studies have been essential to a large amount of qualitative research and the method is vital for understanding the ‘routines’ of organisational life (Silverman, 2006: 19, 69).

### **3.2.2 *Why Ethnography?***

Ethnography is the research approach used by cultural anthropologists and may be defined as both a qualitative research method and a product whose aim is cultural interpretation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 1). Ethnography combines two different words, namely

‘ethno’ which means ‘folks’, and ‘graph’ which is originated from ‘writing’ (Silverman, 2006: 67). Therefore, ethnography signifies social scientific writing about specific individuals. However, the ethnographer goes afar from the reporting of actions and details of experience, and endeavours to explain how these represent the sense making of peoples’ surroundings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 4). Ethnographers usually engage in depth interviewing and participant observations. Through these, ethnographers seek to gain what is called ‘an insider perspective’ without imposing their own theoretical constructions (Bryman, 2004: 267).

Through the participant observation method, which is the trademark of ethnography, researchers record detailed field notes, conduct informal interviews and also gather whatever documentation might be useful to be used as data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 3). Moreover, according to Boeije (2010), feelings that are emerged during the field work should not be neglected but should be seen as valuable in making sense of the data (2010: 131). This is because the researcher’s feelings may function as a way to see the world through the eyes of the participants (Boeije, 2010: 130). Apart from the researcher, key informants are also important here since the success of ethnographic fieldwork also depends on constructing equally helpful relationships with a few significant informants (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 374).

Ethnography was at times considered inappropriate to social science, on the basis that the data and the findings it produces are subjective, however ethnographers came up with the concept of naturalism wherein it is proposed that the social world should be studied in its natural state (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 7). An important factor of naturalism is the way in which the social researcher applies fidelity and an attitude of value and gratitude towards the social world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 7). The research in question required an understanding of the organisational politics that may hinder or assist workplace learning. Information that was gathered through participant observations and the depth interviews included feelings, beliefs, values, opinions, behavioural and sensory data, background information, and knowledge.

Moreover, the questions brought up for this research are ethnographic in nature and generally concern the employees' behaviours. Since ethnography is a method that seeks to answer central anthropological questions concerning the ways of life of human beings and provides clues to trends in human society, it is suitable for studying the behaviours concerning workplace learning and the organisational politics that may affect it.

### ***3.2.3 Semi-structured Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews are often referred to as depth interviews and are defined in a number of ways such as a '*speech event*', a '*social interaction*' or a '*non-hierarchical feminist encounter*' (Warren *et al*, 2003: 94). The method offers a large coverage and

discloses insights on the study to the researcher, due to its qualitative nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 129; Thompson, 2000). Semi-structured interviews are flexible wherein the interviewer can alter the classification and particulars of how topics are examined, but also ensuring that the data could be investigated analytically for archetypes according to the type of the research question (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 29).

This method is also a very extensive way of gathering information and does not only consist of a framework but also a structure. Moreover, during analysis, a semi-structured interview aids in the focusing on pieces of texts that contain the themes related to the research question (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 97). This is because with this method, the researcher knows where to find the information in each text (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 97). According to Boeije (2010) interviews offer a chance for researchers to learn about social life through the viewpoint, familiarity and words of the individuals that live it (2010: 62). This is one of the reasons why this second method was used to study the effect of organisational politics on workplace learning. More specifically during these types of interviews, respondents were able to narrate and report the effect that micro-politics were having on their learning.

The interaction going on behind the semi-structured interview technique is often referred to as '*the interview society*' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 119; Warren *et al* 2003:108-9). The interviewer is dynamically involved and has to have good social skills, including listening

and probing, to be able to pick upon issues related to the study (Mason, 2002: 74-75). Hermanowicz (2002) refers to interviewees as '*dates*' since the former divulge sensitive and intimate information (2002: 493), as participants had done in the research in question, and a plethora of advantages surround this method.

There are several reasons why social scientists use this method: '*positivism*' postulates that the data emanating from the interview has the capability to give researchers admittance to reality; '*emotionalism*' implies that interviewees are considered as experiencing subjects who offer a genuine awareness of their experience of the social world; and '*constructionism*' claims that both the interviewer and the interviewee engage in building the meaning of facts and events (Silverman, 2006: 118). This is another reason why this method was considered suitable to use in the study of the effect of organisational politics on learning since the method gives confidence to participants and these are persuaded to narrate their experiences.

The semi-structured interview method is also useful when researchers are trying to obtain a true understanding of what is happening, since it entails methodical groundwork resulting in a list of themes and questions to be asked and discussed at some stage during the interview (Boeije, 2010: 62). In fact, during the semi-structured interviews each interviewee was asked a set of similar questions based on the interview guide that consists of a list of questions and topics regarding organisational politics and workplace learning

that have to be examined, as well as a variety of probes (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 29). As such, the interview method in question is suitable to study organisations, especially where the focus of study involves ontological properties (Bryman, 2004: 266). These include experiences, feelings, behaviours and practices adopted in organisations. This is because individuals usually generate part of the environment they deal with in their organisation. This is another reason why the study of this thesis used this method: politics and their effect on workplace learning include feelings, experiences, behaviours and practices.

Why did the research in question not use the structured approach? The main benefit of a structured approach is that all of the respondents are asked precisely the same questions and this is considered important in comparing the responses of the respondents (Bryman, 2004: 110). However, there is the drawback that questions may need to be asked in a specific order, which can weaken the ability of the respondent to remember and communicate their experiences as a recalled memory elicits other thoughts on topics, perhaps occurring later on the researcher's list of questions (Bryman, 2004: 126-7).

Therefore, a qualitative enquiry using face to face semi-structured interviews with a number of employees was considered an appropriate and practical way of addressing the questions mentioned in Chapter 2. It was anticipated that face to face interviews would generate data from which commonalities or patterns of activity regarding organisational politics and their effect on workplace learning might emerge, some of which would

correspond with some or all of the questions listed in Chapter 2. A face to face rendezvous is beneficial since interviewees cannot pitch forward to foresee questions or change the replies they have given earlier (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 45).

### **3.3 Targeted Participants & Sampling**

The target participants for this research had to be undergoing some kind of workplace learning activities or were engaging in new responsibilities, as these were a prosperous source to explore. These were identified from the Human Resources database which was available to the researcher. For both the participant observations and the semi-structured interviews, a purposive sampling was conducted. Bernard & Ryan (2010) refer to this type of sampling as '*judgmental*' (2010: 361) and, according to Bryman (2004), this kind of sampling is in effect planned and aims at setting up a connection between the research questions and sampling (2004: 333-4). Similarly, Bernard & Ryan (2010), Boeije (2010) and Silverman (2006) confirm that purposive sampling consents the researcher to choose a case because it shows some characteristic or practice in which he or she is interested (2010: 365; 2010: 35; 2006: 306).

More specifically, the researcher uses this kind of sampling to interview and observe people who are relevant to the research questions. This type of sampling emphasises that the researcher reflects seriously about the restrictions of the population he or she is interested in and chooses the sample case cautiously on this foundation (Silverman, 2006:



306). According to Silverman, purposive sampling can also accommodate the issue of generalizability (2006: 306). In this regard Boeije (2010) argues that this type of sampling relates to the “*variation-based generalisation*” (2010: 181). This is a consequence of when the researcher concentrates on relating the deviations in which a phenomenon takes place, more specifically new cases from the population concerned are added to the sample until no new information is identified and saturation point is reached (Boeije, 2010: 181).

Several areas and communities within the University of Malta took part in the study, starting from the academic, administrative, industrial, research and technical staff. The employee turnover of the University of Malta is very active and plenty of new resources are recruited during the year, and others are promoted. This is mainly due to the opening of new courses, the building of new faculties and centres, and also due to the undertaking of several research projects that would involve a number of human resources. The University administration is also presently undergoing work and training of the newly installed integrated IT system that stores finance and human resources information, which will include online services for all members of staff throughout the University. This project has proved to be a challenge for the University and its employees, since a lot of relevant workplace learning is taking place and business processes are being changed.

### 3.4 Research Design & Developing the Guide for the Data Collection Methods

The design of the research took the form of a case study, more specifically an exemplifying case, wherein a single organisation was studied of which the researcher has cultural knowledge. In general, the aim of doing a case study is to obtain a “*thick description*” (Cousin, 2005: 424) or to get a profound conception of an organisation, since it is a deep examination of a specific situation mainly used to confine an extensive field of research into one simple doable piece of study (Bell, 2005: 10; Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 43; Bryman, 2004: 49; Cousin, 2005: 423; Gillham, 2010: 1). Some maintain that since a case study is so focused, its results cannot be prognosticated to match a whole inquiry and they illustrate solely one constricted paradigm (Bell, 2005: 11; Bryman, 2004: 51; Flyvbjerg, 2006: 221).

However, it is also contended that a case study method offers more pragmatic answers than solely statistical measures (Bryman, 2004: 49) and it “*illuminates*” the functions and facts of an organisation (Gillham, 2010: 102) by providing “*context-dependent*” knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 223). According to Gillham (2010) a case study is beneficial since it studies human behaviour “*as it happens*” (2010: 2). Flyvbjerg (2006) posits that for researchers, the proximity of the case study to actual circumstances and its abundant information are highly significant for; (i) the improvement of a shaded vision of reality; and (ii) the researchers’ own learning course in developing the required good research skills (2006: 223). According to Flyvbjerg (2006) the case study can be a useful

therapy against the predisposition of a researcher to keep a distance from the object of study and thus not achieving concrete experiences (2006: 223).

According to Vigoda-Gadot & Drory (2006), organisational politics is a difficult area to study since employees, managers and company leaders are not keen to disclose the political activities that aid them to advance in the workplace and to move forward their own plans. The case study design is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the research in question (Bryman, 2004: 48), and thus provided a suitable context for the topic of the effect of organisational politics on workplace learning. The type of case in question is also a critical one, in which questions were developed from the literature review and tested accordingly.

In fact, in structuring the design for this research, a number of questions have been brought up in order to enlighten the development of the main research instrument. The development of the questions listed in Chapter 2, which were informed by the literature review, acted as the basis to design the participant observation guide (see **Appendix E**) and the semi-structured interview guide (see **Appendix F**). The terms 'positive' and 'negative' in the interview guide are used objectively to describe the supportive or inhibitive effects that politics have on learning. Participant observations and semi-structured interviews with a number of employees from different job categories was considered the most suitable and realistic way of dealing with the above questions. It has been projected that the participant

observations and interviews would produce data from which prototypes of political activity might come out, several of which would match up with some or all of the questions listed in Chapter 2. The political tactics included in the guide adequately represent the range of political behaviour that has been observed. This issue has been meticulously thought about and the typology used provides a faithful reflection of the political behaviour that was found.

As stated previously in this chapter, the purpose of the qualitative method is to gain detailed knowledge of what people say in connection with the research problem and in this case, the researcher was the data gathering instrument (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 42; Boeije, 2010: 61; Bryman, 2004: 284; Tsourvakas, 2002). At the methodology design stage it has been assumed that all data would be collected via the participant observations and semi-structured interviews, by using the questions mentioned previously as guidance. In this way, it has been projected that following the participant observations, a foundation set of topics based on the participants' experiences would emerge. The information from the semi-structured interviews added to the further development of the questions by detecting patterns of political behaviour and how these affect workplace learning.

In a nutshell, the data collected for this research started by identifying those employees who were recently employed or promoted and recorded the participants' details in an excel sheet which was available only to the researcher. Having begun the process of identifying suitable participants who meet the criteria, the next phase was to organise the date and time

for the observations. Semi-structured interviews followed in the next stage. The topics and questions corresponded with the research questions detailed in Chapter 2 and the questions were used in a flexible way, as suggested by Boeije (2010: 67). Detailed notes were taken during both the observations and the interviews, whilst keeping in mind the questions mentioned previously as guidance.

### **3.5 Collecting the Data**

The participant observations and the semi-structured interviews were conducted solely by the author as an insider researcher and these were overt at all times. Since the researcher forms part of the organisation being researched, access was more easily granted and the data collection was less time consuming. There were no journeys involved and there was greater suppleness with regard to the observation and interview times. Hockey (1993) argues that an insider researcher is able to execute the research better than an outsider by merging into circumstances that make them less prone to modify the research site (1993: 204).

Undoubtedly, an insider researcher has a better preliminary understanding of the social setting because he or she is knowledgeable about the environment being studied (Griffiths, 1985: 211). Additionally, an insider researcher generally has significant trustworthiness and affinity with the subjects of the research that may produce a greater level of

forthrightness (Mercer, 2007: 7). The employees were introduced to the research in person, in the early stages of detecting and building up the target population. This stage was repeated at the beginning of the participant observation for each faculty or section, and before the interview sessions. This repetition served the purpose of illuminating what the research is about.

Prior permission in writing was sought from the heads of department/section/line managers and obtained before each occasion for the participant observations and interview sessions (see **Appendix C**). Out of the twenty four (24) faculties/sections/institutes/centres/offices wherein approval was sought from the head, twenty (20) allowed the research to take place. This means that almost 83% of the heads approved that the research be carried out at their assigned faculty/section/institute/centre/office. Three of the four heads who did not approve, did not reply to the email asking for their permission. The remaining one wanted to know the names of the faculties/sections/institutes/centres/offices that were taking part in the study. This head was informed that the study involved all those employees throughout the University who were employed this year or were engaging in new responsibilities following a promotion or transfer. A reply to this was never received back. With regards to the participants, only one decided not to take part in the research.

The first method used was the participant observations. As this research dealt with the employees' workplace learning and whether organisational politics affect their learning in any way, observations were regarded as an important method and were required to clarify what kinds of political issues are prevalent within the different departments of the University and how these were affecting the learning of individuals. According to Boeije (2010) the main theoretical basics must be distinguished during data collection and also during the data analysis (2010: 81).

Participant observations were carried out in different scenarios and areas such as offices, department level meetings, faculty level meetings, workshops, laboratories, lecture rooms, casual gatherings outside the offices and traveling between one faculty to another. The data obtained from the observations was then used to inform the data collection tools for the semi-structured interviews. A total of 55 sessions of official participant observations took place in a total of 15 sections. The researcher took the 'saturation point' approach in order to determine the time when no more participant observations were required when no new themes were being identified (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 71; Boeije, 2010: 84). Even though this approach emerges from a grounded theory perspective, the researcher found it applicable to this study, since the analysis process involved a supple and unpredictable coding framework, rather than a firm and unyielding one.

Each observation session lasted between one or two hours and data was collected through casual conversations, which are the most important means through which social interaction occurs (Silverman, 2006: 203), as well as discussions and observations. Other data was collected through other unofficial and informal discussions during office hours. As suggested by Bernard & Ryan (2010), a constant validity check took place by examining reports on people's behaviour (either verbally or in writing), looking for other clarifications for particular behaviours, and finding out the reason for a few incongruities which were present between key informants (2010: 110).

During this stage of the fieldwork, key informants were vital as these are people who know a lot about the culture of the organisation and were willing to share what they know (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 370). The employees that participated in each session ranged in numbers between 2 and 10, depending on the type and size of the section or department involved. The researcher kept a note book and took field notes of activities, experiences and matters of interest, such as important quotations and the type of interactions that took place. In this regard, reflexivity was adopted when the researcher took field notes and reflected upon them. This was useful in order to render transparent and thereby hopefully to reduce the impact of any biases of the researcher which are the product of the knowledge of the organisation where the researcher is also an employee.



Following the session, the data was immediately inserted into a personal computer as a word document. This electronic storage of data eased the organisation and analysis of data, as suggested by Jorgensen (1989: 22).

For the second stage of collection, 21 semi-structured interviews took place with employees that have been recently employed at the University of Malta or promoted, and were undergoing some kind of learning of new tasks or new responsibilities. Each interview lasted for a maximum of 1 hour and a tape recorder was used as permitted by the interviewees. In order to give confidence to participants and persuade them to 'tell their own story' a semi-structured interview approach was considered preferable to a fully structured approach. The phased-assertion probing technique was often used during these interviews, since with this technique the researcher shows people that he or she already has a little bit of knowledge on their experiences, thus encouraging the interviewees to open up more (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 33).

During both stages of the data collection, the first participant observation and interview that were organised were initially considered as a test run both for the enquiry guide and the recording of information, as well as a learning experience for the researcher. Participants were advised that they should not feel constrained by the researcher and they were asked to give their approval by completing a consent form. The consent form was available in two languages: English and Maltese, according to the preference of the participants (see

**Appendices A and B).** Almost all participants except 2 preferred the English Version. These were assured that all the data gathered would be handled with the strictest of confidence.

### **3.6 Analysis & the Qualitative Data Management Software**

When writing up reflexively the observations and the interviews, a detailed account of the setting and context in which these took place was provided by the researcher. Reflexive writing is the research technique wherein the researcher syndicates his or her own personal experience with serious thought and observation in order to develop a comprehensive and appealing analysis of an experience (Mason, 2002: 79). Reflexive writing is usually used concurrently with narrative analysis and ethnographic research (Mason, 2002: 79), since it is in these frameworks that the twofold nature of a researcher as both observer and subject has the maximum pervasiveness, making the necessity to contemplate on the researcher's effect upon the subject, insights of the subject and nature as the subject themselves as part of their analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 399-400; Mason, 2002: 149). Being reflexive during the analysis of the data is acknowledged within social research (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003: 414).

For each observation and interview session, the data was initially created as a Word document. In view of the above discussion on reflexivity, a worksheet method (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998: 419) was used, wherein the participants' words were inserted in one

column and the researcher's responses and analyses were inserted in an adjacent column. This method allowed the researcher to scrutinize how and where some of her suppositions and observations might have affected her analysis of the participants' words and the account she composed about the employees. Where a tape recorder was used during the interviews, a transcription took place, wherein the audio was converted into text as a Word document. The transcriptions were primarily decoded by using narrative analysis (Bryman, 2004: 399).

This analysis assumes that people think in narratives to make sense of their experiences (Bryman, 2004: 399) and in order to select quotes that are relevant to the study, the researcher needs to attain a compassionate understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 260). This means that the participants analyse their experience through storytelling and their narratives often include topics that are sustained by occurrences rebuilt from memory, and the researcher benefits from reading through the transcripts of the interviews several times.

Each employee's information, namely the name, age, title of the faculty or section, post category, and the number of months in the present position, was used to make initial data sorts to establish how best to arrange the data as cases. The date and time of day of each observation and interview was recorded on the texts. All the data was carefully read and then coded and managed by using computer aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS). In

this case data was segmented and reassembled according to its relevancy to the research (Boeije, 2010; 76). According to Silverman (2006), by coding data social scientists illustrate how theory can make the data analysis more fruitful (2006: 388). Silverman (2006) adds that without theory, research is unfeasibly constricted, and without research, theory is “*mere armchair contemplation*”, meaning that theory that lacks a few observations to work with is “*like a tractor without a field*” (2006: 388).

At the initial stage of analysis, the open coding approach has been used. This coding approach binds the analyst to fragment the content into pieces, to contrast them and to allocate them to groups that concentrate on the same topic (Boeije, 2010: 96). Coded texts from observations and interviews, namely those referring to the ‘political tactics identified’, the ‘type of workplace learning’, ‘the effect of the politics on learning’, ‘the reasons for the political behaviour’, ‘the most important skills and/or tasks’, the ‘feedback that the learner receives’, the ‘ease of learning’ and the ‘emotional responses towards political behaviours’ were explored. The notes of each observation and interview were compared and interpreted to produce an account from which factors regarding organisational politics and their effect on workplace learning materialised. Boeije (2010) argues that open coding offers an unambiguous organisation of the data, since an indexing system that corresponds to the researcher’s analytical requirements is developed (2010: 97).

In the research in question, especially during observations, field notes were taken of how participants spoke about particular issues, especially their words, phrases and intonations that were used. During the observations, discussions with the participants were held as to the type of workplace learning that was taking place and how they have learned certain skills. It is a known fact that the researcher ought to at all times endeavour to observe and take note of tangible cases of people's actions and conversations, using quotations to the letter and unembellished descriptions (Silverman, 2006: 93). The researcher methodically uncovered the characteristics of political behaviour that seemed present during the observations, a strategy often referred to analytic induction (Boeije, 2010: 86). This strategy which is often referred to as qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) produces comprehensive representations and avails of the text that has been transformed to nominal variables (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 160).

The notion of analytic induction is to put together firm policies about the sources and consequences of social phenomena (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 328), and thus this was suitable to uncover the political behaviour taking place. The main issues were then grouped into elements and the researcher's role in this process was to understand the participants' experiences by extracting the emerging significant effects of organisational politics on workplace learning from the observations and interviews.

The analysis was partly inductive since it was in part informed by existing categories relating to political behaviours and games derived from Mintzberg's collection of games (1985), Allen *et al*'s (1979) political tactics and Lawrence *et al*'s (2005) types of power. This means that the coding frame was to some extent based on categories derived from the literature. The stage of open coding was finished when no new codes were required, in other words, when the saturation point was reached (Boeije, 2010: 107). The issues and groups were created with computer aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) by using a hierarchical coding scheme, wherein higher-level codes contained sub-codes (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 97; Boeije, 2010: 98).

In this case, the analysis moved on to the axial coding approach, which is a more abstract process and consists of coding around single categories (Boeije, 2010: 108). At this stage the sub categories of the above mentioned categories were identified and coded. According to Boeije (2010) the main function of axial coding is to establish the primary and secondary rudiments of the research (2010: 109). Finally, the selective coding approach took place in order to look for relations between the sub categories so as to understand the phenomena occurring in the research field. Boeije (2010) argues that the approach of selective coding may be considered the subsequent coherent stride following the segmenting of the data, and it is useful to establish which categories are prominent (2010: 114, 116).

In some cases, manifest coding (Bernard & Ryan, 2010: 292) was used wherein only words and phrases in the text counted as indicators of themes, such as the categories of the ‘effect of political behaviour on workplace learning’, the ‘reasons for political behaviour’, the ‘most important part of the job’ and the ‘emotional responses towards political behaviour’. For the other categories, the latent coding was adopted. According to Bernard & Ryan (2010), latent coding involves interpretation, which includes the task of reading texts for meaning and identifying relevant topics (2010: 292).

N-Vivo was chosen as the data management software. This programme aids in the consistency and regularity of processing the data, and is useful when using participants’ own words. Its code and retrieve feature provides a great way for identifying, comparing and grouping common elements in the collected texts by using nodes (Boeije, 2010: 144). Parts of the texts which were necessary for writing about the relevant categories in the next chapter could be effortlessly picked up (Boeije, 2010: 199). In addition, N-Vivo recognises Microsoft Word documents and the researcher found it easy to transfer the word document into the N-Vivo programme, as well as editing the texts once these were imported (Boeije, 2010: 143). Another useful reason for choosing N-Vivo is because an online tutorial is available with the programme.

The use of models provided in this programme was found very useful, as this guides the researcher in visualising the themes of the coded data at a glance throughout the fieldwork

process. Boeije (2010) argues that visual displays may help the researcher to develop interpretations (2010: 124). More specifically a coherent model provides a comprehensive view of the social phenomenon that is studied (Boeije, 2010: 79) and allows the researcher to portray a lot of information in a succinct way, thus guiding the reader to go lucidly all the way through the model (Boeije, 2010: 125). N-Vivo also provides facilities for theory building in which it is possible to inspect features and relationships in the collected data (Bryman, 2004: 426). The participants' experiences and the researcher's observations were decoded by reading and re-reading the information and accentuating the themes within, creating narratives based on those themes, and elucidating the common themes across. Groups and categories inductively surfaced from the data, which were then coded accordingly (Boeije, 2010: 79).

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

The ethical guidelines of both the University of Malta and the University of Leicester have been cautiously adhered to. Approval of the research has been requested and permitted from the ethics committee of both Universities prior to initiating the study. All research deals with an array of ethical dilemmas (Boeije, 2010: 44), however, Mercer (2007) identifies a significant issue for the insider researcher: what to say to co-workers, both before and after they take part in the research (2007: 11). An explanation of the purpose of the research was offered to participants who were assured that the findings will not be reported to the top management or anyone from the organisation. This promise was restated on the consent form that each participant signed. Mercer (2007) argues about



another important ethical dilemma that concerns the use of data from informal meetings that is not negotiated upon beforehand (2007: 13). However, since the researcher did not aim to present the findings to anyone at the place of work, the approach of not adding informal data was overlooked.

### ***3.7.1 Subjectivity vs. Objectivity***

A consideration in this study is the subjectivity-objectivity issue, especially where an insider researcher is concerned, in which the methods of participant observations and semi-structured interviews are involved. It is widely accepted that participant observations and semi-structured interviews enable subjectivity to play a greater role in the research process, and this is often seen to conflict with claims regarding objectivity and knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 162). Debates often occur with regards to the data emerging from observations and interviews, especially if the researcher is also an employee of the organisation being studied. In this regards, debates exist as to whether the data includes what has actually been said and done or what the researcher wished that has been said and done (Declercq, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: 164-165; Goodwin & Horowitz, 2002: 39). This is because ethnography involves researchers instinctively representing the data on their own insights and experiences and questioning their own assumptions. Though an insider researcher is able to participate in discussions or merely observe what is going on, as well as being able to participate freely without drawing too much attention, there may be disadvantages (Coghlan & Casey, 2001: 676). The ordeal with the ethnographic method is the assurance that researchers carry out their study in a significant and open way, whilst not

incongruously representing their own insights (Mason, 2002: 77). Participant observations may include too much attachment with the organisations or groups being studied, which can lead to biased interpretations (Declercq, 2000; Goodwin & Horowitz, 2002: 36, 40; Latvala *et al*, 2000: 1254). This is because participant observation involves the researcher being immersed into the group being studied, whilst identifying how individuals interact within that group.

According to Hammersely (2008) ‘bias’ is that mistake which results from a mindful or insentient inclination on the part of the researcher to produce data, and/or to construe them in ways that are harmonized with his or her obligations or previous suppositions (2008: 551). In this regard researchers need to continuously safeguard their study against bias by evaluating whether it has happened (Hammersely, 551: 2008). Biased interpretations may also occur since participant observations rely strongly upon the depth of observation of the researcher, especially if the researcher is as well an employee of the organisation being studied. In this case, the researcher may exclude an array of data in order to verify his or her conventional viewpoint (Boeije, 2010: 54). However, according to Riemer 1977 (in Coghlan & Casey, 2001), researchers should direct accustomed circumstances, opportune actions or distinctive know-how into objects of study rather than imminently overlook their know-how and skill (2001:675). Thus, prior knowledge of and experience in the research context can prove beneficial, if the distorting influences of potential bias can be reduced through exercising reflexivity as outlined above.

The researcher may also change the track of actions due to her participation (Tellis, 1997). For example, researchers may try to be impartial or abstaining from their views and behaviours that are articulated during the study. These may be interpreted or responded to in a number of ways by the individuals being studied (Mason, 2002: 92-93). Thus, the conduct of the researcher may change the track of actions and behaviour of the individuals being studied, which leads to the issue of intrusiveness. It was therefore important that the researcher recognised the difference between reporting what was said and observed and being more objective in opposition to interpreting what is seen and being less objective. In this case the researcher used the method of reflexivity in order to sift out personal biases by writing down objective observations of a particular experience.

#### ***3.7.1.1 Ethical Reflexivity***

Gewirtz & Cribb (2006) argue that an ethically reflexive view implicates that social researchers ought to be willing to cultivate their beliefs in a way that is reactive to, and learns from, the hands-on impasses confronted by those working in the social milieus being studied (2006: 150). This means that sociologists are required to find the means for self-consciously and analytically tackle objectivity in the description and explanation of the research data and consistency of their beliefs (Gewirtz & Cribb 2006: 142). In fact, Hammersley, 2004 (in Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006) argues that social researchers should endeavour to retain a rift between facts and values and to avoid their values from distorting the facts (2006: 144).

Boeije (2010) adds that it is important for researchers to be conscious of their personal occurrences, outlooks, emotions and thoughts, and to be able to surmount any potential preconceived notion that may be the source of these (2010: 175). Similarly, Bernard & Ryan (2010) argue that in order for the researcher to obtain a thorough understanding of the phenomena, he or she is required to put aside his or her biases so as not to sieve the participants' experiences through the researcher's own cultural vision (2010: 259). As such, Gilgun (2010) argues that only those minutes of reflexivity that add to the understanding of research processes, findings and applications need to be included (2010: 3).

#### ***3.7.1.2 The Data Presented in this Thesis***

The purpose of the data presented in this thesis serves to reveal how the respondents interpreted the events as political, how they responded to them and what impact they had on their learning. As such the data are presented essentially as subjective perceptions of particular events and behaviours, including the researcher's perceptions of observational data, and the respondents' perceptions from the interview data. The data therefore do not necessarily represent an objective or 'true' account of these events and behaviours, as they may be somewhat different to descriptions of the same phenomena that other people would give. According to Rhodes & Brown (2005), studying power and political behaviour from a narrative perspective enhances its understanding however its representation is subject to change over time (2005: 174). Similarly, Clegg (1989) argues that one should not expect

that representations remain stable over time within the same context and overtime (1989: 151). This is because different people will have different stories to tell depending on their position, and it is often the case where workplace politics or conflicts are concerned.

### **3.7.2 Confidentiality & Anonymity**

Some groups may feel threatened by certain questions asked or by the researcher being present in the setting, which may cause them distress. This is because during the data collection, the participants may be asked to divulge information on problems in connection with political processes that would put their job at risk. An example of a critical finding identified in the study in question is that political behaviour of a supervisor that is seen or revealed by the subordinate. On the other hand, other participating groups may find the research experience as a safe opportunity to divulge their feelings about the department/section they work in (Boeije, 2010: 51), as was also the case in this study. For some individuals, participation, especially during interviewing, may be an extremely positive experience where one can share his or her feelings (Marshall, 1995: 27; Thompson, 2000), while others may consider a research interview as a social event where the respondent is instantaneously and potentially held liable for his or her words (Bryman, 2004: 332; Warren *et al*, 2003: 103).

However, even though participants may be willing to contribute to the study, they may not want to be identified from their responses. Participants might feel threatened if they would

have to answer a very sensitive question (Boeije, 2010: 48). This may especially occur when questions are asked on the type of characteristics of individuals with high political behaviour in the organisation where participants work. In this case, they would not want to be identified from the responses. According to Latvala *et al* (2000), during interviewing respondents may portray an ideal way of behaving and not how they really behave in their day-to-day life (2000: 1256). In the case of organisational politics, during an interview the subjects' feedback to the presence of the researcher may have inflicted a feeling of uneasiness. For example, an employee, especially from the top management, may confront the researcher in order to protect interests that are to his or her advantage (Butcher & Clarke, 1999: 11).

Hence, guaranteeing anonymity of the participants is the crux for resolving the above ethical dilemma. The names and job titles of participants, and the titles of the departments were kept anonymous so as to protect the identity of the participants. Full details were kept in a digital codebook (Boeije, 2010: 46), which is only accessible by the researcher. The use of aliases (Lee, 1993: 173) is important to keep the anonymity of the participants. After all, trust is one of the central notions of qualitative research (Boeije, 2010: 44) and it was made clear to the participants that they were not obliged to take part in the study and that they could refuse to answer sensitive questions at any stage of the research (Boeije, 2010: 45). This way, the participants felt more at ease and respected, and built trust in the researcher. In this case, it would be ideal to give full information to the participants (Mc Kernan, 2000: 241; Bell, 2005: 16), regarding the requirements of their participation and

the amount of data required. The consent of participants is of great importance (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007: 17), and a 'consent form' was signed by the participants during the study, indicating the above mentioned conditions. Some were also intrigued by the topic of the study and asked to be informed when the thesis is made public.

### ***3.7.3 Setting Boundaries***

During the data collection an important ethical dilemma lies in relation with the closeness of the relationships between the researcher and the participants (Boeije, 2010: 53), especially during the participant observations. According to Bernard & Ryan (2010) participant observation is the most challenging method for data collection, since it requires a lot of rapport (2010: 42). Some of the participants may want to form a close relationship with the researcher that involves reciprocity, mutuality and equality, whilst others may not want this (Mason, 2002: 100). In order to avoid misunderstandings or unnecessary closeness, the researcher made it clear to the participants that the purpose of the fieldwork is purely for research purposes. This had been repeated as necessary.

In some instances, it may also occur that those in an authoritative position may make pressure on the researcher to divulge the identity of the participants (Boeije, 2010: 51). Dilemmas of this type tend to describe ways in which top management interferes with the duties of the researcher, particularly instances in which the researcher is pressured to break pledges of confidentiality to employees. An ethical dilemma in this regard could include

the offer of expensive gifts to the researcher to divulge confidential information. This may seem farfetched, but it does happen, and the researcher in this case should not accept any type of compensation that results in bribery. This was not the case with the study in question. However, there were instances where some supervisors asked whether they could have some feedback on what was observed. The researcher insisted that the data was confidential and it was solely for the purpose of the thesis.

Last of all, it was significant and beneficial to set personal boundaries and limits during the whole research process, to carry out the study as smoothly as possible.

### **3.8 Limitations & Weaknesses of the Research Design**

The research design of this study is in the form of a case study. It is often argued that one of the major limitations of a case study is its descriptive method, however according to Easton (2010), a significant opportunity that a case study has to offer is to understand a phenomenon in depth and comprehensively (2010: 119). Some argue that behaviour can only be described and not explained and the case study depends upon descriptive information provided by different employees (Easton, 2010: 124).



Much of the information collected is retrospective data and reminiscences of past events, and is therefore subject to the problems related to memory. This may have left scope for important details to be left out. In addition, the case study researcher is aware of being inundated by data and there may be too much of the data for straightforward analysis (Darke *et al*, 1998). For example, with regards to interviewing, a lot of extra information may surface during interviews and a lot of skills are required to find a balance between open-ended and focused questions. This is especially concerned with interviewers asking leading questions.

Difficulties may occur if the interviewer asks vague and insensitive questions, and fails to listen closely and to probe. Interviewing may also be quite difficult to carry out, since certain underlying behaviours would be hard to detect (Latvala *et al*, 2000: 1253). Interviewing is one of the essential informative qualitative methods that can be used in research, but it acquires heterogeneous data that represents the interviewer's point of view. Thus, there may be a diminutive relationship between cases and an individual respondent remains significant and evident within the study; a fact that obstructs generalizability. Watson & Watson (1999) argue that even with participant observations, no empirical generalisations can be made (1999: 500). This is because empirical generalisations are made following quantitative research that involves a study that is statistically representative of a wider population (Mason, 2002: 195).

The case study involved only a single organisation and therefore may not be representative of a general group or population. Even though the case study presents rich data on the beliefs and experiences of a group of employees and can provide insights in unexplained frameworks, it does not examine the applicability to other contexts (Bell, 2005: 11; Darke *et al*, 1998; Easton, 2010: 126). By definition, case studies can make no assertion to be emblematic (Bryman, 2004: 51). There is no way of empirically knowing as to what extent the University studied is similar or different from other Universities. In addition, since the sample is particular, and the data is principally non-numerical, there are no means to ascertain the possibility that the data is representative of some larger population (Easton, 2010: 119).

For some researchers, this makes the case study findings as of diminutive significance. Generally, in qualitative research it is not easy to ascertain reliability by replicating the measurement since it often does not entail measurement with standard instruments and the measures have to be built-up explicitly for a specific study (Boeije, 2010: 172). However, it is reasonably expected that much of what is described in this study may be found in other universities and therefore, it may be suggested that the research in question could support '*moderatum*' generalisations to other similar higher education institutions (Williams, 2000).

The case study data is also time-consuming to collect and analyse (Darke *et al*, 1998). However, cutting down on the timing of either of these aspects, is prone to critically deteriorating the value and reliability of any findings produced. When case studies do well in enlightening some of the intricacies of social situations, there is frequently a problem of

representation (Bryman, 2004: 52; Easton, 2010: 124). It may be tricky to present reachable and sensible pictures of those intricate issues in writing, since writing is primarily a rigour and important stage (Darke *et al*, 1998: 284). For example, by writing about one feature of an issue of a person's story, other aspects of it may be inadvertently obscured. There may be a number of dissimilar tactics to illustrate the same set of concerns, each one of which is faintly diverse in its method and importance. This position can make the results of a case study research especially hard to sum up and it may be difficult to cross-check the information (Bell, 2005: 11).

The researcher's knowledge, understanding and instinct is a vital part of the case study approach, since one has to choose what questions to ask, and how to ask them, what to observe and what to record (Darke *et al*, 1998: 286). A significant determinant of the quality of the case study research is the value of the insights and thinking brought up by the researcher (Darke *et al*, 1998: 286). This means that no matter how accurate the researcher endeavours to be, the research may not be completely objective (Darke *et al*, 1998) and some facts have to be taken on trust.

Nevertheless, a case study is a very intimate and critical means of understanding the behaviour of employees (Darke *et al*, 1998; Easton, 2010: 118). Thus, despite the limitations, the case study remains a very valuable method for researching organisational politics and their effect on workplace learning.

## **CHAPTER 4 - ANALYSING & DISCUSSING THE PARTICIPANTS' WORKPLACE LEARNING**

### **Introduction**

The first Chapter of this thesis described the purpose and the aim of identifying to what extent do organisational politics hinder or support workplace learning. The literature review in Chapter 2 concluded that there are on-going debates regarding the relationship between organisational politics and workplace learning, and most empirical work focused on the perceptions of politics rather than the actual behaviours. The qualitative methodology adopted for the collection, distribution and analysis of the data was illustrated in Chapter 3. The two main methods of data collection used, namely participant observations and semi-structured interviews supplied the data for the research. During both stages of the data collection all data was developed and transformed into a data set of legible text documents. The data set of the text documents contain information on the type of workplace learning, the political behaviours identified and their effect on workplace learning, extracts of which are now used reflexively in this Chapter and Chapters 5 and 6 consecutively to discuss and draw out the findings. Issues that stand out are discussed in detail in each relevant Chapter.

The Qualitative Research Software (QRS) N-Vivo was used for the data management in the analysis of the observations and the semi-structured interviews. The coding work and

analysis of the data set of text documents revealed the organisational politics that take place. The analysis also identified the main reasons for the political activity. A hierarchy of N-Vivo coding was developed based on topics and issues arising from the observations and interviews. This approach revealed that organisational politics may enhance as well as hinder the learning at the place of work, or may neither enhance nor hinder learning. In fact, it seems that organisational politics may affect workplace learning in a supportive or an inhibitive way, or may have no effect at all. Thus, the detection of these categories proposed an approach both for the structure of the analysis itself, as well as for deciding which data to choose and utilise.

This Chapter focuses on how the data was sorted, and describes the process of the analysis for the inductively surfaced categories concerning workplace learning. This is followed by a discussion of the types of workplace learning, the most important part/s of the participants' job, the feedback that the learner receives, and the ease of learning. The Chapter also offers an initial picture of some of the political behaviour identified. As noted in the previous chapter, it should be emphasized that respondents' accounts regarding political behaviours are not presented, or to be taken, as objective, factual representations of some organisational reality. Rather, they should be seen as respondents' interpretations and representations of such behaviours and their effects on workplace learning.

#### 4.1 Initial Analysis: Participants' Details

A broad demographic analysis took place to determine the overall details of the targeted participants. Details include the gender, age, employment period, and job category. The details are listed as a global amount in order to protect the identity of the participants. The aim of this initial analysis was to see if there were any significant correlations between these global details, such as the number of male and female participants, and the age. Table 4.1 shows that there were 18 males and 17 females. The majority of participants were aged between 21 and 29. These are mainly employed in the Administrative and Research functions as illustrated in Table 4.1 below. Also, most of the participants have been in the present position for the last 4 months. The academic and administrative parts include a few employees who hold a supervisory or managerial position.

		Number of Cases
<b>Total Number of Cases:</b>	<b>35</b>	
<b>Gender:</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>18</b>
	<b>Female</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Age:</b>	<b>21 – 29</b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>30 – 39</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>40 +</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Employment Period:</b>	<b>1 month</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>2 months</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>3 months</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>4 months</b>	<b>11</b>
	<b>5 months</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>6 months</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>7 months</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>8 months</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Job Category:</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Administrative</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>Industrial</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Research</b>	<b>11</b>
	<b>Technical</b>	<b>2</b>

**Table 4.1 – Participants' Overall Details**

## **4.2 Further Analysis: Inductively Surfaced Categories Concerning Workplace Learning**

From the participant observations and semi-structured interviews, a total of four categories have been identified and created as Tree Nodes in N-Vivo accordingly: ‘Types of Workplace Learning’, ‘Most Important Part/s of the Participants’ Job’, ‘Feedback’, and ‘Ease of Learning’. Sub-categories for each category above were also created as nodes. The sub-categories are explained and illustrated as tables in the sections that follow. According to Silverman (2006), quantification can efficiently link with the common sense of qualitative research when, instead of carrying out surveys or experiments, a researcher counts the participants’ own categories as employed in ‘naturally occurring settings’ (2006: 300). In addition, straightforward counting methods that derive from theory and that are built on participants’ own categories, can present a way of surveying an entire body of data engrossed in rigorous, qualitative research (Silverman, 2006: 301).

### ***4.2.1 Types of Workplace Learning***

From the data gathered during the participant observations and the semi-structured interviews, it emerged that there was a heavy reliance on informal learning. This resonates with the research results of other studies, which suggest that something like 80% of the learning happens in an informal way (Yeo, 2008: 318).

Table 4.2 below illustrates the types of learning concerning the 35 participants of this study, wherein, based on the replies of the respondents during the semi-structured interviews, 2 participants have learned in a formal way only, 10 participants have done some type of formal learning and learned informally as well, whilst a total of 22 participants have learned in an informal way. One participant claimed that she is not learning anything new; neither formally nor informally.

Participant Code		Informal						No Learning
		Formal	Informal General	By experience	By observing	Help from colleagues	Unconsciously	
P1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
P2	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
P3	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
P4	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P5	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P6	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P7	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
P8	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P9	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P10	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
P11	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
P12	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P13	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
P14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
P15	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
P16	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
P17	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P18	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
P19	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P20	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P21	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P22	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P23	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P24	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P25	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P26	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0
P27	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
P28	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
P29	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
P30	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
P31	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P32	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
P33	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
P34	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
P35	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0
TOTAL	12	32	21	2	14	4	3	1

**Table 4.2 – Types of Workplace Learning**



With regards to the informal type of learning and from replies derived from the respondents during the semi-structured interviews and discussions during the participant observations, 21 participants learned through experience, 14 participants learned by receiving help from colleagues, 4 of them learned unconsciously, 3 learned by doing their own research, and 2 participants have learned mostly by observing. Vigoda-Gadot & Dryzin-Amit (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that new employees are inclined to learn rapidly by observing and imitating the traditional behaviours (2006: 8). Vigoda-Gadot & Dryzin-Amit add that these type of employees are usually aware of when to hold back any remarks or overlook those circumstances that may urge them to challenge their supervisor's decision or move away from the traditional political principles (2006: 8).

#### ***4.2.1.1 Prominent Issues Regarding the Type/s of Workplace Learning***

Participant P14 has been allocated to a different department after returning to work from her parental leave. During the participant observations and from her responses during the semi-structured interview, she claimed to not being actively engaged in any formal or informal learning; an issue which may have been connected to two of the political behaviours identified, namely Mintzberg's (1985) 'Insurgency Game' and 'Counterinsurgency Game'. In this case the employee claimed that she used to do more challenging work in her previous job, and said that she is now doing odd jobs. More specifically she indicated that she is given very basic tasks, such as sticking labels to cards, or checking numbers on a paper. The extracts below in this regard are taken from the field notes and semi-structured interview:

Extract from the participant observation:

P14 went near the Faculty Officer's desk and asked for more interesting work while telling the same Faculty Officer that she didn't want to do the 'donkey work' (*as she referred to it*). The Faculty Officer replied "...I decide what you do and don't do". P14 left the office and sat down at her desk and said to me that she does not find the present tasks stimulating and will refer the matter to the HR Director later on in the year if things don't improve.

Extract from the semi-structured interview:

"For certain things such as filing, I did short formal courses in the past. From faculty to faculty the content changes, but on the whole the procedures are approximately the same. Here I had no handover. I am told to do something and I do it... Before I came to this faculty I had asked the Director of HR whether I could be doing challenging work such as the one I used to do before. Unfortunately, I feel I'm doing work that is very "babyish" and I'm learning nothing. I will speak again to my superior about this but I don't want to sound like a trouble maker."

Undoubtedly employees do not need to be 'actively engaged in' learning in order for it to happen as it may also happen passively, unconsciously and therefore, essentially, invisibly. The issue regarding the connection of workplace learning to the political issues referred to above is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

#### ***4.2.2 Most Important Part of the Participants' Job & Ease of Learning the Relevant Task/s***

During the semi-structured interviews, participants confirmed what they saw as various important parts of their jobs. Some mentioned one part while other mentioned two or more. Table 4.3 below illustrates the most important items according to the participants' own words and the ease of learning these same tasks. The majority claimed that they found it easy to learn the relevant tasks, despite the political activity that was affecting their learning.

Most Important Part of My Job	Participant Code/s	Ease of Learning
Accuracy	P13	Easy
Being a good team player	P32	Easy
Being able to deliver what you want to teach	P21	Easy
Being responsible and knowing what you are doing	P16	Easy
Communication	P26	Easy
Co-ordinating	P20	Easy
Delegation, co-ordination and quality check	P29	Extremely difficult
Diplomacy	P27	Not easy
Double checking and attention to detail	P4	Not difficult
Etiquette	P18	Easy
Good organisational skills	P9	Easy
Having science and technology know how	P32	Easy
Keeping every move documented	P1	Easy
Keeping myself up-to-date	P9 & P11	Easy
Knowing what is going on <sup>1</sup>	P27	Not easy
Lab Development	P24	Very Difficult
Linguistic skills	P19	Easy
Patience	P9, P18 & P28	Easy
Planning	P18	Easy
Team building skills	P31	Entails a lot of hard work
Time management	P5 & P11	Easy & Not difficult
To be approachable and nice to people	P7	Easy
To be of full use and feel utilised to give a good service	P14	Can't say
Unit development	P25	Easy

**Table 4.3 – Most Important Tasks & Ease of Learning Them**

#### ***4.2.2.1 Prominent Issues Regarding the Most Important Part/s of the Job & Ease of Learning the Relevant Tasks***

Participant P14 could not say whether the learning is easy or otherwise since she claimed that no new learning<sup>2</sup> is taking place as per the semi-structured interview extract below:

“In general, I am a hard worker and I learn very quickly, but here I can't say because I am not given the opportunity to learn new things.”

<sup>1</sup> The participant is referring to the operations and the day-to-day activities that occur in the department.

<sup>2</sup> Although in all probability she is learning a few things, they are not the skills indicated in her job description.

On the other hand, participant P29 was encountering what he found to be a rather difficult situation with his workplace learning, as he was taking over a particular role from someone else and it seemed to him that no information was provided from top management as to whether the predecessor wanted to resign or whether the management had decided to send him away. P29 found the learning “...*extremely difficult and stressful*” due to what he saw as the political behaviour of his predecessor, which broadly represented the ‘Expertise Game’. His predecessor was regarded as an expert in his field and possessed expertise that apparently no others in the organisation, even managers, possessed. The situation seemed uneasy because the management was postponing the predecessor’s leaving time and therefore, there was no official leaving date. The following is an extract from the observation:

P29 approached the predecessor to ask him a few questions he had about the work. The predecessor replied “I don’t know.” P29 decided not to ask him anything else on that day and then asked for help from the other staff.

From the observations it seemed that P29 managed to get the information in ‘bits and pieces’ from various employees. P29 also confirmed this during the interview. In addition to this situation, new members of staff were being recruited in the department and P29 claimed that they were all expecting to receive help from him, while he was still undergoing training himself, which, as P29 claimed during the interview, resulted in higher levels of stress and tension on his part. This was also happening while a new IT system related to the department was being introduced.

Participant P31 believes that the most important part of his job is being able to create team building and he claimed that he has to undergo a lot of hard work and preparation in order for him to learn to do this. The following is an extract from the semi-structured interview:

"Well, it is not easy and it entails a lot of work. I have to prepare for the resistance and objections that I receive, so that when I am confronted, I will have a reply ready. I have to prepare myself a lot and do a lot of homework before a faculty board."

The above extract might indicate that some political tactics are themselves a driver of learning, which require managers to develop team-building and conflict resolutions skills. High levels of 'Insurgency' type tactics were observed at the department, especially with regards to decisions that have to be taken for the benefit of the faculty and the students. This is indicated by the observed protests and the prevention of the implementation of new procedures in the faculty by its academic staff members, as well as absence and delays of scheduled meetings, which are typical features of the 'Insurgency Game' (Samuel, 2005: 108). The extract below taken from field notes describes a situation of protest during a board meeting:

I entered the board room and there were already some heads and two student representatives. I was informed by the secretary that some members always come late or do not show up on purpose. In fact, the meeting had to start at 9.30am but it did not start until 10.15am. At this time, when almost everyone was there, the head, who is also the chairman of the meeting, informed everyone that the meeting is to start. The chairman started reading the list of items on the agenda. While going through the students' requests, the chairman was referring to a student requesting an extension by one year. A board member interrupted the chairman and asked "But students should write an official letter right? I don't really agree with the extension. Maybe this could be included in the minutes?" The chairman informed the board member that this is something that has always been done – he stated that when a student makes a request, he or she writes an official letter and a record is always kept in the minutes. So, apparently, there was no reason for this board member to ask that question. This same board member then asked the secretary, who was taking down the minutes, to change a few words in a sentence. At this point the chairman explained to him that the wordings are correct and should remain as they are. The chairman then informed everyone about the new course requirements that needed to be revised and offered his suggestions. The board member objected to this "I don't agree with this! We should keep the requirements as they are." The other board members were raising their hands to offer their feedback and the chairman seemed calm while listening to each and every one of them, whilst trying to give an explanation to the opponent.

The above may seem as just an indicative of specific disagreements over particular processes, however, key informants informed that the board meetings held at this faculty are always delayed and adjourned as nothing is concluded immediately due to the resistance and apparently the ‘Insurgency Game’ played by the subordinates on each and every issue put forward by participant P31. It seems that instead of using the ‘Counterinsurgency Game’ to fight them back, P31 prefers to engage in the political behaviour akin to ‘Developing a Base of Support’ (Allen *et al*, 1979), in order to obtain the approval of everyone. P31 claimed that when he has an idea, he tries to make his subordinates believe that it is their idea and makes them own it. He added that he would keep on working with this behaviour until the final decisions are made, which take some three board meetings for each issue. It is a lengthy process however, in his view, this would minimise the conflicts and helps to promote their dedication and support. P31 claimed that this had generally proven an effective tactic.

Participant P27 stated that learning in the workplace was inhibited by particular types of political behaviours which, during the observations, bore a close resemblance to the ‘Rival Camps Game’ (Mintzberg, 1985) and ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ (Allen *et al*, 1979).

The extract below taken from field notes describes a typical situation:

The participant went up to the office to ask for the whereabouts of the document. When she entered the office she turned to an employee and asked about the document. The employee told her that they are very busy and that she better check with someone else and guided her to another office. The participant went to the other office and asked the same information about the document to the person standing there. He told her that they were very busy and did not have any information as yet and sent her to another office.

There seems to be a lot of rivalry between them as, according to key informants, most of the employees employed on an indefinite basis possess the view that that their counterparts employed on contract are treated much better and have higher wages. As a consequence, it was felt that those employees that are employed on an indefinite basis do not take full responsibility for their job. Additionally, P27 claimed that she endured difficulties in learning due to the seemingly 'Episodic Power' shown by the academic staff involved in the work who, in the perception of the respondent, wanted to impose their own agenda on organisational processes and procedures.

Participant P24 stated that the most important part of her job is to be able to develop the laboratory she works in. P24 indicated that the workplace learning she is undergoing in this regard is very difficult; this seemed to be connected to political behaviours similar to 'Attacking and Blaming Others' that appeared prevalent in Department D4 of the central administration. The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

*Researcher: So, what is the most important part of your job?*

P24: "Well, the most important thing is my PhD and the research I am doing. Priority is the development of this lab and the research that is taking place. So mainly, the most important thing is developing this lab."

*Researcher: In general, how easy is it for you to learn your tasks with this behaviour?*

P24: "Very difficult. To be honest, when I need something I try to acquire it from other colleagues at other departments instead of having to go to the central administration. It is shocking for me to have to deal with the central administration because of people not taking full responsibility for a matter."

As indicated in the above extract, P24 claimed that she finds the centralised system excessively time-consuming to engage with and hence obstructive in terms of her learning

process and prefers to do the things herself or seek help from other departments instead of going directly to the central administration. This is a typical situation when political behaviour is a result of the organisational structure which, according to Kuh *et al* (1997), often results in inflexible patterns of behaviour that may hinder the overall performance of the organisation (1997: 257).

#### **4.2.3 Feedback**

The data collection included observations and discussions regarding the amount of feedback that respondents receive from the head, line manager or supervisor, regarding the new tasks or responsibilities. Table 4.4 below illustrates that, despite the political activities, 30 out of 35 participants claimed or seemed to be receiving feedback.



Participant Code	Department Code	Feedback		
		Yes	No	Sometimes Yes, Sometimes No
P1	D4	1	0	0
P2	D13	1	0	0
P3	D10	1	0	0
P4	D3	1	0	0
P5	D9	1	0	0
P6	D5	1	0	0
P7	D2	1	0	0
P8	D9	1	0	0
P9	D8	0	1	0
P10	D11	1	0	0
P11	D11	0	1	0
P12	D15	1	0	0
P13	D4	0	1	0
P14	D10	0	0	1
P15	D10	1	0	0
P16	D2	1	0	0
P17	D4	1	0	0
P18	D6	1	0	0
P19	D10	1	0	0
P20	D6	1	0	0
P21	D14	1	0	0
P22	D4	1	0	0
P23	D4	1	0	0
P24	D15	1	0	0
P25	D5	0	1	0
P26	D5	1	0	0
P27	D4	1	0	0
P28	D12	1	0	0
P29	D7	1	0	0
P30	D2	1	0	0
P31	D2	1	0	0
P32	D9	1	0	0
P33	D7	1	0	0
P34	D1	1	0	0
P35	D13	1	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>30</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>

**Table 4.4 - Feedback**

#### ***4.2.3.1 Prominent Issues Regarding Feedback***

Participants P9 and P25 claimed that they do not receive any feedback and this seemed at least in part to be connected to a political tactic identified in their respective department, namely the ‘Line vs. Staff’ (Mintzberg, 1985). Undoubtedly it is also possible that the act of giving feedback itself may be regarded as political behaviour where it is used as an

opportunity to exert control by giving negative feedback. The extracts below are taken from the field notes and transcription of interviews. It is to be noted that these extracts include the key informants' subjective interpretation brought by past experience and knowledge of the individuals:

Extract from the participant observation where P9 is situated:

During the board meeting the head seemed to be ignoring the feedback from his academic subordinates and told them "you are here just to say yes and that's it". From past experience and claims of key informants, he seemed to want to have power over everyone. One of his subordinates showed him a list she had done and he made it a point that it is done his way by making, according to her, insensitive amendments. From my observation and interpretation, as well as key informants' claims, there seem to be lack of communication between him and the subordinates, and he is rarely at the department. I was informed that on some occasions, the subordinates sent him a few emails about the work they are doing but he replied after a few weeks or did not reply at all. On another occasion the head was there but they did not talk about work. On other days, key informants informed me that he still did not give feedback on what needed to be done, even though the report has been sent to him months before.

On another occasion, he was spring cleaning his office... When he was ready, he asked the administrative staff to go and look at his office and show them what a good job he had done. According to his subordinates' view, he is all the time fishing for compliments. P9 then told me that at last, she had managed to set up a meeting regarding the work that needs to be done by their office and it will be held on the 6th of September. She informed me that she will keep me posted of the outcome.

Extract from the semi-structured interview with P9 which was held 3 weeks later:

P9: "No (laughs). The only feedback I got is for you to come here and interview me!"

*Probe: So what about the work? Are you still receiving no feedback?*

P9: "Yes, that's right, no feedback! I have everything ready and I am still waiting for him to give me the go ahead regarding the report I did on what we should order or discard, and how we should proceed."

Extract from the semi-structured interview with P25:

P25: "No feedback at all. For example, I prepared a document and after sending it to the director, I had to ask about what happened to it. I received no reply! It is incredible; to ask for the feedback or talk to my superior I have to make an appointment. This is ridiculous."

Participant P11 seems to be not receiving feedback as per extracts below from the interview. Participant P13 has been in department for a very short period and she claimed that she has not yet received any feedback regarding the tasks carried out, whilst Participant P14 seemed to ask for the feedback but does not always receive it, even though she says

that she is learning nothing new. Following are extracts from the semi-structured interviews:

P11: "No one gives me feedback."

*Probe: During the observations you had showed me a document that you received from your superiors regarding some spelling mistakes. Is that the only feedback you receive?*

P11: "Yes that's all! I totally agree with receiving feedback as I believe that feedback forms some 50% of the learning. I know what I do wrong and I don't know whether I am doing something else wrong because I receive no feedback."

P13: "At the moment I am asking a lot of questions about the work so I am instigating to get feedback. I am still in that phase of asking a lot. I try to come to a solution by myself but then I ask my seniors or colleagues. Until now I have not received feedback on something I did wrong or right."

P14: "I ask for the feedback, sometimes someone tells me "ok, this is good". Others do not give any feedback, even if I ask. I like to receive feedback and I like to ask the person whether I am doing things the right way."

As discussed in the above sections, the majority of the participants claimed that they are receiving feedback. In some cases it may be possible that the act of not giving feedback or giving negative feedback may be regarded as political behaviour. This might indicate an opportunity for the supervisor or manager to exert control over the subordinate.

## **Conclusion**

This Chapter presented some broad demographic analysis of the participants and focused on the inductively surfaced categories concerning workplace learning. It also presented a taste of the political behaviour associated with these categories. Most of the participants' functions are administrative and research. The prominent issues were discussed regarding the most important part/s of the participants' job, the feedback that the learner receives, and the ease of learning the tasks.

There seems to be a heavy reliance on informal learning and participants claimed that they have learnt mainly by experience and by help from their colleagues. One participant seemed to be learning nothing new, which appeared largely due to the learning-inhibitive effects of the political games resembling 'Insurgency' and 'Counterinsurgency'. The most important parts of the participants' job vary from one person to another and almost all of the entire participants claimed that they found it easy to learn the relevant tasks, except for a few.

Two participants highlighted some of the ways in which their learning appeared to be inhibited by political behaviours: one was replacing someone else who was considered an expert in his field whilst the other encounters a lot of resistance from his subordinates who engage in the 'Insurgency Game' of which the participant responds by employing the 'Developing a Base of Support' political tactic. Similarly, two other respondents claimed that they found their learning opportunities obstructed due to the rivalry that is present between different groups of employees and their organisational structure, especially those working in central administration. The political behaviours in this case are similar to 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Rival Camps Game' and 'Episodic Power'.

The next Chapter will now discuss in brief the political behaviour in terms of Mintzberg's (1985) games and, Allen *et al*'s (1979) and Lawrence *et al*'s (2005) political behaviour. The next Chapter will also delve into the general affect/s and the emotional responses of the participants towards the political behaviour.

## **CHAPTER 5 - ANALYSING & DISCUSSING THE POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR IDENTIFIED**

### **Introduction**

The previous Chapter specified how the data was organised and described the process of the analysis for the inductively surfaced categories concerning workplace learning. More specifically analysis and discussions on prominent issues ensued relating to the types of workplace learning, the most important part/s of the participants' job, the feedback that the individuals receive, and the ease of learning the tasks. In general it was seen that the majority of workplace learning occurs informally, mostly through experience and by getting help from other employees. Almost all of the participants received feedback from their supervisor or line manager and claimed that they found it easy to learn their tasks irrespective of the political behaviour that goes on in their department.

However, as a consequence of the perceived political activity, a few of the participants seemed to encounter obstacles to learning and did not receive feedback. In this Chapter, a total of four categories have been identified from the participant observations and semi-structured interviews, namely 'Political Behaviour Identified' and 'Political Tactics Exhibited by the Participants', wherein the title of each political tactic is taken from Mintzberg (1985), Allen *et al* (1979) and Lawrence *et al* (2005), 'Reasons for the Political Behaviour', and the 'Effect of the Politics on Learning'. Here as well these were created

as Tree Nodes in N-Vivo accordingly. Sub-categories for each category above were also created as nodes. This Chapter will now analyse and discuss these categories, and will also illustrate that political activity may not always have an effect on learning. The actual effects of politics on workplace learning are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

## **5.1 Political Behaviour Identified**

The general political activities identified through interpretation of interview and observation data are listed in Table 5.1 below. The table presents the title of each political tactic and its definition, as well as the number of sources that represent the departments in which the political behaviour was identified. As can be seen, the categories used are based on those used by Allen *et al* (1979) and Mintzberg (1985). These are the categories highlighted previously in the literature review, and subsequently used as the basis for the analytical framework of this aspect of the study – though it should not be inferred that all conceivable political behaviours would fit neatly into one of these categories.

Any typology describing complex social behaviours should be viewed as a blunt tool, but here it is argued that the composite typology presented below broadly encompasses and represents the political behaviours observed and described in the research, and serves as a useful illustration of how some common themes emerged with regard to such behaviours. From the participant observations and semi-structured interviews; (i) no significant political activity could be identified where 12 participants are situated (some staff working for the

same department are situated in different offices/workshops/areas); (ii) 4 participants claimed that they are not affected by any of the political activity/ies identified in their department; and (iii) 19 participants claimed that they are affected in some way or another by the political activity/ies identified in their department.

Table 5.1 is sorted according to the total number of departments in which the political behaviour was identified. The Table illustrates that, using the defined system of categorisation, the most prevalent political tactics appear to be the ‘Rival Camps Game’ (Mintzberg, 1985), ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ (Allen *et al*, 1979) and ‘Insurgency Game’ (Mintzberg, 1985). These seem to be apparent in seven departments. The third most frequent behaviour is the ‘Counterinsurgency Game’ (Mintzberg, 1985) with a count of four. More than one political activity has been identified in some departments as illustrated in Tables 5.2 and 5.3 below, which also show that department D2 seems to have five types of political tactics present at the workplace. Departments D3, D5, D6 and D11 each seem to have four types of political tactics present in their workplace. No significant political behaviour has been identified in department D15, however the employees of this department seem to be affected by the political behaviour of department D4, as will be analysed and discussed in Chapter 6.

Title of Political Behaviour <sup>3</sup>	Definition	Number of Departments where behaviour was identified
Rival Camps Game	Conflicts between departments or two opposing goals of employees or differing personalities, and occurs when the alliance or empire building games result in two main power troops.	7
Attacking or Blaming Others	Employees who are avoiding their involvement with a failing situation at the place of work, presence of rivalry among individuals that is making a rival employee look bad in the eye of a significant person.	7
Insurgency Game	Employees who resist the authority of their superiors.	7
Counterinsurgency Game	Managers who are attempting to increase their control over the subordinates by reacting with political or legitimate means.	4
Episodic Power	Self-interested employees who are engaging in more responsibility in decision making, in order to increase their power over a new employee.	3
Line vs. Staff	Occurs when employees ignore the expertise of another employee in order to make him or her less powerful.	2
Reciprocity	Employees who are performing services of favours to create obligations.	2
Alliance Game	Managers who are bargaining hidden deals of support for each other in order to move further up in the organisation.	2
Impression Management	Employees whose behaviour shows over enthusiasm or charm in order to enhance their self-image by developing a reputation of being liked.	2
Ingratiation	Employees who are praising another employee in order to create a good rapport.	1
Developing a Base of Support	Managers who are trying to make their subordinates feel as if an idea is theirs to guarantee their dedication.	1
Expertise Game	The use of expertise to build power base. Experts in a field flaunt it or try to keep the information to themselves and non-experts attempt to have their work seem as expert to be viewed as a professional so as to be able to have control over it.	1

**Table 5.1 – Political Behaviour Identified**

<sup>3</sup> Source: Mintzberg (1985), Allen *et al* (1979) and Lawrence *et al* (2005)



Department	Political Tactic 1	Political Tactic 2	Political Tactic 3	Political Tactic 4	Political Tactic 5	No. of Political Tactics
D1	Attacking or Blaming Others	Alliance Game	Episodic Power			3
D2	Attacking or Blaming Others	Developing a Base of Support	Insurgency Game	Reciprocity	Rival Camps Game	5
D3	Attacking or Blaming Others	Insurgency Game	Episodic Power	Rival Camps Game		4
D4	Attacking or Blaming Others	Episodic Power	Rival Camps Game			3
D5	Attacking or Blaming Others	Alliance Game	Reciprocity	Line vs. Staff		4
D6	Attacking or Blaming Others	Counterinsurgency Game	Insurgency Game	Rival Camps Game		4
D7	Attacking or Blaming Others	Expertise Game				2
D8	Line vs. Staff					1
D9	Counterinsurgency Game	Insurgency Game	Rival Camps Game			3
D10	Counterinsurgency Game	Ingratiation	Insurgency			3
D11	Counterinsurgency Game	Impression Management	Insurgency Game	Rival Camps Game		4
D12	Impression Management					1
D13	Insurgency Game					1
D14	Rival Camps Game					1
D15						0

**Table 5.2 – The Departments & Their Political Tactics**

	Department														
Political Tactic	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	D8	D9	D10	D11	D12	D13	D14	D15
Rival Camps Game	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
Line vs. Staff	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Attacking or Blaming Others	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Insurgency Game	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
Counterinsurgency Game	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Episodic Power	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reciprocity*	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Alliance Game	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Impression Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Ingratiation*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Developing a Base of Support*	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Expertise Game	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

**Table 5.3 – Total Political Tactics Identified in Each Department**

\*These are political tactics that are exhibited by the participants themselves, which have not been noticed anywhere else during the fieldwork.

## 5.2 Political Tactics Exhibited by the Participants

A few of the participants seemed to be engaging in seemingly political behaviour themselves (though they may have not been aware that such behaviour is political), in order to get things done at their place of work. These behaviours are similar to the political tactics of 'Reciprocity', 'Ingratiation' and 'Developing a Base of Support' (Allen *et al*, 1979).

To begin with an example of 'Reciprocity', during an informal conversation P31 stated that he has a very good relationship with a particular manager within the central administration as per the extract below taken from the field notes:

P31 was talking on the phone with the manager and when he finished the call, he turned to me and told me that he finds the manager of department D11 very efficient and helps him immediately when he requires something. From reports by key informants, this efficiency is present in view that a relative of the manager works with P31 and would like to keep his appointment there.

This informal arrangement, whereby P31 and the manager would help each other in various ways not afforded to others, was corroborated by other respondents, who observed that this manager would often take too long to take action when approached for assistance or to reply to a query or request. This suggests that, with the case of P31 there is a degree of informal 'Reciprocity' occurring between him and the manager, based at least in part on the fact that the manager's relative works within the department of which P31 is the head.

Another case where a degree of ‘Reciprocity’ seemed in evidence is that of P26 wherein during an informal discussion she stated that favours take place all the time between her and the head of department. The following is an extract from the field notes:

P26 told me that she gets paid "in kind" when the head of department gives her the opportunity to do lectures and said that she is hoping that she would be employed full-time as an academic in the near future. In this respect she informed me that she has enrolled in a post-graduate degree course to be able to apply for an academic post.

P26 added that she loves working with this head of department and does not mind working beyond her contracted hours.

‘Ingratiation’ (Allen *et al*, 1979) is another political activity that was exemplified by one participant. P15 appeared eager to have a good relationship with everyone, especially with people within the central administration as she would require their help on a lot of occasions. The following is an extract from the field notes:

P15 told me that she finds co-operation from everyone and she approaches people in a nice and diplomatic way as she believes that she could gain more help by that approach. P15 added that she even tries to remember small personal things about the staff she is involved with so as to keep a good rapport.

Even though ‘Ingratiation’ may serve to form a productive working relationship with colleagues, in the case of P15 this political tactic seemed to be used as an influence technique (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 197; Poon, 2003: 138; Sussman *et al*, 2002: 315) in which the ingratiation is emphasising her own attributes in order to be seen positively in the eyes of the employees within the central administration.

Finally, P31 is also engaging in ‘Developing a Base of Support’ (Allen *et al*, 1979) in order to get things done within the department. He is new to the role and therefore requires the support of the subordinates. The following is an extract from the semi-structured interview about the problems that he encounters:

“I prefer to have the support of everyone even though they (the subordinates) are more interested in themselves and not in the well-being of the department. Unfortunately this creates a lot of friction and frustration and it takes too long for things to be actuated.”

It is interesting to note that the above brief discussions illustrate that although these three participants are new to their job, they have already adopted the view that they have to engage in political behaviour (though they may not explicitly recognize it as such), in order to acquire their goals and objectives, be it personal or job related.

### **5.3 Reasons for the Political Behaviour**

Several reasons have been revealed by the participants during the semi-structured interviews, as to why employees engaged in the various types of behaviour that affected their workplace learning. Table 5.4 illustrates the reasons given by participants, the amount of participants who provided the reason/s, as well as the corresponding perceived political tactic/s. The table detects political behaviour to their sources and shows that there is the possibility that many political tactics have a variety of combined causes that are multifaceted and varied, stretching back over a period of time.

Reason	Participants	Political Tactic
Age gap	1	Rival Camps Game, Counterinsurgency
Bureaucracy	3	Attacking or Blaming Others, Rival Camps Game, Insurgency Game
Demotivation	3	Insurgency Game, Rival Camps Game
Differing personalities	1	Rival Camps Game
Fear of change	1	Insurgency Game
Influenced by someone else	1	Episodic power
It's in his character	1	Attacking or Blaming Others
Lack of career opportunities	1	Rival Camps Game
Inefficiency & lack of co-ordination between departments	2	Attacking or Blaming Others, Rival Camps Game
Lack of resources	1	Attacking or Blaming Others, Rival Camps Game
Less pay	1	Attacking or Blaming Others, Rival Camps Game
Likes to feel in control	1	Counterinsurgency Game
Narcissism	4	Rivalry Game, Line vs. Staff, Insurgency Game, Impression Management
Need for approval from others	1	Impression Management, Rival Camps Game
New employee considered as a threat	4	Counterinsurgency Game, Rivalry Game, Line vs. Staff, Attacking or Blaming Others
Rigidity in job duties	1	Counterinsurgency Game
Stress	2	Rival Camps Game, Expertise Game
Too much centralization	1	Attacking or Blaming Others
Women are more problematic	2	Counterinsurgency Game, Rival Camps Game

**Table 5.4 – Reasons Behind the Political Behaviour as Provided by the Participants**

### ***5.3.1 Prominent Issues Regarding the Reasons for Political Behaviour***

The contents suggest that any one type of political tactic can be exhibited for more than one reason, as per Table 5.4 above, meaning that political behaviour can be multi-causal. The results demonstrate that according to the participants' view, narcissism and the new employee considered as a threat, followed by bureaucracy seem to be the main reasons for some types of political games namely, 'Attacking or Blaming Others' and 'Impression management' (Allen *et al*, 1979), and 'Rival Camps Game' and 'Insurgency Game'(Mintzberg, 1985). For example, apart from the above mentioned reasons, the 'Attacking or Blaming Others' tactic seems to be the result of lack of co-ordination between departments, lack of resources and too much centralisation. Some of the additional causes of the 'Rival Camps Game' perceived by the participants include the age gap, lack of career opportunities and lack of resources.

Some of the participants mentioned the concept of narcissism and they claimed that some individuals act in a similar behaviour to the games of rivalry, insurgency and impression management because of their narcissistic nature. The extracts from the semi-structured interviews below show how employees, subjectively in their own words, see and feel about the individuals that, according to them, are narcissistic:

Extract from the semi-structured interview with P9:

"You know that meeting we had to do? He wanted to postpone it because he had a reception at that time. I mean, why couldn't he cancel the reception or go a bit late? Anyway, at least, the meeting was done. Even for someone to come and visit our department, the secretary tried to contact him and when she couldn't get through to him she contacted me. The head was furious when I related the request for the commissioner to come and visit our place because he said "she has to ask through the proper channels!" I think that he acts like that because of his narcissistic character but there is also a lot of competition for power here."

Extract from the semi-structured interview with P31:

"There are two factors here, one is personal power politics and the second is the resistance to change, it is more a fear of change. I am more concerned about the personal power politics. There are people here who have no intention to give up the study units they teach (which are not relevant to their department), even if it makes more sense for the units to be lectured by the appropriate department. Some people here are really concerned with building their empire. They are self-interested and act like children. There is one who is very touchy and he has conflicts with all the staff of his department - he has never been in an authoritative position before and once he got the headship, it went up to his head!"

Extract from the semi-structured interview with P21:

"I think that he is also very self-centred and he has a lot of bullshit. He thinks that he is perfect and according to him he is always right. He's an only child and probably that affects the way he acts at work."

The concept of narcissism is often doubted for its validity, reliability, robustness and coherence. The term has sometimes been criticized for being a "*catch-all*" expression and, according to Gendlin (1987) 'narcissism' is an intransigent poor term. Gendlin adds that in the present day and age individuals are usually referred to as "*narcissistic*" for the reason that they are anxious about their "*inner*" ego development. This means that when an adult fails to identify fully with his or her ego, the individual falls into the regression of immature experience and is egocentric.

Some of the participants felt that some employees at the University view new recruits as a threat, either to them as a person or to their job or career. This resonates with the work of Curtis (2003) and Latif *et al* (2011) who argued that individuals engaging in politics, such as withholding information, is often the effect of seeing their counterparts as a nuisance or a threat (2003: 294; 2011: 206). The extracts below from the semi-structured interviews discuss this issue:

P7: "I think she was afraid that I was going to take over her job. She used to see me as a threat. She is also very slow and she sees me working very efficiently and fast and used to think that I act fast to look good with the others and make her look bad."



P20: "Well, I am her assistant. Sometimes her superiors ignore her and give me instructions without first referring the matter to her. Then I wouldn't know to whom do I give priority: to her or to the Director? And that brings rivalry. I also like to help others, I mean, it is good to be in the same office and help each other, but my superior always tells me not to waste time with other people, but I don't agree with that. I think she engages in this behaviour because she doesn't like disturbances, she likes to feel in control and there is the age gap too. I think she sees initiative as a threat."

P21: "I'm going to be extremely open. Could it be that he sees me as a threat? I am now prepared for his tactics. Yesterday we had a meeting and after I said something he tried to go against it but I knew how to handle him very well."

Reaction to what is perceived excessive bureaucracy seems to be another reason for employees to engage in political behaviour. Bureaucracy is often defined as the intricate administrative centre, with responsibilities and systems wherein employees have specific tasks and work within a hierarchy of authority (Kuh *et al*, 1997: 262; Macfarlane, 2005: 174). It values procedures and the founding of a pattern and the regulation to control the utilisation of power (Zaleznik, 1971: 67). According to Zaleznik (1971) bureaucracy is unable to detach the fundamental from the insignificant and it demands energy over extraneous matters, since the covert role of the bureaucratic method is to circumvent disagreements (1971: 67). Zaleznik (1971) adds that organisations may turn out to be dormant because the bureaucratic methods rarely assemble power and the significant matters which make organisations vibrant (1971: 67). Discussions with respondents revealed views that corresponded with such an outlook. The following are extracts from discussions that took place during some of the participant observations, which illustrate how some employees feel in the organisation:

P32 entered the lab and before he started the stock take exercise he turned to me and said "I feel that the central administration has a lot of power and to go there to ask for information I would feel intimidated. I sort of lack confidence and feel like a mouse begging for cheese."

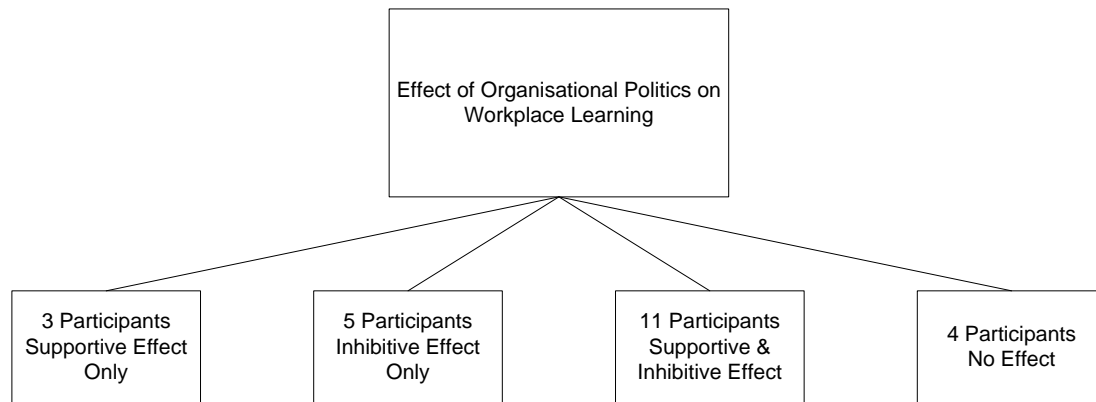
P25 added "There is high bureaucracy and some people dampen the process due to the backstabbing that take place and other reasons of which I don't know about. The structure does not help and central administration has a name of being very incompetent and inefficient, especially when you send an email and you don't receive a reply!"

P31 complained that "...there is a lot of bureaucracy at this University and things take too long to be processed. Even to make minor amendments, for example in a title of a study unit, you have to fill up a 5-page form, present to Faculty Board, then to APQRU, and then to Senate. It is a very long process."

This antipathy towards what was seen as the bureaucratic culture has its own motives and it seems that the above participants see bureaucracy as a threat to functionality. According to Connor & Douglas (2005), individuals who have a need for dominance, achievement and autonomy show antipathy towards rules, regulations and orders from others, and therefore abhor bureaucracy (2005: 216). The issues that transpired from this study seem to concern mostly financial matters. Undoubtedly, from an administrative viewpoint, it is rather intricate to approve something which is difficult to explain or control, especially when the approval involves financial sustainability.

#### **5.4 Effect of Politics on Workplace Learning**

As the following Chapter further explains, the study shows that perceptions of political behaviours may have a supportive effect, an inhibitive effect or no effect at all upon workplace learning. Figure 4.1 below illustrates the number of participants who confirmed the type of effect they felt that political behaviour has on their workplace learning.



**Figure 5.1 – Effects of Politics on Workplace Learning**

The above diagram shows that the single largest category of respondents was those who felt that political behaviours had both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on their learning. Moreover, from the study it transpired that one political behaviour may affect employees disparately. These are further discussed in detail in the next Chapter. The difference in effect is confirmed by Meriac & Villanova (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) who state that the political climate in an organisation affects employees in dissimilar ways (2006: 19). Moreover, according to Curtis (2003) people who are not capable of using political behaviour themselves are affected negatively from the political tactics of their counterparts (2003: 296).

In addition to this, participants divulged a variety of emotional responses to the perceived political behaviour that affected their workplace learning. Table 5.5 below illustrates a list of statements in the participants' own words in this regard. The Table shows that six participants stated that they "*feel a lot of frustration*" whilst two feel no effect at all.

Description of the Emotional Response to Political Behaviour	Number of Participants	Political Tactic
I feel a sense of adaptation	1	Rival Camps Game
I feel challenged to be more assertive	1	Rival Camps Game
I feel a lot of confidence	1	Attacking or Blaming Others
I feel a lot of frustration	6	Attacking or Blaming Others, Insurgency Game, Rival Camps Game, Line vs. Staff
I feel frustrated and shocked!	1	Attacking or Blaming Others
I feel I am going backwards instead of improving	1	Counterinsurgency Game
I feel that I learned a lot	1	Counterinsurgency Game
I feel I increased caution and attentiveness	1	Attacking or Blaming Others
I feel a sense of irritation, frustration and anger	1	Insurgency Game, Rival Camps Game
No effect really, I've been through much worse things	1	Rival Camps Game
I feel misunderstood and obliged	1	Counterinsurgency Game
I feel no effect really	2	Rival Camps Game
I feel that the situation is pathetic	1	Attacking or Blaming Others, Line vs. Staff
I feel pity	1	Attacking or Blaming Others, Rival Camps Game
I feel successful	1	Episodic Power
It felt turbulent	1	Expertise Game

**Table 5.5 – Emotional Responses to Perceived Political Behaviour**

According to Rosen *et al* (2009), the every day disturbances linked to organisational politics are related to the augmented intensities of frustration (2009: 37). More specifically, actions that are thought to obstruct the accomplishment of an employee's objective and effective performance lead to negative feelings such as frustration (Rosen *et al*, 2009: 30, 33). Rosen *et al* (2009) add that the strength of frustration depends on the interferences that occur in order for an employee to hinder the achievement of his or her goal, as well as the

degree of importance of that goal (2009: 33). The following interview extracts indicate that such feelings of frustration, and of being thwarted in performing in one's job due to different types of political behaviour, were apparently widespread among the respondents:

P4: "On the whole I am very happy working here. I mean, every two days I require the help of this person, sometimes he helps immediately but most of the time he resists and takes ages. It frustrates me at times, but what can you do!"

P5: "Though this behaviour is frustrating, it does not hinder me from learning and it does not really make it difficult."

P9: "Sometimes I lose it, but you know, this is my first job and I love it. I also made a lot of friends with other colleagues. I am a person that if I can do something in a week rather than 2 weeks, I do it in 1 week. I am bugged at times, even frustrated. I think that the person who was employed before me left without notice and probably my boss is afraid that the same happens."

P19: "It was really exhausting and frustrating. However, I am still very thrilled with the job!"

P26: "Well, it is frustrating, as I said, and a complete waste of time, and the project suffers."

P31: "I feel frustrated, but what can you do? You have to be patient and persistent at the same time."

## **Conclusion**

The political behaviours reported by respondents and in some cases observed were categorised into 12 broad types, drawing on models provided by Allen *et al* (1979), Mintzberg (1985) and Lawrence *et al* (2005). Three of these are often displayed unknowingly by the participants themselves, namely Allen *et al*'s (1979) 'Reciprocity', 'Ingratiation', and 'Developing a Base of Support'. In general, the most prevalent political tactics impacting on the perceptions of respondents seem to be the following: Mintzberg's (1985) 'Rival Camps Game' and 'Insurgency Game', and Allen *et al*'s (1979) 'Attacking or Blaming Others'. In some departments their experiences of multiple political tactics reported and no new political behaviour other than those of Mintzberg (1985), Allen *et al*

(1979) and Lawrence *et al* (2005) have been identified (though this is not to preclude the possibility of political behaviours that fall outside of these typologies).

A variety of possible reasons have been put forward by the participants as to why certain individuals are considered to engage in political behaviour. It transpired that the perceived causes are combined, multifaceted and varied. The results demonstrated that narcissism, the new employee considered as a threat, and bureaucracy seem to be seen as the top reasons for some types of political behaviour such as 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Impression Management', 'Rival Camps Game', and 'Insurgency Game'. There seems to be a certain amount of antipathy towards bureaucracy and some of the participants view it as a threat to functionality. Some participants also view individuals in their department as narcissistic individuals since they view their behaviour as childish and perceive them as very self-centred. Other participants feel that they are seen as a threat and a nuisance either for personal or career reasons.

This Chapter identified that political behaviour may have a supportive and/or an inhibitive effect on learning, or no effect at all. In this regard participants divulged a number of emotional responses to the political tactics that affected their learning, especially the issue of frustration. This discussion now continues in Chapter 6, which draws out in detail the key findings on the effects of perceived political behaviour on workplace learning.

## **CHAPTER 6 - ANALYSING & DISCUSSING THE EFFECTS OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS ON WORKPLACE LEARNING**

### **Introduction**

The main purpose of this chapter is to address the core question of this study by exploring the ways in which political behaviours and respondents' perceptions of and reactions to them impacted on workplace learning. In doing so, it brings together the themes identified in the previous two chapters. Chapter 4 described how the data was identified and organised according to inductively surfaced categories concerning workplace learning and Chapter 5 discussed the identified political behaviour in terms derived from existing research on the topic, namely Mintzberg's (1985) collection of games, Allen *et al*'s (1979) political tactics and Lawrence *et al*'s (2005) 'Episodic Power'. The most prevalent types of political behaviour identified are the 'Rival Camps Game', the 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Insurgency Game' and the 'Counterinsurgency Game'.

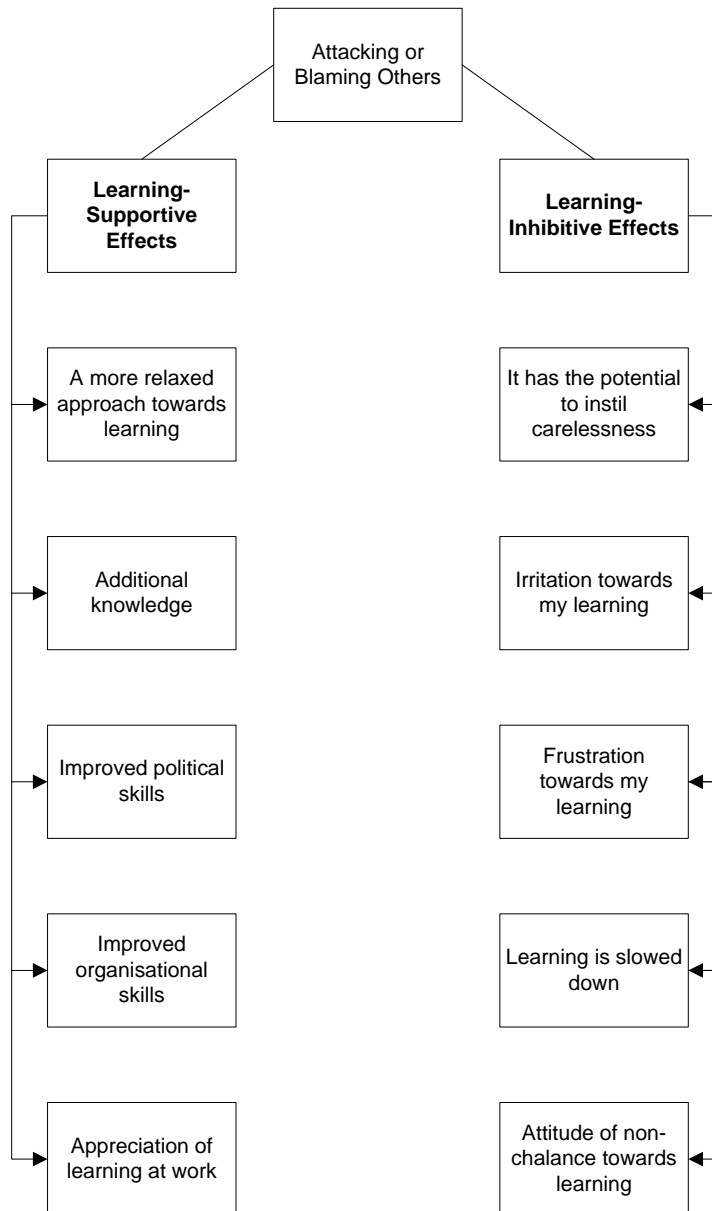
When participants were asked about the reason or reasons behind the political behaviour, it most often emerged that narcissism and the new employee considered as a threat, followed by bureaucracy were the primary causes of some common types of political tactics, namely 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Rival Camps Game', 'Line vs. Staff', 'Insurgency Game' and 'Impression management'. It was also found that participants may not be affected uniformly by such political behaviour. For example, some participants claimed that they were not affected at all while others seemed to be more deeply affected. The majority of

those affected indicated that they ended up frustrated. This chapter now continues the discussion of the analysis and presents the data concerned with how each political tactic is perceived by respondents and how in turn it affects workplace learning. Interview extracts and field notes are used and presented selectively to illustrate the nature of these relationships.

## **6.1     Attacking or Blaming Others**

According to Allen *et al* (1979) ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ is a political tactic employed by individuals who avoid their involvement with a detrimental or a failing situation at the workplace. This behaviour is said to concern the presence of rivalry between employees that may make a rival look bad in the eyes of a significant member of the department (Allen *et al*, 1979: 78). As will be seen, the causes the respondents saw as giving rise to such behaviour can be broadly categorised as excessive bureaucracy, too much centralisation, the character of the individual, inefficiency and lack of co-ordination between departments, lack of resources, less pay, and a new employee considered as a threat. Furthermore, the data suggest that this political tactic and the way in which it is perceived can inhibit as well as support the workplace learning of the participants. Figure 6.1 below illustrates the effects in the form of statements as indicated by the participants themselves:





**Figure 6.1 – Effects of Attacking or Blaming Others**

A few of the participants namely P19, P24, P25, P26 and P27 who seemed to be affected by this political behaviour did not necessarily experience this from within the department within which they are situated but rather from certain parts of the central administration with which they have some sort of liaison. All of these participants were affected

significantly by encounters with bureaucracy, and – as explained below – this was seen in many cases to lead to the political tactic resembling ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’.

### ***6.1.1 Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect***

During an informal conversation at the participant observation, P19 had expressed the view that the organisation is highly bureaucratic, and it is also very inefficient. He further commented that, according to him, the positive thing about the inefficiency of the organisation is that it allows for a less rigid attitude towards his learning and work. He said that it is as if "... *nothing matters too much* ..." and has a more relaxed approach towards his formal learning which is concerned with linguistics. The account given by this respondent indicated an established bureaucratic structure (conventionally associated with universities) combined with inefficiencies within key parts of the bureaucracy. This lack of efficiency appeared to promote a more relaxed approach to work and learning, even perhaps promoting certain carelessness. The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"In the beginning it was very stressful and it was a shock to me. I remember my contract took a lot of time, some 2 months to be signed by all. And it is signed by 4 people, which I think is too much. It was all very frustrating which affected a bit my initial learning. Nowadays with the administration, which part of the job is concerned with it, I expect that when I fill out papers and submit them, I receive something back from someone telling me that "something is missing."

*Probe: So, in what way did this negatively and positively affect your learning?*

"Yes, at the beginning and during my initial learning phase, I was really worried about deadlines, and the administration made it impossible for me to reach these due to the bureaucracy. However, due to the inefficiencies of certain offices, you are given the impression not to worry too much and one may become careless. However, I take pride in what I do and, unlike the administrative part, I enjoy the technical side of the work, i.e. the project. Now I am more relaxed."

Similar to P19 above, P25 claimed that he encountered a lot of bureaucracy. Throughout an informal discussion during the participant observation, P25 said that he came to work at the University with a lot of enthusiasm, but now he has changed his attitude completely and lacks concern towards his informal learning and working towards developing the unit where he is situated. He added that:

"You burn out yourself here with the high complexity, internal politics and bitchiness that take place. These affect me in a negative way and my attitude towards learning has changed to nonchalance. Here there are no bearings, you are thrown in a department and that's it."

Additionally, P25 mentioned the issue of lack of resources, especially the lack of space. P25 claimed that he is supposed to be situated in an office alone; however he has to share with others, which he said that he finds very disrupting. He took the matter to top management, but nothing happened and he gave up. Interestingly enough, in this case the root of the political behaviour seems to be an institutional or departmental underinvestment in appropriate office space and other resources, which is one of the causes of political behaviour illustrated by Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen (2010). Furthermore, P25 reported that, when he had asked for feedback about a pending situation he had been deflected several times by those he had asked and his query directed elsewhere. However, now, when he approaches someone and is referred to someone else, P25 said that he persists with the original enquiry until he has obtained a response that satisfies him. Despite the ostensibly negative nature of the bureaucratic culture behind such behaviour, these issues did have the effect of enabling the respondent to gain an understanding of the systems and bureaucracy of higher education as he claimed:

"Positively I learned about the academic arena and what it really entails, which is interesting."

P26 believes that the reason behind this political behaviour is the lack of co-ordination between departments. During an informal discussion at a participant observation she had mentioned that she found circumstances in Department D4 extremely frustrating. I asked her to explain further. Echoing the experience related by P25, she said that some matters take months to be processed and when she phones the persons concerned to check the position of an issue, or the position of a document, they refer her from one person to another. She felt as if no one wants to take responsibility when the position of an issue is unclear and one person blames the other. Reflecting on this, she felt that this was a political tactic, reflecting the bureaucratic culture and structure, which needed to be learned if it was to be engaged with. And so, as with the previous respondent, P26 seems to be affected in both a supportive and an inhibitive way by these behaviours as per the extract below from the semi-structured interview:

"The positive thing is that you learn about the processes and the people of the organisation. But with all this bureaucracy, all the learning and work slows down. This affects me psychologically and I don't have peace of mind until a matter is settled. It frustrates me because to finalise something I have to go through many processes. Actually I have to check myself with individual people and not having one person taking the responsibility for the whole thing. If I had to do all the things myself to get them done, I would do that."

The picture that starts to emerge from such findings is that the perceived political behaviours arising out of bureaucratic issues faced by respondents had divergent effects ranging from demotivation and frustration to opportunities to learn about the inner workings of the higher education institution. Re-affirming the more negative effects, P27 affirmed that she encounters a lot of frustration and irritation when having to liaise with people who she believes are engaging in this political behaviour. She believes that there needs to be an improvement in communication to eliminate misconceptions between all

staff of the University, who seem to be engaging in the game of ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ which she believes often occurs between staff where there are perceptions of significant differences in pay. The following is an extract from the semi-structured interview:

“I waste my time by phoning some 12 different people to issue a document. This had to be issued some 3 weeks ago. I literally have to beg and am forced to be too nice to ask for this document and give reasons why it is urgent. Actually there are 12 important documents that need to be issued and this problem has been going on for just 1 document. Meanwhile, I do not know the proper procedure of how documents are issued and I do not know who the person responsible for issuing of these documents is. When I phone, people blame others in different sections and so on. Then I give up. We have documents pending since May, and these still have not been issued! This is a big problem and this shows great inefficiency. I have worked with them for 2 weeks when I started this job and I noticed the large amount of time that is wasted in chatting and gossiping, making coffees, and visiting colleagues. This really irritates me because I take responsibility for my job and these do not take their job seriously. They do this because they have less salary than us so they do not take responsibility.”

This situation appears potentially to support and at the same time inhibit the informal learning of P27 as per the following extract from the semi-structured interview:

“Positively it makes me appreciate more my learning at work and the team I work with at my office. I can be an example to others (the ‘rivals’) and maybe motivate them to change their attitude towards work. Negatively, there is the fear that I will not succeed to do this and I sometimes tend to become irritated to learn something new on the job when I encounter people who blame each other and do not take responsibility!”

The experiences of the three respondents discussed in this section indicate that political behaviours such as those stemming from bureaucratic issues can have both inhibitive effects in terms of causing irritation, frustration, conflict and demotivation and more supportive effects in terms of developing a better understanding of organisational practices, systems and cultures, and how to manage or work around them. However, for other respondents, the effects were more one-sided.

### 6.1.2 *Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only*

P24 claimed to have been shocked during the first few weeks of working at the University due to the system and the way that she thought people sought to avoid responsibility. She indicated that at the company where she had previously been employed, when there was a problem, it was tackled immediately. P24 added that at the University of Malta no one takes responsibility and it is a very frustrating situation. She described currently feeling anxiety due to the fact that a document had recently gone missing, and she was concerned that she would – in her view unfairly – receive the blame. The following are extracts from the participant observations:

The secretary was complaining about the materials that P24 required way back in May and have not yet arrived. The secretary was saying that everyone at department D4 try to blame someone else for a fault they make, such as losing track of a document, inputting incorrect data, not knowing the position of an issue.

A few days later:

The missing document was sent directly to her and was copied to department D4. P24 said that she had no idea what she had to do and that the people of department D4 did not help her or guide her on it. Her tutor looked very angry and he said that he was going to his office to write an email to the Rector regarding the issue. They informed me that the materials are required immediately as results following some experiments have to be presented abroad in a month's time. P24 was saying that she expects the people to take responsibility for their job and not having to chase them in order to check the position of a document.

P24 saw such behaviour as politically motivated as, in her view, it involved not only withholding information but also attempting to shift responsibility on to others in an attempt to preserve one's own position, a behaviour that accords with Allen *et al*'s category of 'Attacking or Blaming Others'). Furthermore, she felt that this has no supportive effect on her informal learning and the inhibitive effect is frustrating her as it actually impedes her

learning by distracting and concerning her. The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"I can see no positive affect. Negatively it is frustrating and my learning is slowed down."

Whilst the above participants generally expressed negative views concerning the central administration, other participants seemed to have encountered the political behaviour of 'Attacking or Blaming Others' within the department in which they are situated. Unlike the above mentioned participants, from the data collection it transpired that the two participants mentioned in the Section that follows had no inhibitive effect on their workplace learning.

### ***6.1.3 Participants with a Supportive Effect Only***

P1 informed me that she had recently experienced problems with an academic staff member regarding some hourly rates. The academic staff had asked P1 to provide him with some rates (of which she thought that he was already in possession) and when she sent him these by email he realised that the details were not tallying with his own. Then, according to P1, the member of academic staff had then emailed a number of colleagues alleging that P1 had made a mistake with providing the wrong rates and that the resulting disorganisation of the issue, which involved him carrying out workings with the wrong rates, was therefore her fault. P1 saw this essentially as blaming behaviour and found it disagreeable, but said that it did not cause her any significant anxiety or concern. P1 said that she was ultimately found to be in the right, since the member of academic staff in question had the wrong

records of the rates, and the fault was shown to lie with him. P1 said that this perceived instance of attacking and blaming did not affect her negatively however, on the positive side the participant had treated this as an opportunity to learn more about the person and claimed that she will now know how to approach him or other similar members of staff.

The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"It didn't really affect me to be honest. On the contrary, I am learning how people are and how to react with them, everyone is different. It's a sort of political skill that you must learn on how to deal with certain people."

Similar to the case of P1 above, P16 encountered a comparable experience. P16 informed me that he had organised a faculty meeting that included all heads and the dean. He said that he had sent an email to everyone concerned and showed it to me. On the day of the meeting the dean came to talk to him about one particular head of department who had told him that P16 had not sent him the email and therefore could not attend the meeting. P16 showed the dean that email he had sent to this particular lecturer, who had not replied or confirmed. From then on P16 affirmed that he has always asked for things in writing and always asks for a receipt or confirmation. With regards to the member of staff engaging in the 'Attacking or Blaming Others' behaviour, P16 claimed that this was that staff members' habitual mode of behaviour in the workplace.

According to P16, this reinforced his attitude of keeping track of everything that goes on with regards to the tasks and duties in writing, and compelled him to be more organised with the papers and the correspondence to avoid misunderstandings. Therefore, the outcome of this instance of political behaviour was that the individual learned to play



political games more effectively by keeping a paper trail of correspondence. The extract below from the semi-structured interview shows that P16 reported no inhibitive effect on his informal learning:

“Positively it made me aware of the importance to keep everything in writing. Negatively? It didn’t really affect me in a negative way.”

Though the enabling of this political behaviour, namely protecting oneself by keeping a paper trail, is viewed as a learning-supportive effect for P16, it may be viewed as learning-inhibitive in another sense, as it might for example undermine trust.

Similarly, P34 reported that she has been blamed for a batch of missing assignments. The issue seemed to have affected her learning in a supportive way wherein she claimed that her organisational skills were enhanced by the experience. Following is an extract from an informal discussion during the participant observation:

P34 said that she has a good relationship with everyone even though there were some hiccups. I asked her to explain further. She said that once, she had to work with a lecturer who was sick and was also unreachable. She had a problem with her because she needed the assignment results that this lecturer had to correct so as to add them to her results. Some two months passed and apparently this lecturer failed to submit them and informed P34 that she did submit them. P34 was not sure of this and she told me that the head of department was very angry about the situation. P34 checked each and every paper that was in her office to try and find the result sheet.

A few days later ...

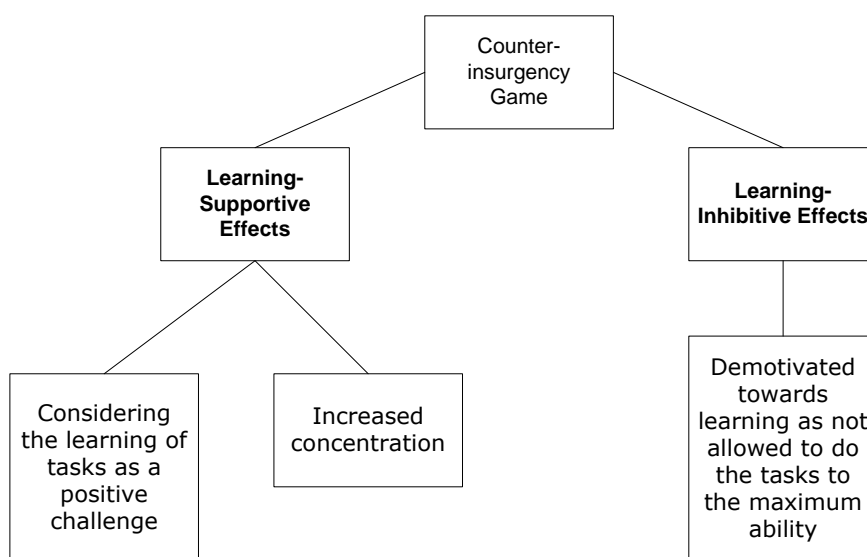
P34 informed me that finally, the results and assignments were found, but not at the office. Apparently they were under the lecturer's bed!

As seen in the above sections, the study identified instances where the ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ political tactic may have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect or either a supportive or an inhibitive effect towards the workplace learning of some of the

participants. Undoubtedly, the effects differ from one participant to another and as such where one sees the effect as supportive, it could be inhibitive for another individual.

## 6.2 Counterinsurgency Game

The 'Counterinsurgency Game' involves managers, heads or supervisors who are attempting to increase their control over the subordinates by reacting with political or legitimate means (Mintzberg, 1985). The data suggest that behaviours of this kind are most common where there are significant age gaps between colleagues, where individuals are keen to assert control, if a new employee is considered as a threat, there is rigidity in job duties, and where gender-related tensions are evident. The 'Counterinsurgency Game' also occurs when subordinates engage in 'Insurgency Games' (Jain, 2005: 184). The findings suggest that such behaviours can both promote and inhibit learning as per the statements illustrated in Figure 6.2 below:



**Figure 6.2 – Effects of Counterinsurgency Game**

### **6.2.1 *Participants with a Supportive & Inhibitive Effect***

During the observations, I noticed that P20's supervisor often engaged in behaviours consistent with the counter-insurgency game, for example in terms of frequent surveillance and close monitoring of work tasks, inspecting the time he comes in and goes out of the office, and the people he talks to. This is a typical approach of the 'Counterinsurgency Game' where the supervisor's tactic is to intermittently follow up the requests made to the subordinate with a meticulous checking method (Jain, 2005: 184) and a close supervision of subordinates (Samuel, 2005: 108). The following are extracts from the participant observations that may give light on this issue:

P20 and his supervisor are situated in the same office and I heard her keeping on asking about his whereabouts if he did not return to the office immediately. I also noticed that from time to time she was checking what he was doing. This was easy for her to do since she is situated in the same office. At one time, when he was at the office, she also told him "... keep me informed please" of a task that he was working on. Some of the other members of staff kept coming in the office to ask things to the supervisor. At one moment there was one employee who joked about P20 and said to me "*Do you need an aspirin?*" The following day P20 was going through his emails and he told me that he has too much emails to reply to. He told me that he sorts them in order of priority and replies accordingly. Some emails even receive a reply from him after a month. He told me that he wanted to do an auto-reply against his supervisor's wish, but after a few arguments between them he did not set it up. His supervisor turned to me and told me that it would not be a good idea since then people would send a reply to the auto-reply and so on and so forth.

P20 claimed to have found this behaviour rather demotivating since he feels that it prevents him from performing his role to the maximum of his ability, as per the extract below from the semi-structured interview:

"I am not allowed to do my best at my job and I just hate it. I don't like to work like that. Initiative is unheard of in this department. They want you to have initiative but it is not supported. You are not allowed to take initiative and this is very demotivating. Sometimes I try to take initiative and push it ... I have to push it hard. I am not allowed to do something without asking permission, even a simple auto-reply for my emails or the title of my job after each email. I also do not feel trusted and appreciated. I end up coming to work just for the pay. You start hating what you are doing."

According to P20 this political tactic occurs due to the age gap that there is between him and his supervisor, however, there is no hard evidence that this might be the cause of the 'Counterinsurgency Game'. P20 also claimed that the supervisor sees him as a threat and likes to feel in control of a situation. P20 added that during the first weeks of his employment he came into some conflict with her, because she was telling him to do things her way. However, P20 commented that he had believed that some things could be done in a more efficient way.

Notwithstanding this situation, P20 claimed that he finds that this political behaviour has a learning-supportive effect on him and considers the informal learning of tasks as a challenge, which he likes. The statement below in this regard is extracted from the semi-structured interview:

"Positively, I find it as a challenge and I like challenges. I try to take the job as a challenge so as to try and enjoy my job despite this behaviour. Negatively, it does not let me do the work with the maximum capability of my skills because there is no time and it is demotivating."

### ***6.2.2 Participants with a Supportive Effect Only***

P11 feels that the counter-insurgency-type behaviours are a necessity in the department where he is situated, though when he was initially employed he said that he felt shocked with the situation at the office. Similar to P20, his supervisor was constantly monitoring his work rate, checking the time he comes in and goes out of the office, and the people he talks to. However, positively, he said that this activity had the effect of encouraging him to try to concentrate more on his work and pay more attention to what he was doing since, by

his own account, he tends to get distracted very easily. This shows that even though political behaviour tends to be perceived in a negative way, it could be a useful or even sometimes a necessary part of organisational life as argued by Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010) wherein they reiterate the importance of an effective political environment (2010: 197). The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"It urged me to stay more focused as I tend to get distracted by things that go around me, and I tend to procrastinate my work."

*Probe: Do people chase you to get things done?*

"Yes, of course, a lot! People chase me all the time because people tend to expect that everything is ready straight away."

*Probe: Why do you procrastinate?*

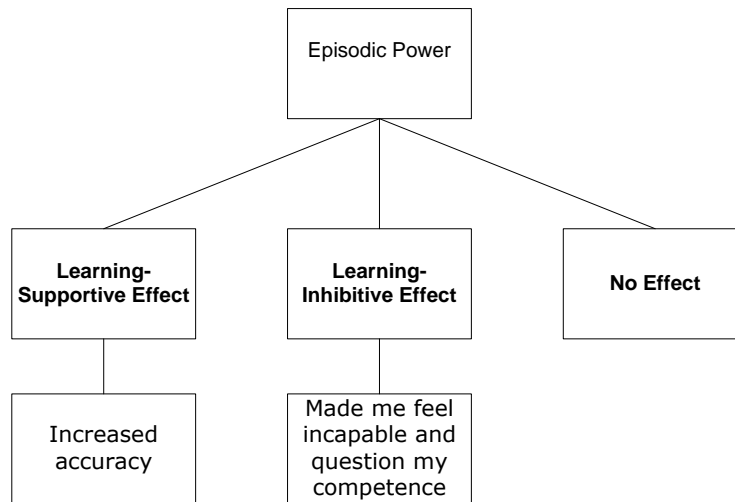
"I don't do it on purpose. When people ask me I tell them that I'm not ready and I do the work the following day. I also know that this work is only done by me, there is no else who does it."

The above extracts indicate that in the case of P11, the exertion of control and authority by the supervisor may have been a conscious tactic employed for the purpose of facilitating the efficient completion of tasks within the department. In this sense the political behaviour was seen by the supervisor – but also by the respondent – as a legitimate (though not perhaps pleasant) part of the management process.

### **6.3 Episodic Power**

Similar tactics to that described as 'Episodic Power' are often employed by employees that seek and engage in more responsibility in decision making, in order to increase their power over a new employee or another employee with new responsibilities (Lawrence *et al*, 2005). According to Lawrence *et al* (2005) this type of person is self-interested and is most

able to influence organisational decision making. Figure 6.3 below illustrates that this political tactic seems potentially to have both a learning-supportive and a learning-inhibitive effect on workplace learning:



**Figure 6.3 – Effects of Episodic Power**

### ***6.3.1 Participants with a Supportive & Inhibitive Effect***

P27, an administrative staff member, seemed to have experienced both a learning-supportive and a learning-inhibitive effect where this tactic was experienced. During a discussion at the participant observations, P27 indicated that it was a shock for her when she had to approach the academic staff and felt inadequate. According to her account, this is in part due to the academic staff not allowing her to take decisions on his behalf even though the decision may be fruitful. The following is an extract from the field notes:

P27 said that it was shocking the first time that she had to approach the academic staff as these made her feel belittled: "This is because they make it a point that everything is done their way and with their approval. There is one in particular who does not allow me to take decisions on his behalf." This may be done by the member of staff in order to secure results.

Key informants informed me that he engages in full responsibility to make decisions on the projects and does not allow P27 to take the decisions herself, even though her opinions sometimes were of benefit. Informants also informed me that he often told her bluntly that since she is a new employee she cannot take decisions on his behalf - These are typical features of 'Episodic Power'. P27 added that with this behaviour she used to doubt herself and asked herself whether she was good enough for the job. But she said that she kept on insisting and waited for good feedback from this same member of academic, which she did receive at the end.

On a positive note P27 feels that she informally learned to be more accurate. The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"Negatively I felt bad but I am sure that he was influenced by another person, a rival so to speak. It is not professional of that person. Positively? Well, it made me more accurate and proved him right! I took this issue with the professor to heart and felt offended because he literally told me that "I do not know what I am doing", and I think this was not justified. I think that he was influenced by someone else to say that. So the best reply for this statement was action. I manage to exceed his expectations and his team is all the time telling me "what are you doing to him? He is all the time praising you!" All that I am doing is present him with work that is accurate. That is all he wants."

P27 later added that she regarded this experience as a success for her, and felt that her standing amongst her colleagues had improved as a result of her response to this political behaviour.

### ***6.3.2 Participants with No Effect***

P34 encounters this type of political behaviour too however, this seemed to have neither a supportive nor an inhibitive effect on her informal learning. P34 added that when the head of department is absent, another academic member of staff takes over and sometimes speaks very badly about a few colleagues for example "*...she doesn't have any power now because she is on sabbatical leave...*" and "*I am in charge*". Other key informants suggested that this member of staff tries to be involved in the decision making of the department and manages to influence the head of department accordingly. The following is an extract from the field notes:

During the discussion the members of staff were saying that this particular lecturer steps over the boundaries and that the head of department does not object to this. They added that this lecturer says that she suffers from an Attention Deficit Disorder and talks a lot to herself. P34 stated that this same person slows down the work flow due to her intrusiveness. P34 added that this lecturer tries to dump a lot of work on her. In one instance, while at the office with them, I heard this lecturer asking P34 to make her a photocopy of a document and the head of department spoke up from behind his desk and told her that P34 is not her secretary.

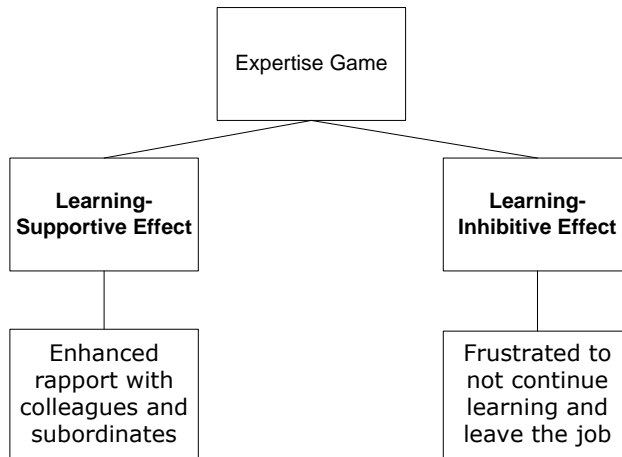
Lawrence *et al* (2005: 182) observe that the exercise of such Episodic Power may have beneficial effects for both individual and organisation in some instances, as it can enable self-interested employees to exert control in order to promote positive ideas. However, Lawrence *et al* (2005) also argue that in organisations where the manifestation of 'Episodic Power' is improperly cultivated, employees will experience lack of learning (2005: 189). In the case of P34, experience of this political tactic seemed to be not affecting her learning even though the lecturer concerned seems to be very much self-interested and manages to affect the decision making of the department. P34 indicated that she tries to stay detached from the manipulations of this lecturer.

#### **6.4 Expertise Game**

According to Mintzberg (1985), behaviour reflecting the 'Expertise Game' is exhibited when there is the use of expertise to build a power base. Some writers have observed that experts in a field sometimes flaunt their expertise or try to keep the information to themselves and non-experts attempt to present themselves and their work in an expert light, so as to be viewed as a professional and thus maintain their privileged status as expert, and the power that it confers (Mintzberg, 1985: 137; Samuel, 2005: 110). One participant encountering this political activity stated that his predecessor engaged in the 'Expertise Game' due to stress. Figure 6.4 below shows that where this political behaviour is



experienced, it seems to have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on the participant's informal learning.



**Figure 6.4 – Effects of Expertise Game**

P29 has been at Department D7 for the past six months during which time he claimed that he had experienced significant levels of conflict and was even considering leaving the job. This, he suggests, is mainly due to the situation between him and his predecessor. P29 stated that his predecessor was not very approachable but he was very good at the job and he had a very good reputation. When P29 was asked about the reason why he did not feel that approachable, he answered that he (his predecessor) was under exceptional stress and was in a bad mood because his leaving time was being prolonged. Moreover, new members of staff were joining the department and, as P29 claimed, they were all expecting help from him, while he was still learning himself, which further exacerbated stress levels. This was also happening while a new electronic system was being introduced.

As an apparent consequence of these various factors, P29 expressed feeling high levels of anxiety and said that he had spoken to his predecessor with extreme caution so as not to irritate him. He also felt irritated that he was even thinking of leaving the job as this atmosphere was affecting him personally. The extract below explaining the situation is taken from the field notes:

I noticed that P29 seemed extremely uncomfortable to approach his predecessor to ask for the training as the person seemed in a very bad mood. It appeared to be a very uneasy situation because, from inside sources, I got to know that the management was telling this person that he was going to leave the place in two weeks, and when the two weeks went by, he was still there and the management were instructing him to stay a bit more. I then saw P29 approaching the other members of staff for help so as not to bother the predecessor. Apparently, however, the task concerned was only known by the predecessor and when P29 approached him to ask him for help, this person refused to give out the information. I asked P29 whether he had any intention of speaking to the management about the situation but he did not think about it. He said that there were too many challenges going on that he wouldn't know what to talk about with the management. He was convinced that "they cannot really offer a solution".

Notwithstanding this very '*turbulent*' situation, as P29 described it, he claimed that there was a supportive effect from this 'Expertise Game', but on the other hand it created a lot of frustration towards his informal learning. The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

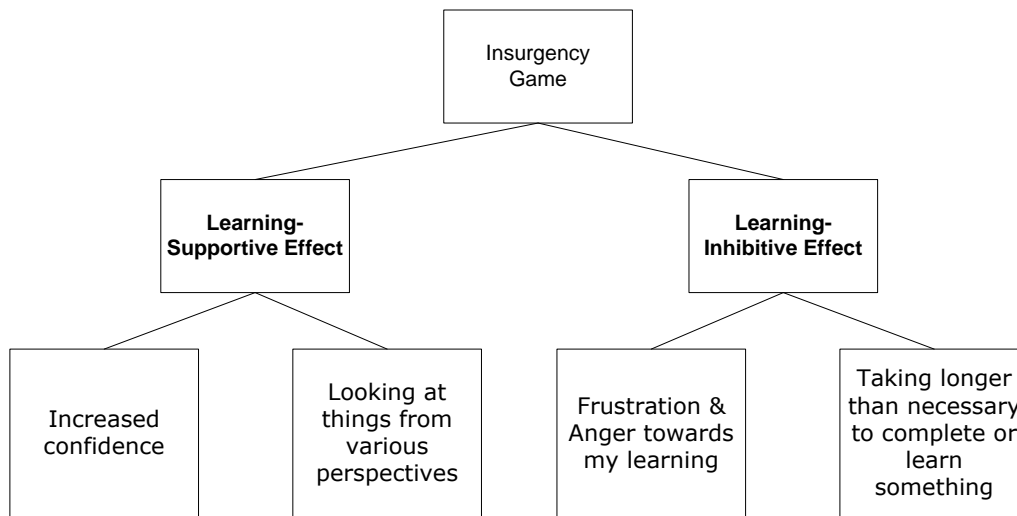
"On the positive side, I got to know the other employees more as I used to ask them instead of the actual person. In this way I got to know their level of expertise and created a rapport with them which is useful for me as now I am their head. Negatively, it created a lot of frustration and I was considering leaving the job. I used to go home and grumble a lot about the work with my wife!"

The experience described above of what appeared to be behaviours consistent with an 'Expertise Game' seemed to have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on the informal learning of P29. The expert in this instance apparently tried to keep the information to himself, which caused the participant to almost resign from his job, though finally and in a

supportive way, as the matter was settled, the participant claimed that he got to know more about his subordinates to be.

## 6.5 Insurgency Game

According to Mintzberg (1985) and Samuel (2005: 108), 'Insurgency Game' is a political tactic that involves employees, mainly subordinates in a lower level, who for some reason resist authority. Behaviours apparently resembling such a tactic were observed and reported by the participants, and the main causes of such behaviours include lack of motivation, fear of change and narcissism. Figure 6.5 below shows that this political tactic may have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on workplace learning:



**Figure 6.5 – Effects of Insurgency Game**

### ***6.5.1 Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect***

P4 expressed the view that a recently-promoted employee within his department frequently engaged in shirking behaviours such as neglecting or avoiding work tasks and responsibilities that were integral to their job. P4 also said that he felt that this employee took excessive lengths of time to accomplish the tasks. The extract below is taken from the field notes:

P4 started laughing as he was telling me that in order to get 'the lazy chap' to organise the room, he and his manager told him that I was going to be there to check things out - "we used you as an excuse to get things done! Instead of telling him that you were going to be here to do observations for your thesis, we told him that you were coming to check us out". P4 added that this person prefers to stay alone in his office and does not socialize with his colleagues.

P4 claimed that the main reason for this resistance was a de-motivational work environment where there were few incentives to encourage a more productive work ethic. He also claimed that this Insurgency-type behaviour had both a supportive effect, such as increase in confidence, and an inhibitive effect on his workplace learning, though this political behaviour irritates him. The extracts below from the semi-structured interview confirm this:

*Researcher: Could you tell me how this behaviour affects your learning at the workplace?*

"I am used to be independent and when I see this behaviour I tend to become very irritated and angry. But then I do a report, and take things from there. Sometimes I even have to check the work done by this person which is a waste of time."

*Researcher: So, in what way does this negatively and positively affect your learning?*

"On the positive side, I became more confident and feel trusted when my superiors see me take things this seriously. Before I report the resistance I try to approach the person myself and guide others to approach him in a certain way. This makes my superiors see that I am not a person that like to dump work on the others and try to be helpful at all times. On the negative side it affects me mentally as I tend to lose it and waste a lot of time when having to check the work of this person."

In another illustration of the effects of the 'Insurgency Game', P31 claimed to find a lot of resistance from his subordinates and said that this affects his informal learning concerning team building skills both in an inhibitive and a supportive way. He told of the frustration he feels when he goes to the Faculty Board with ten items to discuss knowing that only one or two will be tackled due to (in his view) the resistance of the other members. The following extract is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"The positive thing about this is that at least a decision is taken when looked from various people and from various perspectives. This means that a decision is taken after being meticulously discussed upon. Negatively this affects me a lot as it takes long for me to actuate reforms and ideas. I plan a lot for the future of the Faculty. It is very difficult to proceed as you have to have the co-operation of everyone. I mean, I am open to suggestions and if someone presents an idea that is beneficial, I adopt it."

#### ***6.5.2 Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only***

P32 claimed that he finds it rather frustrating with having to work with other departments who resist his department's authority, an issue which, according to him, has an inhibitive effect on his learning. He affirmed that he cannot find or see anything supportive in this regard. The extract in this respect is taken from the field notes:

P32 added that things take a very long time to be actuated here, especially when he asks someone to do something. P32 was telling me that he finds this very frustrating and for him it is a waste of time and is not sure whether all the work will be ready by November. He said that by time he is getting used to this resistance even though he finds it frustrating.

P32 claimed that he believes that in order to get things done, one has to exaggerate the urgency and importance of a situation or lie as per the extracts below from the semi-structured interview:

"We asked the secretary to call herself and ask for their help by stating that 'the students needed it' and they helped us immediately. Basically, the secretary had to over blow the situation so that we get the help required."

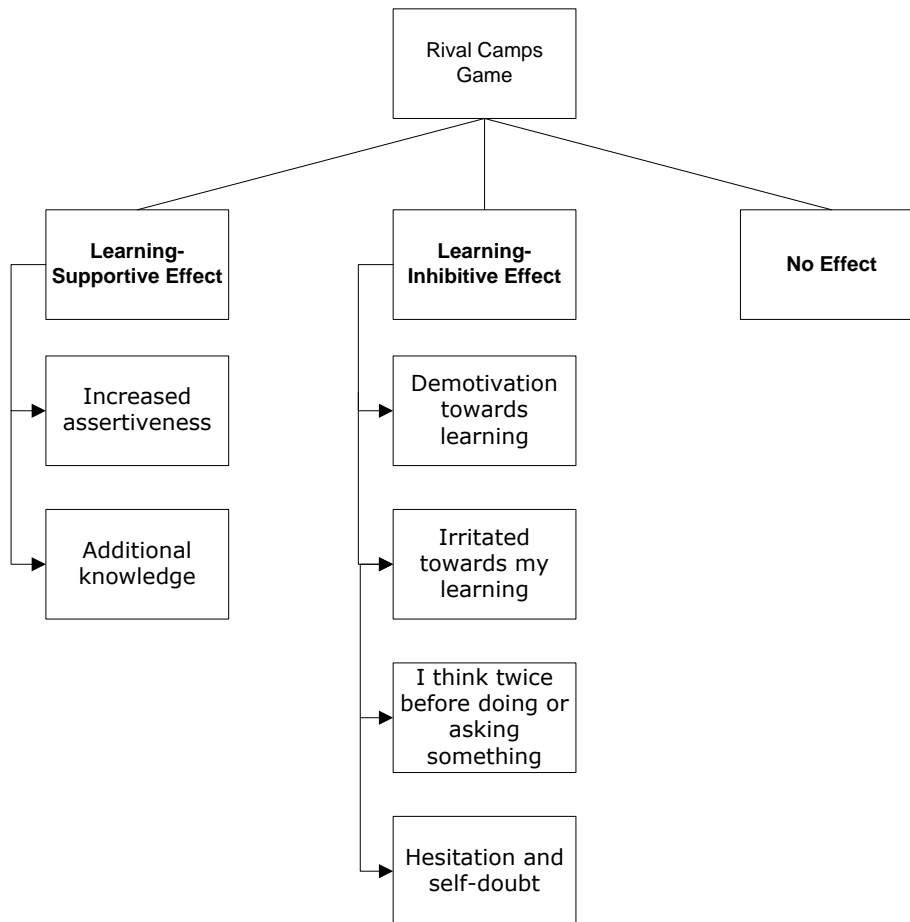
*Probe: Did you or the head of department ever think of complaining about this with the Rector?*

"No, the head of department does not want to over do it or create more tension. He just wants to get things done in peace. I wonder what we will do when we would be extremely busy and tight with deadlines and would require greater help in the future!"

As illustrated in the above sections, behaviours relating to the 'Insurgency Game' do not seem to have a uniform effect on the participants' workplace learning. Some seem to be affected in both a supportive and an inhibitive way, while others seem to be affected in an inhibitive way only. Similar to other political tactics, what might support one individual, such as increased confidence, may destruct or inhibit the learning of another by creating frustration and delays.

## **6.6 Rival Camps Game**

As described by Mintzberg (1985) and Samuel (2005), the 'Rival Camps Game' consists of conflicts between departments or two opposing goals of employees or differing personalities, and occurs when the alliance or empire building games result in two main power groups. The reasons provided by the participants for behaviours of this kind include the bureaucracy, lack of co-ordination between departments, lack of resources, and many others as presented below. Figure 6.6 below illustrates the supportive and inhibitive effects that the 'Rival Camps Game' appeared to have on workplace learning. In some instances, it seemed to have no effect at all.



**Figure 6.6 – Effects of Rival Camps Game**

### ***6.6.1 Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect***

P5 described a situation within his own department where he felt that behaviours associated with the ‘Rival Camps Game’ had promoted an uncooperative attitude from his colleagues. He claimed that this could be due in part to some innate predisposition on their part, but he also claimed that, they may also be influenced by their supervisor. Either way, the political activity seemed to have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on his informal learning including time management, as per the extract below from the semi-structured interview:

“Negatively, it is a bit demotivating, however there is the positive side too because when I do all the things myself, I would have more knowledge of the material and of what is going on.”

P5 said that he finds the behaviour of his colleagues extremely frustrating since in his view they hinder him from reaching certain deadlines for his experiments. The extract below regarding the situation is taken from the field notes:

I entered the room and noticed that P5 was using the equipment manually. He told me that because his colleagues refuse to help him, he ended up doing this by himself by using manual equipment. He said that they have more modern equipment but every time he asks them to help him out, they refuse or come up with some excuse. P5 added that it is customary for these employees to be gathered in a room having a coffee or chat and he sees this scene quite often! He was explaining to me what he was doing with the equipment and he again commented that this was a waste of time for him, for he could do something else if his colleagues would do this bit instead of him.

In terms of the supportive effects of such behaviour, P5 revealed that he has learned new things as due to the refusal of his colleagues to help him out, he has to do the tasks himself with the help of a manual. P5 added that like this he could check first hand whether the samples he receives from industry are good. Indeed, he revealed a piece he had that was not good and got to know this when using manual equipment. In his view, the other employees would probably not have bothered to notice or inform him. Thus, in perceiving the behaviours of his colleagues as political in line with the ‘Rival Camps Game’, he had responded by effectively expanding the parameters of his job – and hence learning new tasks.

P21 also felt that she had suffered from behaviours relating to the ‘Rival Camps Game’ occurring in her department which in this case occurred specifically between her and a



colleague of hers who has been in the department for a number of years. A key informant informed me that this member of staff is more highly qualified than P21. She claimed that he sees her as a threat and added that he also shows signs of a narcissistic personality. The following is an extract from the field notes:

P21 was attending some tutorial lessons with him, as instructed by the manager. During the tutorial, this employee was interfering while she was talking to the students and kept on remarking "no P31, that is not the case, you are wrong." P21 was hesitating to give out answers to the students and did not say another word for the rest of the tutorial session.

P21 said that she finds this very intimidating and claimed that she felt belittled and questioned her own competence in her job, as per extract below from the semi-structured interview:

"Negatively it made me feel belittled and doubted my competence on the job. As I said, it made me question whether I am good for the job."

During an informal discussion I had asked her whether she confronted this colleague but she said that she does not want to create a rift. She said that she did not even tell her superior about this and does not intend to. In the following weeks she stopped attending tutorials with this employee and does not want to attend in the future as he made her feel incompetent by the way he acted when she was giving answers to the students. On the other hand, she claimed that this incident also had a supportive effect on her informal learning concerning the ability to deliver what she teaches, as per extract below from the semi-structured interview:

"Positively it made me more assertive, it sort of made me realise about the reality of dealing with people."

### ***6.6.2 Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only***

P7 revealed that she loves her job however she said that the political tactics and attitude of one of her colleagues are creating irritation towards her informal learning. From informal discussions with her other colleagues, I was informed that this is because this particular colleague is all the time thinking that P7 has been employed by the institution to take over her tasks, and is therefore trying to make her life difficult. The extract below in this regard is taken from the field notes:

While I was at the department, I heard P7 complaining about her colleague, who she said that she finds very difficult to work with. I could then hear the faculty officer telling P7; "Yes, I know, you are right, she is a difficult person." Apparently this colleague does not like to take orders and tries to dump her work onto P7 who then turned to me and kept on complaining about her. Other members of staff who were present agreed with her and told me that this is all true – this employee is a nuisance. P7 asked me whether I had heard these complaints before.

P7 claimed that she does not find anything supportive in this situation as per extract below from the semi-structured interview, which also illustrates P7's view that her colleague sees her as a threat:

"Positively nothing. Negatively, she irritates me with the way she attacks me by saying that I am trying to take over her job."

Another respondent, P20, seems to be suffering from aspects of the 'Rival Camps Game' occurring between his immediate supervisor and another colleague. During an informal discussion he informed me that he sometimes suffers from conflicts between them, as both are responsible for the same area of work. He initially was confused with whom he should comply as he had to deal with both of them and they both have different views. He claimed that he strove to present himself positively to both of them and did not want to side with either since: (i) his immediate supervisor is his senior and is situated in his same office, and

(ii) the 'rival' colleague is a personal friend to him. In fact he said that he feels more at ease with the 'rival' colleague because she is of his same age. He then said that it was finally agreed that he should always consult his immediate supervisor, no matter what. This behaviour seems to be demotivating in terms of his informal learning as illustrated in the extract below extracted from the field notes:

P20 said that this 'rivalry between the 2 ladies' hindered him from continuing with his work and didn't know how to approach the female colleagues involved if they were in a bad mood during the day. In fact, I noticed that when he needed to ask something or needed help with a task and asks someone who is annoyed, he gets this answer "Not today please!" He said that because of this, his learning and work flow suffered a lot and he felt left behind and ends up demotivated.

Similarly, P27 also revealed an inhibitive effect of this political behaviour on her informal learning. During an informal conversation P27 said that the people she liaises with at one of the Sections of Department D4 sometimes refuse to help her. The situation in this case seems to be rather sensitive since, employees in this section are split into two: those who are employed on a definite contract for four years, and others who are employed on an indefinite basis, i.e. until their retirement age. Employees on a definite contract have a higher salary than the others however they have none of the contractual benefits of a permanent contract such as parental leave. As such, P27 felt that, as she is employed on a definite contract, those on an indefinite basis refuse to help her. This situation was further confirmed by other participants, such as P1 and P13 who are also employees on a definite contract. By her own account, this seemingly rivalry game makes P27 feel rather irritated towards her learning. The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"With regards to the rivalry game, unfortunately the issue is growing... This really irritates me because I take responsibility for my job and these do not take their job seriously. They do this because they have less salary than us and they think that they are capable to do our job. I think they need to know what we do exactly."

In another instance, P28 claimed that he also suffered a ‘minimal’ inhibitive effect on his informal learning when he was situated in Department D11. During an informal conversation he stated that at this department he had been involved in odd jobs, and he could often hear a group of employees from the same department talking against another employee. He said that it was indicative of low-level rivalry. Initially he said that this particular political activity did not really affect his learning. However, during the semi-structured interview he revealed the following:

“Well ... it did affect me but very minimally. I used to think twice before saying or asking something about a task or a piece of work I’m learning, for fear of being talked about behind my back, and I think this is negative. At the back of your mind you will always have that question mark. I can’t think of anything positive.”

P32 claimed that this political behaviour had no supportive effect on his informal learning. He said that he had found that such behaviours related to the ‘Rival Camps Game’ significantly slowed down his learning and consequently the work process, especially when he asks someone to do something, and he finds this irritating. In one case, P32 affirmed that he experienced irritation when he had asked for help from another department whose head is said to be not on good terms with the head of P32. The following is an extract from the semi-structured interview:

“Well, you tend to feel a bit irritated, frustrated and angry with this behaviour, but what can you do. I was not expecting this behaviour at the University; I expect this more from a governmental entity...”

### ***6.6.3 Participants with No Effect***

P13 is one of the participants that appeared to have experienced behaviours in her department associated with the ‘Rival Camps Game’, yet she has not been affected by

them. During an informal conversation at one of the participant observations she had expressed feelings of awkwardness towards the other members of staff because, she said, they had applied for her position and did not get the promotion partly because they do not have a degree, and P13 needs their help in order to informally learn the necessary skills such as accuracy. She claimed to find one of them a bit tough to work with and in fact she will be moving out of the section very soon. P13 indicated that this employee said a few hurtful things to her and to another new employee however, both P13 and the other new employee explain this as a product of her failure to obtain a promotion. The following is an extract from the semi-structured interview with P13 a few days after the 'rival' employee left the department:

*Researcher: So, in what way did this negatively and positively affect your learning?*

"No, it didn't really affect me...I am not the type of person who takes things personally, even more so when I got to know that this person was going to leave the office. It never really bothered me."

Similarly, P18 claimed to be unaffected by the 'Rival Camps Game' occurring in the department where he is situated. It is interesting to note that P18 is situated within an office of female colleagues and one of the themes that emerged strongly here was that of rivalry between these colleagues and one female colleague from another department:

P18 asked them whether the supervisor had come to work today. One employee said yes since she had received an email from her. At this stage, I noticed that all of them were smiling sarcastically and another employee said "we can feel her presence" and laughed after this comment. One employee looked at me and told me to ignore their comments and of course I replied that what goes on at the office will be kept confidential.

P18 stated that he tries to detach completely from what he saw as this political behaviour.

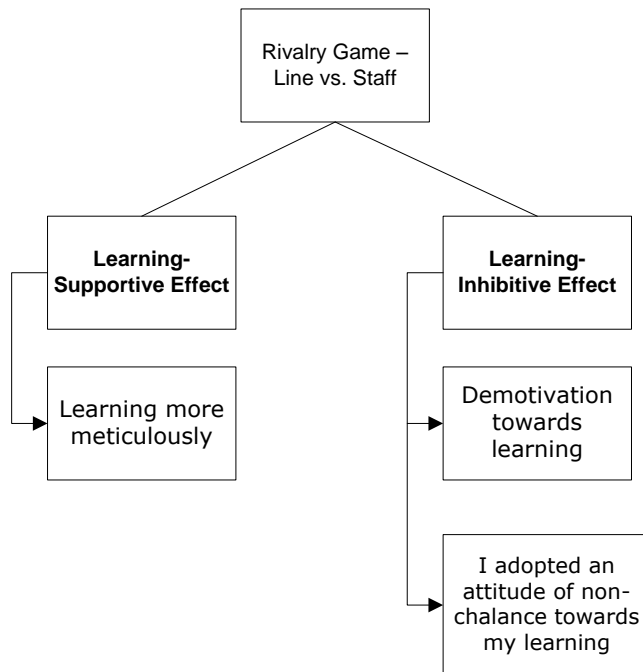
Below is an extract from the semi-structured interview:

"I am not a slow learner and it is very easy for me to learn. I absorb quickly. I like to ask a lot of questions too...My learning is not really affected by this behaviour...I don't take notice of these things (*P18 is referring to the political behaviour*). I mean, if something bothers me at work, I keep it to myself..."

The above sections show that the 'Rival Camps Game' seems to not have a homogeneous effect on the participants' learning at work. Where it was experienced, some seemed to be affected in both a supportive and an inhibitive way, while others seemed to be affected in an inhibitive way only. A few participants do not seem to be affected by this political game. Similar to other political behaviour, which might support some individuals, such as increased assertiveness and knowledge, may inhibit the learning of others by generating irritation and self-doubt.

## **6.7 Line vs. Staff**

According to Mintzberg (1985), behaviours reflecting the 'Line vs. Staff' political tactic mainly occur when employees ignore the expertise of another employee in order to make him or her less powerful. Samuel (2005) adds that this game may include a perceived tension or status difference between knowledge achieved through formal education and experience acquired through long-standing work (2005: 111). Such behaviours were identified by some of the respondents, and the main reasons identified for it include narcissism and the new employee is seen as a threat. Figure 6.7 below illustrates the supportive and inhibitive effects on workplace learning.



**Figure 6.7 – Effects of Line vs. Staff Game**

### ***6.7.1 Participants with a Supportive & an Inhibitive Effect***

P9 offers an example of rivalry occurring in the department between a manager and his subordinate, and the reason given by the participant for this behaviour is narcissism. This term was actually used, unprompted, by P9 and in this context it was used to refer to what was considered to be the manager's self-centred personality, as informed by key informants. According to Ronningstam (2005) this type of narcissistic leader has a strong motivation for power, and feels entitled to deliberately take advantage of his position in the organisation for his personal fulfilments (2005: 136). In the previous section of the thesis it was described how P9 often encounters an issue with feedback, which she perceives to

form part of the political behaviour of her superior. The extract below taken from field notes explains the situation:

P9 informed me that she sends a lot of emails to her manager about the work she is doing but she said that he replies after a few weeks or even does not reply. She claimed that she receives very little feedback from him and told me his power tactics make her feel helpless and demotivated, even angry and frustrated at times.

The extract below from the semi-structured interview illustrates that this political activity is affecting the informal learning of P9 in both a supportive and an inhibitive way:

"The positive thing is that I have a lot of time to complete the work and I can do it with no pressure and more meticulously. On the other hand, I need the feedback and need to get things going. Negatively, it is demotivating my learning."

### ***6.7.2 Participants with an Inhibitive Effect Only***

Similar to P9 above, there seems to be evidence of the 'Line vs. Staff' tactic occurring between P25 and his superior. Similar to the effect on his learning of the 'Attacking or Blaming Others', P25 claimed that he adopted an attitude of nonchalance towards his learning and affirmed that his superior sees him as a threat. The extract below is taken from the semi-structured interview:

"I can't put my finger on it. I have to make an appointment to talk to him. I can't wait for him for ages to be able to talk to me and my ideas are always ignored. I also wanted to do post doctoral research but he refused to support me. Apart from that, I think that there is a problem nationwide that when you put a teacher in a management position, he or she suffers because of the lack of managing skills. "

P25 believed that he had nothing else to do but resign from his job as he believed he could not learn or work in that situation as per extract below from the semi-structure interview:

"I feel relieved to have resigned. I mean even the attitude of the support staff is really lacking in cordiality and they literally waste time in petty things which are of no importance, such as feeling offended for not saying 'good morning' to everyone individually. Come on, this was the situation there. How pathetic!"



As shown above, where behaviours associated with the ‘Line vs. Staff’ are experienced, they seem to have a diverse effect on the learning of the participants. Whilst P9 seemed to be affected in both a supportive and an inhibitive way, participant P25 claimed that it had an inhibitive effect only and adopted an attitude of nonchalance towards his formal and informal learning. Consequently he claimed that he felt helpless and decided to resign.

## **6.8 Other Political Behaviours with No Effect on Learning**

Two of the political tactics identified during the study seemed to have no effect on the informal learning of two participants, namely the ‘Alliance Game’ and ‘Impression Management’. In Mintzberg’s (1985) account, the ‘Alliance Game’ involves colleagues agreeing to support each other to move further up in the organisation, and is often played by higher level employees. P34 said that she observed frequent clashes among members of academic staff in her department and she described an environment rich with ‘Alliance Games’, however she said that these do not affect her. The following is an extract from an informal discussion during the participant observations:

“I don’t take notice of the alliances that are present in this department. I’m here to do a job and I am not interested to join with neither of the groups. I have a good relationship with everyone and I try to detach from certain office politics that take place.”

P34 was not available for the semi-structured interview and therefore there were no further discussions on the issue.

‘Impression Management’ involves employees who attempt to present themselves in terms of enthusiasm or charm in order to build and enhance their self image by developing a reputation of being liked (Allen *et al*, 1979). While this tactic seemed to be in evidence in some instances, none of the participants claimed to be affected by it and the reasons indicated behind this activity include narcissism and the need for approval from others. The following are extracts from the field notes that illustrate a typical situation of ‘Impression Management’ activity carried out where P28 is situated:

The colleague of P28 came out from the adjacent office to tease the other employees. He spoke loudly and used his hands a lot. He showed over enthusiasm and a lot of charm. He asked me what I was doing and then started to explain his yesterday’s experience of carrying an item up a 4-storey building. P28 does not seem to be bothered by him. He is charming indeed and shows a lot of enthusiasm when he talks about work.

This employee seemed to adopt an extremely exaggerated approach to Impression Management, and key informants during informal conversations claimed that he was also trying to improve his popularity by involving himself in issues related to work schedules, which the management wants to change for the support staff. Some of his colleagues informed me that he really makes an effort to become popular with staff at University and one may get an impression that he is an asset to the department even though he has his shortcomings. P28 does not seem to be bothered by this political activity, as per extract below from the semi-structured interview:

“Well ... it doesn't really affect me because since I am new I tend to stay out of these issues.”

## Conclusion

This Chapter analysed and discussed the effects that each identified political tactic – and, more importantly, the respondents’ perceptions of and reactions to them – may have on the workplace learning of the participants. The most prevalent political tactics experienced by the respondents were associated with three main factors mentioned by Mintzberg (1985), namely authority, power and rivalry. Some of the perceived political tactics seem to have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on learning, namely Allen *et al*’s (1979) ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’, and Mintzberg’s (1985) collection of games such as ‘Counterinsurgency Game’, ‘Insurgency Game’, ‘Expertise Game’, and ‘Line vs. Staff’.

Other political games (and the respondents’ reactions to them) seem to have a supportive effect, an inhibitive effect, as well as no effect whatsoever such as Lawrence *et al*’s (2005) ‘Episodic Power’ and Mintzberg’s (1985) ‘Rival Camps Game’. In this study, Mintzberg’s (1985) ‘Alliance Building Game’ and Allen *et al*’s (1979) ‘Impression Management’ political tactic seem to have neither a supportive nor an inhibitive effect on learning. Participants in this case commented that they try to stay out of such political issues and as such claimed that they encountered no effect.

Such divergences in the effects that one type of political behaviour can have on learning may depend on many factors, such as differing personalities and work situations. Perhaps this could be a scope for further research. As illustrated in the literature review of Chapter

2, it seems that where political behaviour is experienced, participants can attribute it to various reasons starting from the structure of the organisation and the bureaucracy that is present, especially the centralisation of the administrative functions, and the differing personalities of the employees. A discussion of the findings will now ensue in Chapter 7, which draws out the key findings from Chapters 4, 5 and 6, and focuses on the thesis question ‘To What Extent do Organisational Politics Hinder or Enhance Workplace Learning?’ Chapter 7 also echoes the questions made in Chapter 3 and reflects on how this research can append to the literature and contribute to the knowledge described in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 7 - FINDINGS & CONCLUDING REMARKS

### Introduction

This thesis began with the introduction to organisational politics and workplace learning and the title of the work asked the question: *To What Extent Do Organisational Politics Hinder or Enhance Workplace Learning?* The title poses the unanswered question and the thesis states the findings of this research. Various ideas have been put forward about the relationship between organisational politics and learning as illustrated in Chapter 2 and in the sections that followed. The existing literature provides a somewhat superficial discussion of the relationship between organisational politics and learning, and thus do not offer a systematic or detailed analysis of the actual effects of political behaviour on learning, and the purpose of this research was to begin to fill that gap.

Some of the learning-supportive and learning-inhibitive effects have been identified from the findings of this research. Interestingly, some political tactics manage to enhance and/or inhibit the learning of individuals, whilst a few of the participants do not seem to be affected at all. Other participants have seen the need to engage themselves into certain types of political behaviour, in order to get things done at the workplace. This chapter now describes and explains each of the findings in relation to the literature review discussed in Chapter 2 and the questions set out in Chapter 3. It also includes a discussion on how the research will contribute to existing knowledge and suggestions for further research.

## 7.1 The Findings

In structuring the specification for this research in Chapter 3, a number of questions were raised which informed the development of the main research instruments – a participant observation guide (see **Appendix E**) and a semi-structured interview guide (see **Appendix F**). This data collection process allowed for a detailed investigation of respondents' experiences of what they saw as political behaviour in the workplace, how they perceived that behaviour, how they reacted to it, and how those perceptions and reactions impacted on their workplace learning. On the basis of the findings, it can be concluded with some confidence that political behaviours and relationships within the workplace can and do have a variety of effects on the employees' workplace learning, which itself is mainly informal. It transpired that organisational politics may enhance as well as hinder the learning at the workplace, or may neither enhance nor hinder learning.

The political behaviours described by the respondents were categorised according to an analytical framework that was based on typologies of political behaviours and tactics provided by Mintzberg (1985), Allen *et al* (1979) and Lawrence *et al* (2005). Like all typologies, this framework is an imperfect tool in terms of faithfully representing all types of political behaviour, but it did provide a clear and, it is argued, valid tool for making sense of the data and delineating commonalities in the behaviours observed and described by respondents. The main themes pervading these behaviours were seen to be authority, power and rivalry. The most significant games and tactics identified include the 'Rival Camps Game', 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Insurgency Game' and 'Counterinsurgency

Game’. While the respondents mostly described these tactics in terms of what other people in their workplace were doing, a few of the participants were engaging in some political behaviour themselves, in an attempt to get things done at their place of work, namely ‘Reciprocity’, ‘Ingratiation’ and ‘Developing a Base of Support’.

## **7.2 The Kind of Learning Explored**

The first part of the analysis took note of the type of workplace learning that took place. The majority of learning observed occurred informally mostly through experience and by receiving help from colleagues. This confirms existing evidence about the importance of informal learning, such as Yeo’s (2008) illustration in Chapter 2 of this thesis that 80% of the learning occurs informally through self-directed learning, networking, coaching and mentoring (2008: 318). A few also learned in an unconscious way, through observation and by doing their own research. Most of the participants found it easy to learn their relevant tasks, despite the political activity that affected their learning and some also found learning relatively easy *because of* the political activity – this is discussed further in Section 7.5.1. of this Chapter.

The majority of the participants learned through receiving feedback from their superior or line manager except for a few: (i) Two participants did not appear to receive any feedback and this seemed at least in part due to a political tactic identified in their respective department, namely the ‘Line vs. Staff’; (ii) One participant did not receive any feedback

seemingly due to the lack of managerial skills of his superior; and (iii) Another participant had been in the department for a very short period of time and thus had not yet received any opportunity for feedback. The findings illustrate that there are a few employees who have found it difficult to learn due to the effects of political behaviours in their workplace. This echoes Mallon *et al's* (2005) implication that organisational politics can impede learning, thus making workplace learning an unnatural process for the employee (2005: 8). The research presented in this thesis portrays an organisation where the journey from periphery to core proposed by Lave and Wenger (if indeed it does happen) is fraught with the difficulties caused by political relations. However, those same relations and behaviours can promote learning in ways that were unanticipated by Lave and Wenger. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Lave & Wenger's communities of practice model lacks any detailed analysis of organisational politics and does not identify the ways in which relations and political behaviours may promote learning.

### **7.3 The Types of Political Behaviour Observed**

The data revealed that respondents experienced several political tactics and games in the workplace, namely those tactics similar to Mintzberg's (1985) 'Rival Camps Game', 'Insurgency Game', 'Counterinsurgency Game', 'Line vs. Staff', 'Alliance Game' and the 'Expertise Game', Allen *et al's* (1979) 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Reciprocity', 'Impression Management', 'Ingratiation' and 'Developing a Base of Support', and Lawrence *et al's* (2005) 'Episodic Power'. Table 5.1 in Chapter 5 demonstrates that the most commonly experienced political tactics are Mintzberg's 'Rival Camps Game' and



‘Insurgency Game’, and Allen *et al*’s ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’. According to the observations, these exist in seven departments. Behaviours associated with Mintzberg’s ‘Counterinsurgency Game’ were also observed in four departments. More than one political activity has been identified in some departments as shown in Tables 5.2 and 5.3 in Chapter 5. In one instance no significant evidence of political behaviour was found in one department however, the participant described being affected by the political tactics of the central administration.

#### **7.4 Causes of Organisational Politics**

While the causes of workplace political behaviour are of secondary concern to this study, they still merit attention as they may help us to understand *why* peoples’ experiences and perceptions of political behaviours impact on learning and how they can be addressed, eliminated or harnessed to improve learning. Table 5.4 in Chapter 5 illustrates a full list of causes and reasons as perceived by the participants. Vredenburg & Shea-Van Fossen (2010) affirm that organisational politics may be encouraged by cultural circumstances and individual surroundings at the workplace (2010: 31). This resonates with the results of the research wherein part of the micro-political behaviour seemed to be occurring due to the structure of the organisation. The participants indicated a few reasons behind the political behaviour they encountered; the most common being narcissism (a term used by one of the respondents), which corresponds with Lubit’s (2002) (in Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010) aspect of human nature that enhances organisational politics (2010: 35), the new employee considered as a threat, and bureaucracy. According to the participants, these

three reasons generate the following behaviour and political games: 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Rival Camps Game', 'Insurgency Game' and 'Impression management'.

Participants also divulged a variety of emotional responses towards the political behaviour that affected their workplace learning, with the most common being 'frustration'. Some have also shown an amount of antipathy towards the bureaucratic processes within the organisation and saw them as a hazard to their learning. Findings of this research indicate that politics arising out of bureaucratic issues had divergent effects on the learning of individuals, which range from demotivation and frustration to opportunities to learn about the internal systems of a tertiary education institution. This sensitivity towards politics is confirmed by Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun (2005) who argue that employees are sensitive to decisions made in their organisation, that may be perceived as political and individuals may react emotionally in different ways (2005: 258). This also matches Rosen *et al*'s (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) illustration that different personalities may perceive politics more positively than others (2006: 47).

## **7.5 The Effect of Politics on Workplace Learning**

Finally, the study shows that behaviour that is perceived as political may have a variety of effects on workplace learning; it may have a supportive effect, which matches the affirmation of Vredenburg & Shea-Van Fossen (2010) that organisational politics can also be functional, and; it may have an inhibitive effect or no effect at all on the workplace

learning of employees. This is contrary to Drory & Vigoda-Gadot's (2010) affirmation that workplace learning is only likely to occur when there is low political behaviour in an organisation. All participants managed to learn and in the majority of cases, where a political behaviour was experienced, it had both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on their learning.

Moreover, from the study it transpired that any particular political behaviour may affect employees disparately and this conforms with Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller's affirmation that what is considered politically negative in one culture may be considered otherwise in another (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 343). An example of this concerns two participants who encountered the same political behaviour of 'Attacking or Blaming Others' and who perceive the same effect differently: one considers the attitude of nonchalance or relaxed approach towards learning as inhibitive whilst the other perceives this same attitude as supportive. Nevertheless, such differences may not be due to cultural variation; they could also be due to personality, identity or dispositional differences towards learning at the individual level (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). A few of the participants who were affected by this political behaviour did not necessarily experience this from within the department in which they are situated but from certain parts of the central administration with which they had some sort of liaison.

### **7.5.1 Political Behaviour Concerning Authority**

From the findings it transpired that experiences of political games concerning authority had an important effect on workplace learning, and prime among these were similar to Mintzberg's (1985) 'Counterinsurgency Game' and 'Insurgency Game'.

The 'Counterinsurgency Game' seemed to be supporting the workplace learning of the participants by compelling them to consider the learning of tasks informally through experience and help from colleagues as a positive challenge and increasing their concentration. As discussed in Chapter 2, the findings confirm in part that according to Lawrence *et al* (2005), without such political behaviour organisations cannot learn (2005: 190). One participant in particular improved his concentration during the learning phase, as a result of the legitimate 'Counterinsurgency Game' adopted by his supervisor. This also supports the conclusions advanced by Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010) wherein they say that political behaviour could be a useful part of organisational life (2010: 197). However, where this game is experienced, it can also inhibit the learning by instilling demotivation in other participants. As indicated in Chapter 2, Silverman (2003) illustrates that lower level employees are often ready for greater autonomy and are eager to participate in decision-making related to their tasks (2003: 17). This was true in the case of some of the participants. During the research, one participant in particular commented that he wants to have more autonomy regarding his job but he is not granted the freedom to exercise his abilities to the full.

The 'Insurgency Game' is another game which, in this study, seems to support informal learning through experience by increasing confidence and making a participant look at things from various perspectives. Conversely, it can also generate frustration and anger towards learning, and learning is taking longer than necessary to be actuated. The study therefore identified both supportive and inhibitive effects in this regard. The findings suggest that insurgency games can be caused by a variety of factors such as; the age gap, the individual likes to feel in control, a new employee is considered as a threat, and the presence of rigidity in job duties. For example, respondents in more than one department claimed that supervisors were monitoring younger employees much more explicitly and closely than they did other employees. This lends some support to the contention that political behaviours may emerge partly as a product of age differences. However, the data do not allow any firm conclusions about this to be drawn, and it may be an issue for further study.

In one case, an employee found the workplace learning process arduous and difficult, mainly due to what he saw as behaviours that appeared to reflect the 'Insurgency Game' within his Faculty, especially with regards to decisions that had to be taken for the benefit of the faculty and the students. Conversely, the findings also promote the conclusion that behaviour perceived as political may be a driver for learning in that some managers respond by developing skills that enable them to work around political behaviour. This is in line with the suggestion of Butcher & Clarke (1999) wherein they propose that managers should be able to manage political behaviour and not simply avoid it, since management is also

concerned with the resolution of opposing interests (1999: 12). This also raises the issue of individual differences meaning that some individuals may be predisposed to deal with politics in a confrontational way, while others may be predisposed to respond in a more conciliatory way. Their reaction is likely to depend in part on their previous experiences and how they have developed their managerial approach and coping strategies over time. This could possibly be an area for future research by investigating the causes & origins of these different dispositions.

For example, the employee mentioned above engaged in reconciliatory behaviour that was closely aligned to 'Developing a Base of Support' instead of using the 'Counterinsurgency Game' to manage his subordinates in a more confrontational way. He also seemed to engage in behaviours reflective of 'Reciprocity' in order to obtain the necessary resources from the central administration. Likewise another participant seemed to engage in 'Reciprocity' with the head of department by working more than her contracted hours in favour for a future academic post. Similarly, a different participant engaged in 'Ingratiation' in order to obtain the necessary resources from central administration. In this case the participant may have used (though it cannot be affirmed so) this behaviour in order to be seen positively in the eyes of the employees within the central administration, which conforms with the conclusions drawn by Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010), Poon (2003) and Sussman *et al* (2002) concerning the use of 'Ingratiation' as an influence technique.

### **7.5.2 Political Behaviour Concerning Power**

The findings illustrate that two particular political tactics specifically concerning power can have a key effect on the workplace learning of the participants. These include Lawrence *et al*'s (2005) 'Episodic Power' and Mintzberg's (1985) 'Expertise Game'.

Experiencing political behaviour similar to 'Episodic Power' was seen to support the informal learning of one participant in an administrative role by helping to increase her accuracy of numerical data related to her work, however when she felt that Episodic Power was being exercised by an academic colleague, it made her feel incapable and led her to question her competence during her learning phase. This is because she did not feel that the academic colleague allowed her to take decisions on his behalf, even in instances where her opinions may have been productive. According to Lawrence *et al* (2005) this perceived political tactic may benefit the organisation where a manipulated idea put forward is of benefit to the organisation, however it can also hinder workplace learning if it is inappropriately used (2005: 189). In the case of the above mentioned participant, the perception that this political tactic was being used did seem to inhibit her learning in a way but it also seemed to have resulted in some positive outcomes for her, by improving her standing with her colleagues. Another participant tried to stay detached from those members of staff engaging in 'Episodic Power' and thus, she seemed to have endured no effect on her informal learning.

On the other hand, the political behaviour similar to the 'Expertise Game' affected one participant in both a supportive and an inhibitive way. The participant felt that an Expertise Game was being played by his predecessor who tried to hoard information for himself because his leaving time was being prolonged by the management. On one side this experience enhanced the participant's rapport with colleagues and subordinates whilst learning informally from them. On the other side of the continuum this political game appeared to promote a sense of frustration, stress, demotivation to learn, and he also considered leaving the job. This supports Ladebo's (2006) and Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun's (2005) proposition that organisational politics are a source of stress at the place of work. This employee in particular had found his informal learning greatly impeded due to what he saw as the stress-inducing 'Expertise Game' played by his predecessor. As illustrated in Chapter 2, Silverman (2003) states that a predecessor is the best source of information about a new job, however, Silverman does not mention that in such situations the individual may actually be a hindrance to his successor's learning if it is perceived that there is negative political behaviour such as the 'Expertise Game'.

### ***7.5.3 Political Behaviour Concerning Rivalry***

The findings show that a number of political games and tactics concerning rivalry had an effect on the workplace learning of the participants. These games and tactics are similar to Allen *et al*'s (1979) 'Attacking or Blaming Others', and Mintzberg's (1985) 'Rival Camps Game' and 'Line vs. Staff'.



Behaviours associated with 'Attacking or Blaming Others' seemed to affect the workplace learning in a supportive way wherein some employees who experienced it adopted a more relaxed approach towards learning (where the learning is formal on-the-job), others improved their knowledge and their political and organisational skills (where learning is informal both by experience and unconsciously), as well as increased their appreciation of learning at work. On the negative side this political tactic seemed to have the potential to instil carelessness towards formal learning and an attitude of nonchalance towards informal learning. Moreover, this political behaviour seemed to be reducing the pace of learning and instilling frustration and irritation in the participants' attitude towards informal learning.

Almost all participants experienced considerable engagement with bureaucracy which led to perceptions of the 'Attacking or Blaming Others' political tactic, and consequently inhibited workplace learning by causing irritation, frustration, conflict and demotivation, whilst in terms of support, this political game developed a better understanding of the organisation. One participant in particular was shocked during the first few weeks of working at the University due to the highly bureaucratic system and the way in which she perceived that people avoided responsibility. This respondent expressed the view that many employees of the University failed or refused to take responsibility for core tasks, and found this a frustrating experience.

Other participants appeared to have had no inhibitive effect on their workplace learning in respect of 'Attacking or Blaming Others' tactics. In fact, the findings illustrate that some experiences of this political behaviour occurred due to the structure of the organisation. This cause is anticipated by Buchanan (2008) wherein he states that politics may be caused by structural relationships within an organisation (2008: 54). Also, the root of some political behaviour, namely the 'Attacking or Blaming Others' political tactic, seemed to be at least in part associated with institutional or departmental underinvestment in appropriate office space and other resources. The limitation of resources such as lack of space is one of the causes illustrated by Curtis (2003), Latif *et al* (2011) and many others. The supportive thing about this political tactic as encountered by one participant is that the individual unconsciously learned to play political games more effectively i.e. by keeping a paper trail of correspondence. Whether such learning can be described as 'positive' or not is certainly debatable, but that is perhaps a debate for another time.

The 'Rival Camps' game was seen to affect the informal learning by experience in a supportive way by improving the employees' assertiveness and knowledge. However, this political game also seemed to inhibit this same type of learning by instilling an attitude of demotivation, irritation, hesitation and self-doubt towards learning in the employees. A few others did not seem to be affected by this political game.

Behaviours connected to the 'Line vs. Staff' rivalry game were also seen to support informal learning. For example, in one instance it appeared to support the learning by experience of one employee in a way that made him more meticulous in his work. However it also seems to have the potential to inhibit learning by instilling demotivation towards informal learning and an attitude of nonchalance towards both formal and informal learning. One participant in particular experienced such demotivation as a result of such behaviours that he eventually resigned from his job. This may be considered as an addition to the consequences of organisational politics outlined by Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun (2005) wherein they affirm that organisational politics may cause an individual to detach either physically or mentally from the workplace (2005: 260).

In general, it seems that rivalry behaviours of various kinds can significantly impede or undermine workplace learning, and this was particularly illustrated where rivalry games were played out between groups of employees in central administration, namely the 'Rival Camps Game' and 'Attacking or Blaming Others'. The findings reveal a high degree of rivalry between two particular types of staff: (i) those employed on an indefinite basis i.e. until retirement age, and (ii) those employed for a definite period. Staff in (i) above perceive that the employees who are employed for a definite period are treated much better and have higher wages. There is a perception that the first group of employees seem to not be taking full responsibility for their job and there also seems to be a misconception in this regard.

This indicates that there may be a lack of communication between the management and the subordinates and there are also conflicts, which, conforming to Jehn (1997), seem to be task-related conflicts that have changed to relationship conflicts. This rivalry also supports Albrecht's (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) portrayal that employees tend to reduce their dedication, put in less effort and engage in withdrawal behaviour when they feel that they cannot trust other employees and the procedures of the organisation (2006: 109). Similarly, another participant indicated that the formal on-the-job learning she was undergoing is very difficult due to the 'Attacking or Blaming Others' behaviour that she felt occurs at the central administration. This particular participant found the centralised system very time-wasting for her learning and prefers to do the things herself or seek help from other departments instead of going directly to the central administration.

## **7.6 A Summary of the Research Findings & the Key Factors**

The literature review in Chapter 2 commenced by highlighting the lack of relevant literature that directly addresses the effect of organisational politics on workplace learning. This last decade saw a lot of developments in the area of workplace politics however, despite a few isolated and disparate studies in this area, the relationship between organisational politics and workplace learning has hitherto been poorly and only partially understood, and limited to particular and isolated parts of the politics – learning relationship. According to Vigoda-Gadot & Dryzin-Amit (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), organisational politics are important since these provide an understanding of the informal processes of conflicts and co-operations in organisations, and their impact on the

employees' performance (2006: 7). Therefore, not knowing the effect of politics on workplace learning leaves a gap in the knowledge. The findings of this thesis give light and provide an understanding of how micro-politics may or may not affect workplace learning, thus filling the gap that there is in current understanding of the relationship between organisational politics and workplace learning.

Lawrence *et al* (2005) put forward the idea that in order for learning to occur individuals need to be politically skilled, whilst Kirwan (2009) argues that the manager's approach towards his or her subordinates could be inhibitive to the workplace learning (2009: 118). The findings of this thesis identified several political actions that add to Kirwan's argument, especially in cases where feedback from the line manager was not provided to the subordinates. The findings also indicate that, as per Lawrence *et al*'s idea for people to be politically skilled, managers and supervisory staff used political activity in order to get the work done. In this regard, the political tactics identified were 'Reciprocity', 'Ingratiation' and 'Developing a base of support'.

Mallon *et al* (2005) argue that workplace learning is not a neutral process for the organisation or the employee (2005: 8). Their argument and that of Collin *et al* (2011) suggest that workplace learning situations are generally subject to considerable power inequalities (Collin *et al*, 2011; Malcolm *et al*, 2003: 5) due to the different personalities. Similarly studies concerning the relationship of organisational politics and learning

illustrate that workplace learning is more likely to occur when there is low political behaviour (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195). Indeed the findings illustrate that despite the political activity that may have hindered some of the participants' workplace learning, the respondents claimed that it was not hard for them to learn their tasks.

In general, the key findings can be summarised as follows (and their implications will be discussed further below): (i) in essence organisational politics may hinder or enhance workplace learning depending on the specific type of behaviour, the context in which it is played out and how it is perceived by different individuals. This may depend on the disposition and personality of the individuals; (ii) organisational politics may have no effect whatsoever on an individual's learning by choice of the individual to stay detached from the political behaviour. This as well may be due to the personality and disposition of the individuals; (iii) part of the political behaviour is caused by the structure of the organisation; (iv) individuals in a managerial or supervisory role may need to be politically skilled in order to attain their goals. The study showed that the participants felt the necessity to engage in political behaviour to get things done; (v) there seems to be rivalry between two groups of staff - in fact, the study also identified that the structure of the organisation generates a lot of political games concerning rivalry due to its bureaucratic nature. As such, the presence of bureaucracy seems to have the capacity to motivate individuals to engage in political behaviour; and, (vi) subordinates also need to learn to play political games more effectively, such as in the case of one of the participants of this

study and as previously mentioned, keeping a paper trail of correspondence, something which enables the existence of political behaviour within the organisation.

## **7.7 Implications for Theory**

This research has looked closely at the effect of organisational micro-politics on workplace learning of individuals and has systematically investigated the impact of particular political behaviours upon workplace learning activity. The study also delved into the reasons behind the actual political behaviour. According to Buchanan (2008) structural relationships within an organisation may also be the cause of political behaviour (2008: 54). Such seems to be the case at the setting where this study has been carried out, wherein political behaviour in part occurs due to the formation of job duties. There also seems to be a lack of communication between the management and the subordinates which leads to misconceptions and consequently particular political behaviour such as the ‘Rival Camps Game’ and ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’.

The lack of performance measures, as also indicated by Gotsis & Kortezi (2010), Othman (2008) and Poon (2003), and other practices such as for example, talent management, are leading employees to become demotivated and engage in various political tactics such as ‘Insurgency Game’ and ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’. As has been made clear several times in this thesis, in Malta there has been no studies regarding the effect of politics on

workplace learning and this research will contribute to discussions in this area of sociological examination.

The research included in this thesis has made a novel contribution to the existing research on politics and learning since it identified the type of effects that particular political behaviours have on the learning of the individual at the place of work. The effects may be learning-supportive or learning-inhibitive and these effects were completely unknown before this research took place. Where political behaviour is learning-supportive it is meant that the political behaviour improves and boosts the learning of the individual. On the other hand when the political behaviour is learning-inhibitive it is meant that the political behaviour impedes, obstructs or even delays the learning of the employee. The study also identified that any one political tactic can have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect. Other political behaviour seemed to have no effect at all on some employees. Whether the political behaviour is learning-supportive and learning-inhibitive or has no effect at all highly depends on how the individual reacts to a particular political tactic in relation to his or her learning. Thus, one can say that the effect of politics on learning depends to some extent on the individual's perception, character, disposition and state of mind.

## **7.8 Implications for Policy & Practice**

Undoubtedly, researchers who undertake a study in the organisation they are employed, do so because they feel the need to improve certain aspects of their organisation's processes



(Coghlan & Casey, 2001: 676). Both Allen *et al*'s political behaviour and Mintzberg's political games were important for this study however, Mintzberg's definitions of the games have been very influential in this research. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Mintzberg has 'illuminated' the research in question with the thorough characterizations of the various political activities. While he is not deprived of critics, Mintzberg is extensively valued in the arena of management and organisational theory (Lemieux, 1998: 36). One would ask, why choose Mintzberg's definitions of political activity? There are indeed other writers whose work on organisational politics is interesting and it is not intended to suggest that one should not investigate the work on organisational politics of other writers.

However, this research distinguishes Mintzberg's work on organisational politics as a model of how one can apply the definitions of political activity, particularly because he is a well-respected organisational theorist in his own right (Lemieux, 1998: 58). Moreover, his definitions offer a firm basis in understanding and observing commonalities in political activity since, according to Lemieux (1998), they establish part of a broad construction of the primary theories on organisations drawn from political (as well as other areas on organisational theory) literature up to the late 1980s and because they are determinedly ingrained in the 'neo-functionalist sociological' focal point (1998: 58). As noted above, while no typology of social behaviours can lay claim to totally perfect or comprehensive representation, the benefit of using Mintzberg's typology of political behaviours (and also those used by Allen *et al*) is that it offers a clear framework for analysis and a useful heuristic tool for making sense of common themes in political behaviours.

From the findings of this research and in the best of circumstances, the aim of the researcher in this case would be to make the top management of the University aware of potential political situations that are hindering the workplace learning of employees and remedy the matters at hand. One of the responsibilities of the Office for Human Resources is to resolve conflicts between employees or between employees and their superiors however they originate, as well as complaints put forward against the University by its employees. Since the researcher forms part of the Office for Human Resources she is concerned with creating a positive, gratifying work setting, by remedying the negative situations and improving the employees' work place learning. The main concern stands with the rivalry that is present between different types of employees and this issue is best dealt with by top management, since it is a result of the lack of communication about the present policies of the University.

On a general note, this research can contribute to discussions on policy making and the findings can be used to give advice on the benefit of implementing human resource best practices and how people react to different situations while they are learning. As discussed in previous sections, some political behaviours seem to be beneficial for workplace learning, in certain circumstances and where individuals are positively predisposed towards political behaviours. In this case it is most important to implement coaching and mentoring as part of the HR practices, which, apart from the workplace learning, may also enhance the development of relations at the workplace. For other employees who seem to be affected negatively, the traditional HR practice of a conflict resolution mechanism may be rather useful in

this circumstance. This is in view that conflict resolution practices may empower employees whereby they can speak out about their personal issues related to management.

Other universities might use this research as a guide to inform their understanding of how politics affect their employees' workplace learning. One should bear in mind that politics may have an influence on an organisation and in certain organisations politics may govern, even if for a short span of time (Lemieux, 1998: 59). According to Mintzberg (in Lemieux, 1998), such organisations are best defined in terms of power, not structure, and by power which is applied in illegitimate ways and not by means of authority or capability (1998: 59). As such, managers should have knowledge of how workplace learning takes place. Additionally, they should also have knowledge on the various political behaviour that may be present in a university setting, in particular those political behaviours concerning authority, power and rivalry identified in this study. The specific politics-learning relationships concerning these three types of politics might be most pertinent to them. These should also preferably learn some political skills as sort of 'survival skills', since from the study it transpired that a few participants in a management/supervisory role engaged in political behaviour in order to get things done.

Managers could also carry out a survey based on the causes and effects, perhaps those included in this thesis, to be able to identify the political behaviour that is present in their organisation and control the learning-supportive effects that the political behaviour is

having on the learning of their employees. With the survey, managers could also identify the political behaviour that has a learning-inhibitive effect on the individual and try to contest these by making the necessary changes for example in the work process or the people that are hindering learning due to their political activity, and take action accordingly. It is really a case by case situation. These findings will also be of interest to other type of organisations, wherein employees are engaged in workplace learning.

Last but not least, and as mentioned in previous sections, in this research the bureaucratic structure of the organisation seems to be partly at the root of some political issues. The motive why bureaucracy and consequently organisational politics embellish is that they are a normal evolving quality of an organisation structure. As has been seen in this research, the present structure seems to be influencing the employees' behaviour and thus is stimulating the enhancement of bureaucracy and political behaviour. Maybe the only way to overcome this dysfunction is to change the organisation's structure. This may be done by carrying out a reengineering and a restructuring exercise of the processes, policies and HR practices (such as rewards and incentives) of the organisation.

### **7.8.1 Reflections on Professional Practice**

The research of this thesis urges some changes to the HR practices adopted at the University of Malta. As discussed in the previous section, following the research findings,

the researcher identified the importance of developing several skills and enhancing HR practices such as communication, conflict resolution, coaching and mentoring. A starting point would be for the researcher to make the top management of the University aware of the present potential political behaviours that are hindering the workplace learning of employees. This is required in order to remedy situations such as the conflicts between the various groups of individuals. The major issue at hand seems to be the rivalry between two different types of employees, which issue also seems to be a result of the lack of communication from the top management about the present policies of the University of Malta. The research also seems to have several impacts on the University's HR practices as to how these need to be developed or enhanced by improving the skills of individuals – the main one being conflict resolution.

Conflict in the workplace may be a natural mechanism in an organisation, however it can be extremely damaging to employees and especially teamwork. If employees are managed in an incorrect way, factual and reasonable differences between them can rapidly become rampant (Aritzeta et al, 2005: 175). This may result in situations where teamwork collapses and the goals and objectives are susceptible, particularly in circumstances where the wrong tactics to conflict resolution are used (Aritzeta et al, 2005: 161). Conflicting objectives can rapidly change into individual aversions: Teamwork is disrupted and capacities are unexploited as employees will tend to isolate themselves from their tasks, and end up in a rancorous descending meander of pessimism and blaming (Aritzeta et al, 2005: 175) – similar to what seems to be happening in certain departments of the

University of Malta. In such situations it is beneficial to use a positive tactic to conflict resolution, where a discussion is considerate and non-provocative, and the focus remains on the issues rather than on the individual employees (Koza & Dant, 2007: 291). As long as individuals listen attentively and analyse the actualities, disputes and potential resolutions appropriately, conflict will likely be resolved in a successful way.

As part of the HR practice, the practitioner is to understand the various ways of resolving conflicts that may be present in a situation, and perhaps should use one of Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) five styles of conflict resolution, namely the Collaborative style. This style is useful in the case of the University of Malta since it involves the conflict resolver trying to meet the needs of all the employees involved. The conflict resolvers that use the collaborative style can be very emphatic however they collaborate well and recognize that all employees are significant (Koza & Dant, 2007: 281). This style of conflict resolution is beneficial when the conflict resolver is required to combine a range of perspectives to acquire a paramount resolution (Koza & Dant, 2007: 281).

In the previous section the issue of lack of communication has been mentioned. Communication is important for the conflict resolution process. One has to listen sensibly in order to understand why one group of employees are espousing their point (Moreno, 2010: 103). Moreover, one has to understand where the other employees are coming from before defending the position of the other group of employees. At this stage,

communicating effectively by setting out facts and objectives to both groups is vital in order to adopt the best resolution. Speaking of effective communication - it has to be understood that communication is an important tool in an organisation since it creates a clear understanding of the policies of the organisation (Moreno, 2010: 100) and it assists in enhancing the productivity of the employees (Moreno, 2010: 102).

The research of this thesis clearly illustrates that unblemished communication and transparency are important so that the employees can understand the policies and the job responsibilities of their peers who receive higher wages. This communication would offer a sense of direction to the employees since they would understand what their peers are required to achieve from their tasks. Perhaps, as part of its practices, the HR Department, in line with the other departments, should start by creating an effective communication strategy to outline what the organisation does and what its key objectives are, especially the role of each group of employees. The manager concerned for the groups must communicate effectively with his or her subordinates in order to achieve the team goals with minimal conflicts (Koza & Dant, 2007: 282). In addition, monitoring, which is part of the manager's job, is not possible without effective communication, since communication assists in the monitoring process of the employees' behaviour - this aids the employees to communicate any work issues and grievances to their managers (Koza & Dant, 2007: 282; Moreno, 2010: 105). Therefore, one may say that, in part, communication helps in the monitoring role of management.

Linked with communication are the mentoring and coaching skills. Previously it has been noted that it is most important to implement coaching and mentoring skills, which, apart from the workplace learning, may also enhance the development of relations at the workplace. Coaching and mentoring are skills that empower the employees to realise their full potential since both use the same abilities and tactic: coaching is short term task-based and mentoring is a longer term relationship (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000: 30; Martin, 2006). In the past coaching and mentoring were only earmarked for directors and executives however, today these are accessible to every individual as a personal improvement instrument (Martin, 2006). These skills are also interconnected with organisational change activities so as to assist employees to agree on and adjust to the changes that take place (Martin, 2006).

In the case of the University of Malta, perhaps those employees who 'hold a grudge' against their peers who receive higher wages, would benefit from the coaching and mentoring skills, since coaching and mentoring focus on the individual employee to enhance his or her morale, motivation and productivity. Several people in a management position have never learned how to be an effective mentor and coach. One of the tasks of the mentor is to encourage an open and two-way communication, which may include the sharing of difficult times employees go through, thus instilling a sense of trust in their superior (Martin, 2006). Undoubtedly, the manager is required to improve his or her listening skills since it is often the case where people tend to talk more than they listen and often interrupt other people when they should not. Ideally mentoring and coaching should form part of the



development programme of the HR Department for managers and directors, wherein the HR Director calls on other mentors/colleagues when appropriate, who will then try to help subordinates widen their network.

One should not forget the jealousy that occurs between work colleagues, especially when one is getting more money than the other, an issue which at the University of Malta is urging employees to be involved in political behaviour. Research shows that monetary payments stimulate the brain equally like other amphetamines such as food and drugs - “nonbiological reinforcers, such as money....can elicit neural activation in the same dopaminergic reward circuitry with drug and food rewards” (Gal, 2012: 1023) – thus earning money feels good. According to Pessiglione et al (2007) and Barridge & Kringelbach (2008), the greater the pay, the more stimulated is the brain. Moreover, Barridge & Kringelbach (2008) suggest that the fragment of the brain that is enthused by money is dissimilar from the fragment of the brain that is roused by kindness and thus, individuals are not able to express contentment when their counterparts gain more money. Therefore, the group of employees at the University who are jealous of their peers who have higher wages need to be made aware that the latter may have a natural ability or talent, or are of superior intelligence. They might also be more competent in their line of work in view of their skills and qualifications.

Finally, pay satisfaction may be a significant factor to entice and retain individuals in an organisation (Weiner, 1980: 745). When employees are not contented with the incentive structure of the organisation, they tend to exhibit inadequate role behaviours such as withdrawal or absenteeism (Weiner, 1980: 746). Conceivably the management of the University of Malta should ask the following question and seek ways to communicate the answers to the unsatisfied employees: What determines the employees' contentment with their remuneration? There exist two answers for this question: 'Pay Adequacy' and 'Pay Equity'. Pay Adequacy is the extent to which an employee's remuneration fulfills his or her pecuniary requirements (Dyer & Theriault, 1976: 603). On the other hand, Pay Equity is the extent to which an individual identifies that his or her remuneration is just in comparison to other groups of employees in the organisation (Dyer & Theriault, 1976: 597). These answers should be seriously taken into consideration by the management of the University of Malta in line with some of the conflicts that exist with regards to the salary structures for different groups of employees.

Undoubtedly, one cannot expect a working atmosphere to be jealousy-free and there may be employees who incorrectly perceive the credentials required to go up the career ladder; however, jealousy can be kept at a minimum level if the perceptions are talked through. Some employees will move up the ladder and others who are less competent or less qualified will not – this will surely generate resentment, jealousy, and further adverse sentiments. Thacker (1998) suggests that over time, those individuals who realize that their perceptions are incorrect as to what fits and what is rewarded in the organisation will

ultimately leave the organisation (1998: 51). However, by coaching and mentoring, resolving conflicts, and communicating effectively with employees, the working relations between the different groups of individuals at the University of Malta may produce a more harmonious work environment.

## **7.9 Further research**

The detailed data obtained from 35 participants who have been recently employed, promoted or transferred to a new department has provided a variety of information on the effect of politics on workplace learning. Further research may usefully contribute to this area by examining in a similar way the experiences of employees in other universities, or perhaps employees in a different type of organisation with other types of jobs. Key informants, who are not presently engaging in workplace learning, whilst included in informal discussions as part of the data collection process, played only a minor part in this study and only the perceptions and actions of those newly employed, promoted or transferred to another department played a major role. There is also the need to gain more understanding of the mediating effect that individual dispositions have on the relationship between politics and learning.

## **Conclusion**

The respective literatures on workplace learning and organisational politics are fairly well developed. However, the potential benefits to be gained from systematically combining these two fields of enquiry have been generally neglected until now. This is where this study has sought to make a contribution; in taking a systematic view of micro-political behaviours in organisations and attempting to illuminate the supportive and inhibitive effects that they can have on learning. Though the observations and the responses of the respondents are not to be viewed as established, objective facts, this study has identified issues which it is asserted add to the knowledge on the effect of politics on workplace learning. It is clear that political behaviour may have a profound effect on the employees' learning, particularly informal learning. These effects can be inhibitive and devastating for some, and supportive and fruitful for others.

The study also identified that the organisation yields a lot of rivalry games due to its bureaucratic structure that seems to generate such political games concerning rivalry. One example of rivalry is occurring because one group of employees has the perception that the other group is treated and paid much better. In other cases, a small number of employees seem to have had no effect on their learning due to their choice to remain detached from the political manoeuvres. Probably a supplementary study of these individuals would be interesting as these may divulge attributes regarding their capacity to remain immune to the political games and tactics.

## APPENDIX A – CONSENT FORM ENGLISH VERSION

Date

Name

Address

### INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Dear .....,

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this research on organisational politics and workplace learning. I greatly appreciate your co-operation in order to help me.

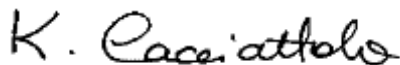
I am undertaking this project as part of a Doctorate degree which I am studying with the University of Leicester. The project I am working on deals with developing a better understanding of politics and how it affects workplace learning. You were selected to take part in this research because you are undergoing some kind of informal workplace learning as a new starter/engaging in new responsibilities.

You can withdraw from the study at any time if you feel that it is necessary. If you are happy to take part in the research, however, I will ask you to sign a consent form giving your agreement. You can still withdraw from the research after signing the form. The observation will last for a few days/weeks. I will be interviewing you/observing your day-to-day tasks and may ask you a series of questions and I will give you the opportunity to ask me any questions you may have. I would like to reassure you that the information which you provide in the course of the interview/observation will be treated in the strictest of confidence. All data collected will be treated in accordance with ethical codes set out in the British Sociological Guidelines and the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee.

In addition, your answers will be unattributed to either yourself or to the University of Malta. The data gathered during the interviews/observations will only be used for my Doctorate thesis. Your own data will be completely anonymous and you will not be identifiable.

Once again, thank you very much for your participation. If you have any questions at any stage of the project please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Karen Cacciattolo  
**Doctoral Student**  
karen.cacciattolo@um.edu.mt



Dr Daniel Bishop  
**Supervisor**  
dan.bishop@le.ac.uk

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

*“To what extent do organisational politics hinder or support workplace learning? The University of Malta case.”*

I agree to take part in the interview/observations as part of the above named project. The research has been clearly explained to me and I have read and understood the participant informed consent letter. I understand that by signing the consent form I am agreeing to participate in this research and that I can withdraw from the research at any time. I understand that any information I provide during the interview is confidential and will not be used for any purpose other than the research project outlined above. The data will not be shared with any other organisations.

Name: .....

Signature:..... Date:.....

## APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM MALTESE VERSION

Data

Isem

Indirizz

### ITTRA TA' KUNSENS

Ghaziz/a .....,

Grazzi hafna talli accettajt li tiehu sehem f'din ir-riċerka dwar '*organisational politics*' u it-tagħlim fuq il-post tax-xogħol. Napprezza hafna il-ko-operazzjoni tiegħek sabiex tghinni f'dan ir-rigward.

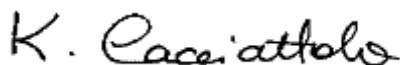
Qed naghmel dan il-proġett bħala parti mid-Dottorat li jiena qieghda naghmel mal-Università ta' Leicester. Il-proġett li qed naħdem fuqu jittratta dwar l-iżvilupp ta' '*organisational politics*' u kif dawn jolqtu it-tagħlim fuq il-post tax-xogħol. Inti gejt magħżul/a sabiex tiehu sehem f'din ir-riċerka għaliex inti għaddej/a minn xi tip ta' tagħlim informali fuq il-post tax-xogħol bħala impjegat ġdid jew qed tigi involut/a f'responsabbiltajiet godda.

Inti tista tirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe hin jekk inti thoss li huwa neċessarju. Jekk inti taqbel li tiehu sehem fir-riċerka, madankollu, jiena ser nistaqsik biex tiffirma formola bħala kunsens minn-naha tiegħek. Inti xorta tista tirtira mir-riċerka wara l-iffirmar tal-formola. L-osservazzjoni se ddum għal ftit jiem / ġimghat. Jiena ser naghmillek intervista/ser inkun qed nosserva ix-xogħol tiegħek ta' kuljum u nista nistaqsik xi mistoqsijiet, u jien ser nagħtik l-opportunità li tistaqsi xi mistoqsijiet lili li inti jista jkollok. Nixtieq ninfurmak illi l-informazzjoni li inti tipprovdi waqt l-intervista/l-osservazzjoni se tkun ittrattata bl-aktar mod kunfidenzjali. L-informazzjoni kollha miġbura se tkun ittrattata skond il-kodiċijiet etiċi stipulati fil-'British Sociological Guidelines' u l-Kumitat tal-Etika tar-Ricerka tal-Università ta' Malta.

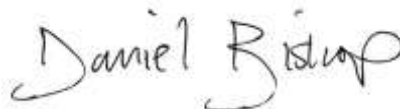
Barra minn hekk, it-tweġibiet tiegħek mhux ser jintwerew lil xi impjegati tal-Università ta' Malta. L-informazzjoni miġbura waqt l-intervista/l-osservazzjonijiet se tintuża biss għat-teżi tat-Dottorat tiegħi. L-informazzjoni tiegħek ser tibqa kompletament anonima u int mhux se tkun identifikat/a.

Għal darb'ohra, nixtieq niringrazzjak hafna tal-partecipazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet fi kwalunkwe stadju tal-proġett, jekk jogħġbok, toqghodx lura milli tikkuntattjani.

Dejjem tiegħek,



Karen Cacciattolo  
**Studenta**  
karen.cacciattolo@um.edu.mt



Dr Daniel Bishop  
**Supervisor**  
dan.bishop@le.ac.uk

## FORMOLA GHALL – KUNSENS TAL-PARTECIPANT/A

*“To what extent do organisational politics hinder or support workplace learning? The University of Malta case.”*

Jiena naqbel li niehu sehem fl-intervisti/fl-osservazzjonijiet bhala parti mill-proġett imsemmi hawn fuq. Ir-riċerka giet spjegata b'mod ċar lili u jien qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' kunsens. Nifhem li billi qed niffirma din il formola ta' kunsens qieghed/qieghda naqbel li nipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka u li nista nirtira mir-riċerka fi kwalunkwe hin. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni li tohrog waqt xi intervista ser tibqa kunfidenzjali u mhux se tintuża għal xi għan ieħor għajr il proġett ta' riċerka kif spjegat hawn fuq. L-informazzjoni mhux ser tkun maghrufa ma' organizzazzjonijiet oħra.

Isem: .....

Firma:.....

Data:.....



## APPENDIX C – LETTER TO HEADS OF DEPARTMENT

Date

Dear Sir/Madam,

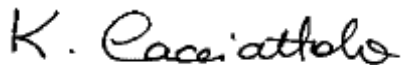
I am currently reading for a Doctorate in Social Sciences at the University of Leicester, which is sponsored by the Scholarship & Bursaries Committee of the University of Malta.

As part-fulfilment of the thesis, I shall be carrying out a study amongst employees of the University of Malta under the supervision of Dr Daniel Bishop, Lecturer, Centre for Labour Market Studies at the University of Leicester, and with your permission I wish to carry out part of the fieldwork at the Faculty/Department/Section/Office of \_\_\_\_\_ .

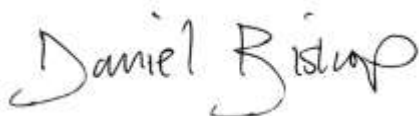
The study I am working on deals with developing a better understanding of politics and how it affects workplace learning, and participants are selected to take part in this research because they are undergoing some kind of informal workplace learning as a new starter or are engaging in new responsibilities. The study consists of interviews and participant observations among employees where several issues will be observed related to workplace learning and organisational politics. The participation of the employees is voluntary and completely anonymous and they can withdraw from the study at any time if they feel that it is necessary. I will be asking participants to sign a consent form giving their agreement. They could still withdraw from the research after signing the form.

Whilst I thank you for your time and collaboration, kindly do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor should you need further information about this study (e-mail addresses below).

Yours sincerely,



Karen Cacciattolo  
karen.cacciattolo@um.edu.mt



Dr Daniel Bishop  
dan.bishop@leicester.ac.uk

# APPENDIX D – LETTER OF PERMISSION FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

L-UNIVERSITÀ TA' MALTA  
Msida - Malta  
UFFIĊĊJU GHAT-TMEXXIIJA  
U L-IŻVILUPP TAR-RIŻORSI UMANI



UNIVERSITY OF MALTA  
Msida - Malta  
OFFICE FOR HUMAN RESOURCES  
MANAGEMENT & DEVELOPMENT

10<sup>th</sup> June 2011

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to confirm that Ms Karen Cacciattolo (University of Leicester Student no. 049014939) has been granted permission to carry out research at the University of Malta and to mention the title of the Institution in her thesis in connection with the Doctorate in Social Sciences offered by the University of Leicester.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Fenech'.

Ms Jacqueline Fenech  
Director  
Office for Human Resources Management  
& Development

Ms Jacqueline Fenech  
Director for Human Resources  
Management and Development

POSTAL ADDRESS: MSIDA MSD 2080, MALTA  
TEL: (356) 2340 2810/3177/3175/2479 FAX: (356) 2340 2810

## **APPENDIX E – PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION GUIDE**

### **1. Introduction to participants and purpose of the study**

*“My name is Karen Cacciattolo and I am undertaking this project as part of a Doctorate degree which I am studying with the University of Leicester. The research deals with developing a better understanding of politics and how it affects workplace learning. You were selected to take part in this research because you are undergoing some kind of informal or formal workplace learning as a new starter, or are engaging in new responsibilities.”*

### **2. Background information**

At the start of the observation the following will be taken note of:

- (i) Date, time, place, and count of the participants (including age, gender & job title);
- (ii) The setting and description of the physical surroundings;
- (iii) Where participants are positioned.

### **3. General observation**

The following general observations will be made:

- (i) Appearance such as clothing and bodily appearance of employees - anything that might signify attachment in groups, such as their job title, status and rank.
- (ii) Verbal behaviour and the dynamics of interaction, such as who speaks to whom and for how long, who instigates interaction, the language used as well as the tone of voice.
- (iii) Physical behaviour and gestures such as what employees do, who does what, who interacts with whom and who is not interacting. These observations will include how employees use their bodies and voice to convey various emotions, and what the employees' behaviours imply about their feelings toward one another.
- (iv) Personal space, mainly how close employees stand to one another, including what employees' inclinations pertaining to personal space imply about their relationships.
- (v) Human traffic i.e. employees who enter, leave, and spend time at the observation setting. The amount of employees, who they are (their job title, age and gender), how long they stay, and whether they are unaccompanied or accompanied.
- (vi) Employees who stand out and are identified as individuals that receive a lot of attention from others. The distinctiveness of these employees will be noted as well as what distinguishes them from others, whether people consult them and whether they seem to be outsiders or popular by other employees present.

### 3. Workplace Learning

During observations the following will be noted:

- The presence of irresponsible or inefficient behaviours during workplace learning and how it is corrected.
- The amount of feedback that the Head/Manager/Supervisor gives to the new or promoted employee regarding his or her responsibilities.
- Whether the head of department/line manager/supervisor is allowing the new subordinate to properly learn his or her tasks/new responsibilities.
- Any colleagues or relationships in the workplace that are important to the employee's learning.
- Whether learning takes place more informally than formally or vice versa.
- The skills that the participants have and how they learned them, whether formally or informally.

### 4. Political Tactics

Here whose opinions are respected and how decisions are made will be observed. Also, where participants stand or sit, particularly those with power versus those with less power or vice versa. Conversations will be listened to carefully to try and remember as many conversations, nonverbal expressions, and gestures as possible. Observations of recurring patterns or underlying themes in behaviour, action or inaction will take place. In particular, a look out for all, some or a few of the following political tactics will take place:

**Attacking or blaming others** - Individuals who are avoiding their involvement with a detrimental or a failing situation at the workplace. Presence of rivalry between employees and the individual/s that is/are making a rival employee look bad in the eyes of significant members of the department or section, such as the Head, Supervisor or Manager.

**Using information as a political tool** - Employees who are engaging in preserving, twisting or using information to harm another employee.

**Impression management** - Employees whose behaviour shows over enthusiasm or charm in order to build and enhance their self image by developing a reputation of being liked.

**Developing a base of support** - How a manager, supervisor or head of department speaks to his or her subordinates regarding his or her ideas. Is he or she trying to make the subordinate/s feel as if the idea is theirs to guarantee their dedication?

**Ingratiation** - An employee who is praising a colleague or another employee in order to create a good rapport.

**Reciprocity** - Individuals who are performing services or favours to create obligations such as the expression “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours”.

***Rivalry Games:***

**Line vs. Staff** - Employees who are ignoring the expertise of another employee in order to make him or her less powerful.

**Rival Camps** – Conflicts between departments or two opposing goals of employees and occurs when the alliance or empire building games result in two main power troops.

***Authority Games:***

**Insurgency Game** - Employees who resist authority.

**Counterinsurgency Game** -Managers, heads or supervisors who are attempting to increase their control over the subordinates by reacting with political or legitimate means.

***Change Games & Behaviour:***

**Whistle Blowing** - Employees who report a wrong doing of another in the hope to bring about change.

**Young Turks Game** - A group of revolt employees who are trying to cause the downfall of the existing leadership of the department.

**Obstructionism** - Employees in a lower level who are opposing top management’s policy making decisions.

**Strategic Candidates Game** – Played by individuals or groups to bring about change in an organisation and involves individuals or groups promoting their own planned ‘contestants’.

***Power Based Games & Behaviour:***

**Sponsorship Game** - Employees who are using their superiors to acknowledge loyalty in return for power, in order to construct their power base.

**Alliance Building Game** - Supervisors who are bargaining hidden deals of support for each other in order to move further up in the organisation.

**Empire Building Game** - Supervisors who are trying to build power individually with subordinates.

**Episodic power** - Employees engaging in more responsibility in decision making, in order to increase his or her power over a new employee or another employee with new responsibilities. This person is self-interested and is most able to influence organisational decision making.

**Systematic Power or Forming power coalitions with allies** - Employees who socialise in order to increase their power within the department. More specifically, individuals that are associating themselves with influential persons in the department or in social situations to gain popularity or feel important.

**Expertise Game** - The use of expertise to build power base. Experts in a field flaunt it or try to keep the information to themselves and non-experts attempt to have their work seem as expert to be viewed as a professional so as to be able to have control over it.

**Budgeting Game** – Played openly by line managers and is similar to the ‘empire building game’ but is less conflict-ridden since it concerns the fight for resources.

**Lording Game** – Line managers or professionals who use legitimate power in illegitimate ways with others who lack it.

## **APPENDIX F – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Introduction**

*Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this interview. To recap, the project I am working on deals with developing a better understanding of politics and how it affects workplace learning. You were selected to take part in this research because you are undergoing some kind of learning at work. May I remind you that your answers will be unattributed to either yourself or to the University of Malta. The data gathered during this interview will only be used for my Doctorate thesis, it will be completely anonymous and you will not be identifiable.*

### **Workplace Learning**

1. *You told me that you have been here for X months and you are responsible for X. So, what is the most important part of your job?*

*Probe: Do you need a particular skill to do that?*

2. *Could you tell me how did you learn/are learning to do that? Did someone show you how to do it? Did you receive some form of training or did you just pick it up?*
3. *Do you get enough feedback regarding this/these skill/s that you are learning or have learnt?*

### **Experience of Organisational Politics & Its Effect on Workplace Learning**

4. *I noticed that in your place of work the following behaviour takes place: (type and meaning of political tactic). Why do you think this happens/happened and why do you think X engages in that behaviour?*
5. *Could you tell me how this behaviour affects/has affected your learning at the workplace?*
6. *So, in what way does/did this negatively and positively affects/affected your learning? Could you explain how?*
7. *How do you feel about this experience?*

### **Concluding Questions**

8. *In general, how easy is it/was it for you to learn your tasks with this behaviour?*
9. *Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions that you would like to ask?*

## **APPENDIX G – THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA**

The University of Malta is the main teaching institution in Malta and it is publicly funded. The institution is open to all those prospective students who have the requisite qualifications and over the past few years, it has reviewed its structures in order to be in line with the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area (University of Malta website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/about/uom>). The University endeavours to build courses that are applicable and appropriate according to the requirements of the country (University of Malta Calendar, 2010/2011: 10). Presently the institution holds approximately 10,000 students, which number includes some 750 foreign or exchange students (University of Malta Calendar, 2010/2011: 10). Almost 3,000 students graduate in various disciplines annually. The University's degree courses are intended to generate highly qualified professionals with research skills, who will engage in major roles throughout the industry, business and the public (University of Malta Calendar, 2010/2011: 10). The University today has thirteen faculties and a number of interdisciplinary centres and institutes.

The primary officers of the University of Malta are the Chancellor, the Pro-Chancellor, the Rector, the Pro-Rectors, the Registrar, the Deans of the Faculties, the Director of Finance and the Director of Library Services (University of Malta website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/about/uom/administration>). The main governing bodies are the Council, the Senate and the Faculty Boards. The 'Council' is responsible for the general



administration of the University. It is also responsible for appointing new staff members, both administrative and academic, to various sections of the University (University of Malta website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/about/uom/administration>). The 'Senate' is responsible for the academic matters of the University including entry regulations, course of studies, research, documentation and examinations at the University (University of Malta website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/about/uom/administration>). The 'Faculty Board' leads the academic tasks of a Faculty and it determines the studies, teaching and research within the Faculty as well as presenting proposals to the Senate regarding academic matters and, to the Council regarding general administrative matters (University of Malta website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/about/uom/administration>).

The administrative set up of this institution entails a number of academic, administrative and technical staff employees who are assigned to the several governing bodies of the University. The Office for Human Resources Management and Development acts as the second hand of the Council, wherein it seeks to employ highly skilled individuals and cultivates and sustains a labour force that congregates the requirements of an active academic institution (University of Malta website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/hrmd>). The main responsibility of this office is to lead the University's efforts to recruit, develop and maintain a work force that meets the needs of a dynamic academic institution (University of Malta website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/hrmd>). The Office is responsible for the recruitment and promotion of all academic, administrative, technical and industrial staff of the University of Malta and acts as a contact point in all matters related to staff needs.

The Office is also responsible for the training and development of staff according to the requirements of the University. It maintains an updated database of records of all employees and is responsible for the administrative procedures in connection with absence. It also provides academic support services, including work resources fund and, further training and scholarships. Furthermore, this Office takes full responsibility for the payroll, the University nursery and health and safety issues. Since 2007, the Office has been organising an orientation programme for the newly recruited administrative, technical and industrial staff. The programme is aimed to give an overview of the institution's structure and to make the employees aware of the several services offered by the University of Malta, as well as the duties expected from employees during their employment period. Throughout the University, the actual tasks of the job are mainly learnt and guided on-the-job by an employee's immediate supervisor/line manager/head of department. The academic employees do not attend an orientation programme; however one is guided by his or her head of department or dean.

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