Abstract:
It is broadly accepted that learning is important in supporting the delivery of change (Tsang, 1997). Furthermore, during times of public sector budget cuts there is a growing interest in innovation and change (Pollitt, 2010, Brown and Osborne, 2013). However, it is also generally accepted that austere times typically lead to a reduction in training and development budgets – particularly within the public sector (Jewson et al., 2015).

This paper explores the extent to which the assumed link between learning and change is contested during austerity. 51 public sector managers from Wales and Scotland participated in the study, over a period of 13 months, from a wide range of public sector organisations across two devolved parts of the UK. The research explored issues surrounding motivations for learning, expectations of outcomes and perceptions around the drivers of change.

It is found that public sector budget cuts are having a direct impact on learning and development opportunities across the UK public sector. Whilst budget cuts may lead to change, this is likely to be piecemeal rather than strategic. In conclusion this research supports the view that austerity is a barrier to meaningful change in the public sector and not a driver.
ABSTRACT:

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KEY WORDS:
organisational learning, change, public services, austerity

WORD COUNT: 5434
Introduction

It is broadly accepted that there is a strong link between organisational learning and change (Tsang, 1997). At the same time there is a lack of consensus on how they are related and to exactly what extent. Indeed there are even continuing debates on the very definition of organisational learning (Easterby-Smith et al., 1998; Tsang, 1997; Wang and Ahmed, 2003).

Within the public sector, austerity is seen by some as not affecting the likelihood of change (Wright et al., 2013) whilst for others it acts as a significant barrier (Roberts and Bailey, 2013).

This research begins with a consideration of the distinction between organizational learning and the learning organisation and how they each relate to organizational change. It then goes on to explore the relationship between austerity, learning and change in the public sector. The experiences of 51 public sector managers are taken into account in exploring the extent to which public sector cuts associated with austerity are having an impact on the nature and extent of learning within public sector organisations.

It is found that public sector budget cuts are changing the approach to learning and to organisational change. Specifically, organisations are increasingly viewing learning in an instrumental way linked to individual projects or activities rather than in a more reflective or holistic way. Likewise change is increasingly seen to be piecemeal and transactional rather than strategic and transformational. It is anticipated that further austerity will continue to limit the benefits of any learning and development and the likelihood of effective organisational change.

Learning organisation and organisational learning

There are multiple perspectives on the nature of change and multiple frameworks that illustrate these perspectives (By, 2005). Similarly a number of approaches to organisational learning have been proposed such as the learning cycle (Kolb 1984); action research (Lewin, 1946); action learning (Revans 1980); appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987); and the learning organisation (Pedler et al., 1991; Senge, 1990; Argyris and Schon, 1978, 1996). All these approaches recognise, albeit in different ways, the interconnectedness of learning and change as well as the relationship between the individual in making change happen and the organisation in providing a fertile environment for change to take place.

Much of the literature on organisational learning and learning organisation treats the two terms as interchangeable. Yet if we take organisational learning to represent, at least in part, learning and development opportunities that are either supported or coordinated by the organisation it does not necessarily follow that the organisation is a ‘learning organisation’. For example, Pedler et al. (1991) argues that a learning organisation should support individual learning in order to transform the entire organisation. Yet surely it does not follow that if an organisation is committed to individual learning it is also de facto committed to organisational transformation. As noted by Senge, ‘individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning’ (2006, p. 129). Likewise an organisation devoted to learning is not necessarily a learning organisation.

Literature on the learning organisation emphasises the degree to which an organisation is skilled at the development and management of knowledge (Garvin, 1993). This also recognises the organisation as a fluid entity which embraces learning as an enabler of change in order to adapt and survive in a fast-paced environment (Senge, 1990). In comparison organisational learning is arguably a broader and more fluid term. As such it is more difficult to define as it encompasses ideas of individual, team-based and organisation-wide learning activities.
Typically organisational learning describes a range of isolated activities that are either organised or supported by the corporate centre in the form of learning and development opportunities for staff. As put by Wang and Ahmed (2003) organisational learning is ‘the collectivity of individual learning within the organisation’ (p. 9).

For the purposes of this research it is purported that organisational learning is learning which takes place within an organisational context (typically an employer) whereas a learning organisation requires a deeper and much more substantive organisational commitment to learning as an enabler of change. Therefore the contrast is between learning within organisations and organisations that learn. As Tsang points out, ‘a learning organization is one which is good at organizational learning’ (1997, p. 146).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Table 1 provides a typology of what might be expected within a learning organisation as opposed to an organisation which happens to have some ongoing learning activities within it. Whilst it is accepted that many of the features are difficult to measure and perhaps, in the case of the learning organisation, aspirational, they nonetheless provide a useful tool for exploring the extent to which an organisation is truly committed to learning as an enabler of change. The following section discussed how ideas associated with organisational learning and the learning organisation may manifest in the public sector.

**Public sector context**

The public sector is an interesting case in this context because public sector organisations are typically seen to be highly hierarchical and formalised organisations (Werkman, 2009). Consequently they are characterised as being resistant to change and not conducive environments for individual agency. At the same time many public sector organisations invest in learning as a tool to further enhance the scope for change. Therefore it is interesting to consider the extent to which an investment in organisational learning leads to a direct improvement in the opportunity for individual actors to influence change.

Of particular significance presently is the context of austerity. There are at least two ways in which austerity may be seen to impact on organisational change: employee’s commitment to change and organisational commitment to learning.

In terms of employee’s commitment to change it is generally accepted that people are more likely to embrace change when they see there is something to gain. Consequently it might be assumed that times of austerity – where change is often linked to cuts – are likely to bolster barriers to change as employees fear lose – either to the public service and / or to themselves personally (Levine, 1979). Within the public sector it is also commonly assumed that there is a link between perceived personal benefit and willingness to support change. However, Wright et al. (2013) have shown that a high Public Service Motivation (PSM) is likely to increase people’s support of change – even in times of austerity and cuts. Therefore austerity may not directly affect people’s commitment to change.

In terms of an organisational commitment to learning it is difficult to draw comparisons between public and private sectors. For example, statistics from the CIPD would suggest that the median training budget in the public sector is significantly lower than in the private sector. Where private sector organisations are reported to spend an average of £372 per employee per year on training this is only £238 in the public sector (see Figure 1).
However, these statistics only present a partial view of sectoral comparisons. Others suggest that the public sector spends significantly more on training and development than the private sector (Jewson et al., 2015). Yet this only serves to highlight the extent to which public-private comparisons represent a false binary. There is in fact little value in drawing on such comparisons for a number of crucial reasons as have been widely discussed elsewhere (Boyne, 2002; Bozeman, 1987).

What is perhaps more informative is that 54% of public sector organisations have seen their training budget cut in 2015 compared with only 24% of private sector organisations as demonstrated in Figure 2. These figures are collaborated elsewhere (Jewson et al., 2015) yet there is strikingly little research into the extent of cuts to training budgets and the potential impact that this may have upon the leadership of change in the public sector.

In 2015 the majority of private sector organisations reported an increase in their learning and development headcount and in their use of external associates compared to a decrease of both in the public sector (CIPD, 2015). What is more, only 8% of public sector organisations have seen an increase in their learning and development budget compared to 25% of private sector organisations. Others have reported that the number of public sector organisations with a training plan for the year ahead has fallen from 82.7% in 2005 to 74.6% in 2011 (Jewson et al., 2015). Thus there is some consensus on the view that austerity is having a negative impact on training budgets.

**Method**

In order to explore this in more depth the following research explores the extent to which the assumed link between learning and change is accepted within local government. The research goes on to explore perceptions on the extent to which austerity and resultant cuts to training budgets are likely to affect the barriers and enablers of change. The fieldwork comprised of four stages, all conducted in 13 months between 2015-2016.

Firstly the study used total of 7 semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of former students in postgraduate public administration programmes. These participants were all middle to senior level managers from five local authorities, the devolved government and a national park in Wales. The interviews were used to understand people’s motivations for study and the perceived benefits of study in relation to organisational change. In particular, issues around barriers and enablers of change were considered in relation to the impact of formal higher education and what impact austerity may have on readiness for change.

Later, three of the original seven participants agreed to take part in a follow-up interview (again from a range of local government, devolved government and national park). Prior to these interviews a short summary of key findings from the first round of interviews was circulated. These second interviews then allowed participants the opportunity to clarify and develop their thoughts from the first interviews.

In the third stage of the research a further 5 interviews were conducted with public sector managers from one local authority in Scotland. Again these interviews were used as a process
of member checking and data triangulation in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Finally, a series of three focus groups were conducted with separate groups of middle and senior level managers from four local authorities and one part of the NHS in Scotland. Focus groups ranged in size from 6-18 participants with a total of 39 participants taking part. With the focus group a nominal group technique was used to build consensus around the groups on what were seen to be the key enablers and barriers of change as well as to identify ‘key players’ and ‘minimal effort’ groups within a stakeholder analysis (Johnson and Scholes, 1999) for each of the local authority areas. This was to offer further insight and challenge to the initial findings in order to further enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). This final stage also helped to develop more analysis of the extent to which learning was seen to impact on the enablers and barriers to change.

The research was conducted in line with university research ethics guidelines, procedures and regulations. All steps were taken to stress to participants that their participation was entirely voluntary and they were reminded at the start of interviews that they could elect to exit the research at any stage. To protect the identity of participants they have all been given synonyms in the below analysis.

**Background of participants and engagement in learning and development**

Participants were asked both about their motivations for working in the public sector and their motivations for learning. Many suggested, in line with findings from elsewhere (Wright et al., 2013) that public service motivation factors were significant in their career choice. But drivers for engagement in learning and development tended to be driven by more personal motivations. Indeed there was a lack of organisational drivers, motivators or expectations that people would take part in continuing professional development. Those who did cite an expectation of learning and development were typically bound by the requirements of professional bodies. Furthermore, it was noted by many that completion of training and development would not automatically lead to any salary increments, career progression or other benefits.

A number spoke of the fact that training budgets had been significantly reduced and that training budgets were likely to continue to reduce and that in any context of budget cuts training budgets were often the first to go. Indeed it was noted that budget cuts were viewed as 'quick wins' as the following extract from Fraser illustrates,

> I had a meeting only last week when we were looking at how I'm going to make some fairly massive savings next year and one of the seemingly easy wins was to probably half the relatively small budget for training and development.

This corresponds with evidence that suggests 52% of public sector organisations have had learning and development budgets cut compared to 28% in the private sector (CIPD, 2013).

There was also an acknowledged lack of strategic perspective in the way budgetary decisions were being taken. Fraser went on to say,

> I think it's [the 50% cut to the learning and development budget] probably something that's just plucked from the air quite frankly. It isn't a figure that's going to go a long way to meeting the overall savings. It's only, it's a small sum...So it's very easy to think in terms of round numbers when you're looking to reduce it.

Similarly where decisions were taken on how learning and development spending should occur there were a fairly narrow set of criteria used-particularly in relation to the current needs of the job rather than any future view of changing organisational needs. Again this points to a lack of
any strategic commitment to learning and development as part of a wider cultural of supporting innovation and change.

With their colleagues it was also stated by many participants that learning and development was not a priority as illustrated by Gareth,

you’ve got people who their ambition was to come and work for [this public body]. And once they come here they have no intention of leaving and it is fairly challenging then to get them to engage in a learning process after that. Y’know ’cause there is no aspiration to leave.

Benefits of learning and development

In terms of the benefits that accrued from learning and development again these were framed largely in personal terms. For those who did not have a public sector background there was a sense of completing learning and development in a related subject in order to gain a better sense of how the sector works. Often this was referred to in terms of being able to perform better within their roles. It was also recognised that this could support progression within their organisations. But again this was informed by personal motivations and was not part of an organisational commitment to learning and development.

As Claire stated, ‘It is for career progression, I was always very clear that I wanted a career’. This personal motivation was often in contradistinction to the perspective of employers, as Claire goes on to say, ‘It was free, that is the biggest driver, y’know because that is the first thing you get asked about is “how much is this gonna cost us?”’. 

Whilst having a greater understanding of the public sector context was, for many, seen as having a personal benefit there was also a recognition that a greater understanding could be used to influence change that would lead to positive outcomes for their employer. In this sense the public sector context and focus of any learning and development was seen as important. Consequently not all learning and development activities were seen as equally valuable. As Beth noted,

In the MBA public and third sector were never mentioned. At all. I’ve got my books here, never mentioned, corporate strategy it would just never be, it’s all focus on um, spend and profit. Not on collaboration, efficiency, learning from others. So the public sector is a different animal altogether – it naturally includes that.

This supports the view that context-specific learning and development activities are essential to support effective change. A number of participants pointed specifically to an apparent deficiency in MBA study in failing to capture the complexity and political context of public sector organisations. Despite this perceived value in public sector sensitive learning and development many have lamented the waning of public administration programmes in UK higher education (Boyne, 1996; Chandler, 1991; Chandler, 2002; Jones, 2012; Miller, 2012; Talbot and Talbot, 2014). This may suggest that any decline is not due to a lack of demand – but rather a lack of appropriate funding.

Other benefits of learning and development were seen to accrue from having time away from the workplace to reflect and think about current challenges from a distance. As Beth stated,

We never have incubation time. It’s so hectic in [this part of the organisation] and I never get management incubation time, solution-building time, and working through that course, especially leading change, gave me a view, it made me step away from it and do a commentary on it. It was a self-analysis.
Networking opportunities that came with engagement in learning and development were also seen as important. This reflects the value of collective learning (Wang and Ahmed, 2003) and the wider experiential or informal elements of learning within a formal setting.

Yet all participants found it difficult to give specific examples of how meaningful change had been delivered better following their learning and development. This highlights the challenge of evaluating learning and development programmes – where outcomes can be multi-faceted, subjective and consequently difficult to measure.

**Barriers to change**

Whilst it proved difficult to identify ways in which change had been enabled by their learning and development there was a greater sense of awareness of persistent barriers to change. These included structural issues, social / cultural issues and financial constraints.

In terms of structural issues it was felt by some that the ability to influence change was affected by position within the hierarchy. Consequently it was at times felt that engagement in learning and development activity would always have a limited effect in relation to other personal factors such as attitude and emotional intelligence.

Indeed there was often a sense of frustration expressed by participants that, whilst they were committed to organisational change and service improvement, many of their colleagues remained resistant to change as exemplified by Fraser,

> It’s been a source of incredible frustration, I’ve never worked anywhere where I’ve found people so seemingly absolutely resistant to change...Whenever I’ve tried to introduce change I’ve come across incredible passive resistance of discovering that people just simply haven’t done what they’ve been told to do and you discover later they’ve been carried on doing it in the same old way.

Similarly organisations were often seen as being reluctant to invest in change that could potentially create longer-term benefits as there was an immediate pressure to realise benefits from as low an input cost as possible. The complexity of factors involved in resisting change reflects the findings of Kluipers et al. (2014) who note that there is no consensus on the causes of change resistance in the public sector. But there are certainly signs of the ‘muddled thinking’ described by Betts and Holden (2003) and a degree to which learning takes place in a context where the cultural and political paradigm of the organisation is not up for discussion or debate.

Many participants commented on the context of ongoing spending cuts as having created an environment where people and organisations were more risk-averse. Reductions in staff numbers had led to an environment where there were fewer people available to implement and support change. There was also a greater emphasis on protecting core services rather than trying to do things differently. At the same time a number of participants commented on the nature of risk-averse public sector workers as creating barriers to learning and change. It was noted by Gareth that,

> I think barriers come in numerous ways, I think one, it’s the type of people and it’s going to be very interesting to see if this changes over the coming decades, if you like, that there are, we still have a number of people working in public organisations that joined the organisation on a career-for-life basis and therefore they have certain expectations and an expectation that there is not going to be massive change within that. That in some ways comes out in particular with terms and conditions which actually makes it very difficult to change things. And certainly people tend not to move because of the
pension requirements etc. are fairly generous and therefore why would they be in that position? Plus you have a fairly bureaucratic mind-set.

These findings reflect the views of those in the focus groups who consistently highlighted lack of capacity or resources as a key barrier to change. Indeed all focus groups found it much easier to identify barriers than to identify enablers of change. What is more, barriers to change were seen to becoming more entrenched. This was particularly the case with participants who were from local authorities who described a lack of leadership capability and scope to try new things. This is perhaps not surprising when so much as 80% of local authority’s budgets are consumed by statutory services (Elcock, 2013). In other words, there was a sense that the austerity cuts were leading to an increasing focus on protecting statutory services and anything else was increasingly being seen as superfluous.

So for many participants it was felt that the public sector remained reluctant to embrace change. Furthermore, and in contrast to the findings of Wright et al. (2013), austerity reforms were likely to increase resistance. Partly this was seen to be due to increased anxiety over the impact of change and partly because even those who might typically be supportive of change were now focused on preserving remaining levels of public services as much as possible. This is in line with the findings of Roberts and Bailey (2013) who found that austerity was leading to a reduction in the staff needed to support innovation and staff needed to identify and initiate innovation. At the same time austerity reform may also limit the extent to which methods to overcome resistance, such as the use of incentives (Thomas 2006, as cited by Kluiipers et al., 2014), can be used.

**Greater need for learning and development**

It was felt that learning and development, if undertaken widely across an organisation, could help overcome some of the social and cultural barriers to change. In part this was seen as a potential counter to the perceived lack of willingness from some to accept the need for change. As Gareth suggested,

> learning is an opportunity of widening horizons and getting people to have an understanding y’know there are different ways of operating...undoubtedly learning opportunities do provide an opportunity of widening experience and identifying that there are different ways, and better ways, of doing things.

Therefore learning and development could be used to help people both understand the need for change and cope with the effects of change. Yet financial pressures were such that it was felt this was unlikely to happen.

During the second round of interviewing it was noted that resistance to change was also different within different elements of the organisation. In particular it was felt that middle and lower-level managers were more resistant to change and also that Trade Unions would, along with some elected members, block any changes that would have a detrimental impact on staff. Within the focus groups elected members were also seen to be a key barrier to meaningful change. This was linked to a fear of failure which many felt was heightened by the increasing pressure on resources. Overall the reasons listed for resistance to change were multi-faceted. Most participants had a positive view of change and their learning had instilled ideas which they were keen to implement within their workplaces. Yet for many the focus of change initiatives was more on piecemeal cutback management (Levine, 1979; Schmidt et al. 2017) in line with ‘salami slicing’ approaches which have been described as “crude, knee-jerk management approaches” (Bailey, 2016: 50). This chimes with what others have found in relation to the challenges with implementing innovation and change in the context of austerity (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Lowndes and Squires 2012). It is recognised that such cutbacks may cause a
negative impact on staff morale and motivation (Esteve et al. 2017). This research suggests that, for those involved in this research, their experience of having recently undertaken a relevant education programme heightened the sense of demotivation as they had a sense of what strategic changes could be made but felt these were being ignored in preference for 'salami-slicing'.

**Future change**

Ongoing austerity meant that, for many, change was seen as inevitable. As Euan explained,

*We’ve been going through two or three years of what we call efficiency savings. What we would infamously call doing the same things with less. We’re now getting to the stage where I think in the next three or four years we’ve got about £30m savings to find on top of what we’ve found already and we’re starting the process of identifying where the real cuts would be or what we can stop doing altogether as opposed to just you know pairing off a bit here and there.*

Consequently therefore, it was felt that change would occur across the public sector, as further austerity reforms were imposed. But there was a general sense that public bodies would continue to have a reactive and piecemeal approach to change. At the same time public sector organisations were seen to be increasingly risk-averse and defensive in the face of continued public sector budget cuts.

Whilst some were committed to developing a strategic approach to change there were many more who were pessimistic about readiness for change within their organisations. As Fraser summed up,

*I think to be fair, I am, I am managing to make little changes. Perhaps ah, perhaps what I am learning is that one’s got to be content with small victories, little changes, rather than expecting people to take on board and embrace something more major. So maybe I’ve learned about setting a realistic target rather than hoping for ah, transformation.*

Yet, when it came to considering where this change might originate the focus group participants held that the most significant enabler of change was legislation and political initiative. Linked to this was the commonly held view that elected members were the ‘key player’ in local authorities. In contrast members of the public, and particularly those who were not regular users of services, were seen to have lowest levels of power and influence in the stakeholder analysis. Consequently it would seem that significant change will not be stimulated by austerity without an accompanying degree of political leadership.

**Conclusions**

Much of the above analysis reflects the conclusion put forward by Betts and Holden of ‘ambiguity and muddled thinking in relation to the links between strategy and learning in organisations’ (Betts and Holden, 2003, p. 280). Change is certainly happening within the public sector and is likely to continue. Likewise there are many managers and employees who remain committed to learning. Yet the links between the development of a learning organisation and change have yet to be recognised to their full potential.

Specifically public sector organisations are seen to have many of the characteristics, outlined in Table 1, of engaging in organisational learning but exhibit none of the characteristics of a learning organisation. As such participants from the learning and development programme were unable to identify any significant organisational benefits from their learning and development. At the same time they were more conscious of the need for change, of the value of learning and
development in enabling change and of the persistent structural barriers that they felt continued to block effective organisational change.

Austerity politics were seen to play a particularly significant role in stymieing organisational change. All participants noted continued cuts to learning and development budgets and staffing levels. Yet political leadership was required in order to enable such change to occur. In this context the opportunity, desire and ability to lead change was seen to be deteriorating. In the face of ongoing austerity it is perhaps unlikely that the benefits of learning and development will be realised in the public sector any time soon.

References

Table 1 – A typology of learning and change

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of learning</th>
<th>Learning organisation</th>
<th>Organisational learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approach to learning</td>
<td>Deep learning</td>
<td>Surface-level / instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of learning</td>
<td>Organisational culture</td>
<td>Individual people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of learning</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Piecemeal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to learning</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
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<tr>
<td>Timescales</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>Sporadic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude to risk taking</td>
<td>Embraced</td>
<td>Avoided</td>
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<td>Type of change</td>
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<td>Transactional</td>
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<td>Evaluation criteria</td>
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<td>Cost-effectiveness</td>
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<td>Relationship to change</td>
<td>Integral</td>
<td>Ad hoc</td>
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http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/TPA
Figure 1 – Average training budget in public and private sector organisations

Median Annual Training Budget per Employee

Source: Adapted from CIPD 2014
Figure 2 – Reported change in Learning and Development Budget

Percentage who report that L&D Department Budget has decreased in the past 12 months

Source: Adapted from CIPD, 2013; CIPD 2014 and CIPD 2015