## SECTION 3.2

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# Worker Education in Malta:
# Unfreezing, Changing, Refreezing

### ABSTRACT

Worker Education was pioneered in Malta at the University of Malta by the Workers' Participation Development Centre – the precursor of the Centre for Labour Studies – with the first programmes launched in 1982, just over 40 years ago. Lewin (1947) proposed a three-step model for social change: one that requires "mental unfreezing, group value changing and new level refreezing". In this short essay, and using a broad brush, I review the changes that have taken place in worker education in the last 40 years in Malta, using the Lewin model.

**Keywords**: adult education; Kurt Lewin; labour education; Malta; paid educational leave; training.

## INTRODUCTION: FOUR CHARACTERS

Allow me to start this brief essay with a character sketch of four of my acquaintances. I resort to pseudonyms here, to protect identities but also to focus readers' attention not so much on who these people are but what they stand for in relation to the theme of this article.

> Peter graduated with a bachelor in electrical engineering from the University of Malta (UM). Exceptionally for those of his age and qualifications, he has been working with the same telecommunications company ever since his gradation, 15 years ago. He is obliged to follow bespoke training sessions and seminars as mandated by his employer; but he has also voluntarily followed evening programmes in adult education, such as those offered by UM's Centre for Liberal Arts and Sciences.
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> Michael graduated in sociology and anthropology from a foreign university but has been living in Malta since 2014. After a few odd jobs, he landed a starting position with a gaming company 8 years ago, and has moved up the ranks since then. He is obliged to follow company training (which includes team building), but is also co-responsible for the training and mentoring of those recruited to his department.
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> Fiona is an EU national now married to a Maltese and living in Malta. She followed basic programmes of study that qualified her as a florist, first in her birth country and then in Malta since 2019. She works with a small, family owned business and must adapt to the work cycles associated with the flower industry, with peaks around Christmas, St Valentine's Day and Easter, as well as the work involved in catering for special events such as weddings and conferences. Her hours can be long. She was furloughed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Her employer does not offer training opportunities and, what she learns, she does so 'on the job'.
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> Joseph is a graduate of MCAST and is passionate about art and product design. He has landed a successive number of jobs with small firms in the local private sector, and has recently started doing some industry-related work with his own equipment on the side. Work is hectic and

the company he works with is understaffed; work gets even more hectic around big events like international festivals or exhibitions. His employer does not offer training opportunities.

Here are four workers in contemporary Malta, differently exposed to the opportunities of worker education, or lack thereof. While worker education is mainstreamed in the case of Peter and Michael; it is an unlikely prospect for both Fiona and Joseph.

## CHANGES IN THE BUSINESS OF EDUCATION

I remember the beta-version of a publicity video that was produced by UM's Communications Office, based on what was meant to be a typical working day at its bustling Msida Campus. It started early in the morning, before sunrise. Then the camera pans to show the arrival of staff to work, the arrival of students, the first lectures kicking off at 8 am and the sequence of lectures throughout the day. The business of tertiary education, along with campus life more generally – laboratory work, poring over a book in the library, chatting over a drink in the canteen – were all illustrated, as the sun meandered across the sky. Then, as we hit 5 pm, the staff and students prepare to leave, and the sun prepares to set, the video ends.

This was simply unacceptable. I pointed out to the producers that their draft promo-video had stopped its recording too abruptly, just as a new cadre of users and service deliverers was preparing to converge on the UM campus. These are the (now many) students, mostly mature, who are taking up evening classes in a diverse range of liberal or vocational programmes, from certificate courses to master's degrees, along with their mentors and tutors, some of whom are part-time, guest, visiting or occasional lecturers at UM.

The business of education is now a lifelong concern in various professions. Many adults today pursue programmes of study for personal enrichment; in various cadres, a minimum number of hours dedicated to professional development is now an essential annual requirement. Reskilling and upgrading is inevitable given the rapid pace of change in various industries, such as

computer programming or information technology. Even at the University of Malta, professional development is now essential for those seeking promotion to Senior Lecturer or for those who take on specific administrative duties such as heads of department or faculty officers.

It is thus hard to imagine that the state of affairs until a few decades ago was anything but so. The world of work and that of education were nicely and clinically isolated. One would study and only study; it was only after finishing one's studies that one – and mainly males – would then look for and land a job. And, at that point, education would end and the only professional formation would take place at the workplace, and via learning by doing. There was hardly any going back. Indeed, many employers were suspicious of anyone wanting to 'study' because that could mean that they had ulterior aspirations, which might include resigning from their current job, or even open up their own business, offer stiff competition and lure away clients. Freshers' Week at UM was a show case of the kinds of jobs waiting for the eventual graduates to consider, three or four years down the line.

Not any longer. These two solitudes – education and work – have now tantalizingly started to connect. Indeed, the notion of a full-time university student in Malta has become the exception rather than the rule; since many (notionally full time) university students may be working – some doing so on a full-time basis - whilst studying. The exhibitors at UM Freshers' Week every October, desperate for suitable human resources, are now offering attractive starting working packages for part time or full time recruitment, even to first-year undergraduate students. No delayed gratification is to be borne; and no long-term career plans are required.

In this paper, I plan to focus on the changes that have taken place in worker education over the last four decades in Malta, a time during which I remained affiliated to the Workers' Participation Development Centre (WPDC), then transformed as the Centre for Labour Studies (CLS) after the demise of worker participation from the Maltese labour relations scene.

## CENTRALITY AND MARGINALITY OF WORK

It is quite ironic, as De Botton (2010) points out, that work is such a central feature of our life; and yet it is grossly underrepresented in how we examine, explore and investigate this life: whether in fiction, theatre, film as well as education. Perhaps it is because it is such a heavy presence that we do our best to imagine it away, and keep our thoughts away. Or perhaps because it is such a meaningless, drab and banal use of so much of our time for many of us that we cannot bear to bring it up for scrutiny. Other than the suite of four interlocking programmes now offered by the CLS – the Diploma in Gender, Work and Society; the Degree in Work and Human Resources; the Degree in Occupational Health and Safety; and the Postgraduate Diploma in Career Guidance – the sustained study of the world of work, and of its workers, does not feature at all or only obliquely in most of the 700+ programmes of study offered at UM. Only one of UM's 140-odd departments – that of Human Resource Management – is explicitly so focused; and there the focus is on workers as 'human resources', servicing corporate objectives. There is more to work than that.

And yet, a dynamic labour market demands skilling and re-skilling, as well as a critical eye to analyse its machinations. Smart responses to mechanisation (including robotisation, digitalisation, artificial intelligence and machine learning) do not involve luddite attempts to stop or thwart advances in technology but rather encourage professionalisation and the enhancement of 'soft' skills (which are hardly soft or insignificant). It pays to understand why and how labour markets work, why workers get employed (typically and clinically: marginal value needs to exceed marginal cost), how best to leverage one's position in an organisational hierarchy, and how trade unions and pluralist industrial relations compare and contrast with strategic human resource management (HRM). Moreover, it helps to be equipped with suitable knowledge, skills, insights and other competences if you are trying to confront professional managers at their own game: which is what trade unions try to do.

For these reasons, and more, the WPDC embarked on its first worker education programmes in 1982. Drydocks workers were especially targeted then: as the exponents of a complex form of worker self-management, they needed to better understand the nuances of running a ship repair yard in a competitive market, as well as how economic democracy needed to align with professional management therein to get the job done. But workers from other places of work joined in: what had effectively started off as an extra-mural training and education centre for Malta Drydocks started diversifying its target audience beyond that institution: civil servants, airline cabin crew, trade union activists from various sectors, middle level managers … all joined as part-time evening students, keen to get some additional insights on that which consumes most of their lives (as it does ours). The actual content of these programmes – starting with a Diploma in Industrial Relations - embraced elements of the sociology and psychology of work, labour law and labour relations, labour economics, principles of management and finance, communication and negotiation skills, and international political economy.

Classrooms were sites of contestation. Patriarchal and 'strategic HRM' driven ideologies of work and leadership were examined and critiqued; while students built the confidence and competence to confront and challenge these dogmas. There was no shortage of discussion and cross-examination: after all, the students could relate what was being presented and discussed to their own, all-too-common experiences. (A comparison with regular, younger, day students, who are more intent on assiduously learning and taking notes from their lecturers, is unavoidable here.) The evening students of these pioneering programmes would also typically spend one weekend per semester in a hotel, for an intensive bonding and learning experience, often moderated by local or international experts. (Allow me to thank here the Malta Office of the German Friedrich-Ebert Foundation [FES] which wholeheartedly financially supported these activities over many decades.) Many graduates of these programmes were promoted to significant roles within human resource management departments, the Malta public service,

as well as within the leadership cadres of local trade union organisations. Being both 'in and against the state' was a common dilemma faced by both students and mentors in these programmes: a 'political economy' approach – where causality and consequence for workplace dynamics can be traced to the broader sphere of economic logic - was the preferred pedagogy of some (but not all) lecturers; but, at the end of the day, each student had to decide the extent to and manner in which they were prepared to challenge the system, if at all. Mayo (1997) had undertaken a brilliantly insightful, and still relevant, critique of the workings of the then WPDC.

These programmes of study were initially offered as certificate courses. But they soon got caught up in the wave of certification that gripped the country. Higher education was moving away from being the exclusive preserve of the few and, in the act of democratising access to tertiary education, there was a demand for higher levels of qualification. Today, the middle class benchmark for completing one's education is, as a minimum, an undergraduate degree. As with other programmes of study, the WPDC-CLS offerings duly morphed into diplomas, then into degrees. This has obliged even longer study periods on students: a part-time, evening degree programme takes at least five years to complete (although one can always exit the programme earlier at certificate or diploma level).

If the WPDC-CLS took the lead in worker education, others were soon to follow. Various medium to large size firms have developed regular, in-house, training programmes for their own employees. In other cases, where this training capacity is not possible, workers are supported (or at least tolerated and allowed) to follow courses with certified service providers from both the local public and private sector. UM has, for example, provided a popular, part-time, three-year, evening executive master's programme in business administration (MBA) for many years. And various foreign institutions have capitalised on the disposition of the Maltese mid-career professionals to seek certification by opening branches or satellite campuses in the Maltese Islands: over 70 such institutions have a warrant to offer fee-paying diplomas and

degrees in Malta. There are 247 institutions with a training licence at the time of writing in Malta, registered with the Malta Further & Higher Education Authority (MFHEA, 2022): they cover a very broad knowledge range, from dance and film studies to language schools, taxation and auditing. Much of this is broad, adult education; but it comprises may examples of specialist worker and professional formation. The two-year Covid-19 hiatus also gave a solid boost to on-line learning and tuition, with a range of hybrid, synchronous and asynchronous programmes now on offer.

## MENTAL UNFREEZING

Four decades have helped to mentally 'unfreeze' the notion that education had to stop at the school leaving age of 16. Malta still has a high proportion of youth aged 18-24 (and mainly males) who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) of around 10.5% when compared to the EU average of 9% (Eurostat, 2022; Vella & Cassar, 2022). And older members of society have taken up many opportunities for adult and worker education.

But there is always opposition to change. Levin (1947) warns that entrenched groups may have "solidified ideas" that militate against reform; and the implementers of change need to be prepared to encounter intense resistance, even hostility, from various stakeholders. With greater exposure to education and training comes the nurturing of a meritocracy; and this needs to confront and overwhelm an entrenched system where seniority, rather than talent, is rewarded (Baldacchino, 1997). Older and experienced workers find themselves increasingly confronted or accompanied by younger but better qualified employees (including graduates): in such dyadic encounters, scoffing at the other's naïveté needs to be replaced with mutual respect. In Malta, the introduction of graduate recruitment into the large public service was one of the implemented recommendations of the Public Service Reform Commission (Polidano, 1996).

There are other pockets of resistance. Not all units in private industry encourage or tolerate their staff in their pursuit of worker education and

training. Certain classes of employees are able to pursue reskilling or competence upgrades only in their own (free) time, which may also involve taking time off, switching shift duties or foregoing overtime. The situation is most dire in small and mainly family owned enterprises, where job-related demands can be so intensive as to thwart all opportunities for a sustained programme of studies. A tight labour market, with negligible unemployment, makes it increasingly difficult to find replacements or understudies able to support the effort required in various manufacturing or service industries. Clearly, the resort to immigrant labour, which has accelerated in the last ten years, has stemmed some – but not all – labour market gaps. In spite of persistent employer demands for even more immigrant workers, it behoves the country and its decision makers to take a step back and reflect as to whether such a policy is indeed the best suited for Malta, already one of the most densely populated countries in the world. I expect a greater readiness to consider investment in technology in order to replace labour in the coming years.

### GROUP VALUE CHANGING

In Levin's second stage, 'change' occurs after staff get unsettled from their previous 'comfort zone' and become willing to move, adapt and take up new opportunities. People accelerate to embrace the new values and goals and, as they get more familiar with the change, additional change agents may come into play, and further assist in the transition, resulting in a virtuous, feedback loop. New training and educational institutions have rushed in to plug the gaps and thus satisfying this new demand for certification, benchmarking and skill upgrades. MCAST's 'Gateway to Industry' offers bespoke courses to employers in the applied sciences, agriculture, aquatics and marine animals, business management and commerce, creative arts, engineering and transport, community Services and information and communication technology (MG2I, 2022). The European Commission has been encouraging micro-credentials, such that workers and other adults can opt to follow one or more specific

study units of their choice, and at their own pace, and without necessarily being registered to follow and complete a full diploma or degree programme of studies (Hunt et al., 2020). At UM, such study units have been pioneered mainly within the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy as well as within the Centre for Liberal Arts and Sciences.

## NEW LEVEL REFREEZING

The third and final stage of change, according to Levin (1947) is 'refreezing'; or the process of reinforcing and solidifying the change, such that it is more likely to stay put and develop resilience. Managers and policy makers are expected to develop reward systems and sanctions that effectively work to support and promote the change. Backsliding in worker education is not likely: employers have recognized the importance of trained personnel as part of their competitive edge, and particularly in the sprawling services sector which dominates the Maltese economy. Workers are increasingly looking at customised professional and skill development as part of their ambitions and obligations, in order to maintain their employability and market edge. Even the registered unemployed and others looking for work are internalising the need to take 'refresher courses' to enhance job prospects and to remain eligible for certain benefits: worker education and training now constitute a key and essential plank of 'active labour market policies' (Vella, 2021).

## CONCLUSION: RESTRUCTURING FOR RESILIENCE

It is sobering to note the advice of a senior and seasoned Maltese HR professional who refers to "regular reskilling and upskilling" as a requirement for the future of work (Caruana, 2021, p. 308).

As usual, the devil lies in the details. Malta has a sprawling private sector, with most business units being small or micro-enterprises by any definition. These are the workers, including the self-employed, who will hardly have time for anything remotely resembling 'worker education'; while thousands of foreign migrants continue to perform relatively menial and precarious jobs

where the opportunities for regular reskilling and upskilling are, realistically, non-existent. All these categories of workers tend not to be represented by trade unions; which means that their conditions of employment are not subject to any collective bargaining and are therefore totally dependent on the minima prescribed by labour law and legislation, plus their own ability to leverage resources when negotiating with management. Taken together, these constitute between a third and a half of all working men and women in Malta today.

And it is here that the proof of the pudding ultimately lies: there are no provisions as yet for worker education and training as a basic right at law in Malta. There is no legal expectation that every employee is entitled to at least a few hours of training annually. And there is not even a European Directive to this effect, reflecting the policy climate in Europe. The only legal obligation in Malta so far is for employers to provide information and training to employees about health and safety issues at the place of work (Servizz.Gov, 2022). The closest instrument to such a provision would be the Convention on Paid Educational Leave, adopted by the International Labour Organisation in 1974, and which came into force in 1976: a time when the power of organised labour was considerably stronger than today (ILO, 1974). In this case, the term 'paid educational leave' refers to leave granted to a worker for educational purposes for a specified period during working hours. So far, 35 countries have ratified this convention; Malta is not amongst them (ILO, 2022).

In Lewin's terms, worker education in Malta has become 'frozen' and locked as a principled expectation – by workers and managers – but only in a number of specific economic sectors (such as the warranted professions) and specific enterprises (the 100-or-so private sector enterprises that each employ over 300 employees, and most of which are unionised). Peter and Michael, introduced at the start of this article, would fall broadly within this grouping.

But Fiona and Joseph do not. What are *their* prospects for professional

development, whether supported, condoned or discouraged by their employers?

Worker education has come a long way in forty years; but it still has a long way to go.

## Disclaimer

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