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Universities in the Knowledge Economy

SECONDMENTS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN ORGANISATIONS

edited by Corina Balaban and Susan Wright

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UNIKE is an Initial Training Network (ITN) funded by EU FP7 - Marie Curie Actions

The UNIKE Notes series can be found at www.unike.au.dk/publications/unikenotes

THE UNIKE PROJECT

The UNIKE project (an initial Training Network funded by EU FP7 – Marie Curie Actions) trains a networked group of critical researchers who are examining the changing roles of universities in the global knowledge economies of Europe and the Asia-Pacific Rim. The UNIKE project aims to generate potential research leaders who are equipped to develop doctoral education in their own institutions and internationally.

Many governments have embraced international agendas for university reform (put forward by the European Union, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, World Economic Forum, UNESCO and the World Bank) on the understanding that the future lies in the development of an ideas-driven competitive global knowledge economy. By arguing that the two ways to compete successfully in this economy are through transfer of research findings into innovative products and through a higher education system that can attract international trade and produce a highly skilled population, universities are placed at the centre of strategies to prosper in this new economic regime. The European approach to competing in the global knowledge economy is to create a European Research Area (ERA), a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and a Europe of Knowledge. Other kinds of strategies have formed in other world regions. These strategies have to be understood within a geographic shift in emerging centres of power from Europe to the Asia Pacific, and particularly East Asia.

The UNIKE project aims to generate new perspectives on the transformation of an institution central to policy projections of the future.

The project explores these issues through regular workshops, which are designed to cover different aspects of the debate. Each UNIKE workshop has a part dedicated to Aspects of Doctoral Education, covering the following topics:

- History of policy debates about doctoral education
- Secondments: Working for/researching in other organisations
- Academic freedom
- Governance narratives and the figure of the doctoral student
- Mobility and doctoral training
- Partners' own practices of doctoral education

From each of these events, a UNIKE Note on Doctoral Education will be generated. The current Note outlines the presentations and discussions that took place at the second UNIKE workshop, held at the University of Bristol on 24-26 February 2014. The main theme of the workshop was ranking and governance and included lectures, panel discussions and meetings with students to discuss their research proposals.

The main intended audience for this Note is composed of UNIKE fellows, full and associated partners and their networks, and other institutions and individuals who are interested in the subject.

UNIKE SECONDMENTS

by Susan Wright, DPU, Aarhus University

UNIKE Secondments
UNIKE is an EU-funded Marie Curie ITN (Initial Training Network) project. One of the aims that the European Commission is trying to achieve through the ITN is to equip doctoral and post-doctoral researchers to work in industry and other sectors as well as in universities. It is therefore a requirement that organisations from different sectors, including private enterprises, be involved in the project.

> 'involvement of organisations from different sectors, including ... private enterprises in appropriate fields, is considered essential for the action. In particular, the action aims to add to the employability of the recruited researchers through exposure to both academia and enterprise, thus extending the traditional academic research training setting and eliminating cultural and other barriers to mobility' (EU FP7 2011).

One of the major contributions of private sector firms and 'socio-economic actors' (in European Commission parlance) is to provide secondments for the doctoral and post-doctoral fellows. For nine of UNIKE's 15 projects, offers of secondments were gained from private sector firms and organisations and international agencies that concern different aspects of universities' engagement with the knowledge economy in Europe and the Asia-Pacific Rim. (In addition, all projects involved research visits to one or more of UNIKE's 31 industrial, socio-economic and university partners).

A secondment is more than a placement, where a person spends a short time in a company to get work experience. In military terminology, a secondment is the temporary transfer of a person from their normal duty to another and Cambridge Dictionaries Online defines the purpose as 'to increase the number of workers there, to replace a worker, or to exchange experiences and skills'. The ITN 'Guide for Applicants' (EU FP7 2011) specifies that the researcher continues to be paid by and receive their salary from the university where they are employed and can be transferred for up to 30 percent of their time. In the examples given, doctoral fellows in science or engineering go to work in companies where they can make use of specialised research facilities or learn a specific technique.

UNIKE has adapted the idea of secondments to doctoral training in the social sciences. Each of the secondment organisations was chosen because it was a key research site for studying a sector that is interacting with universities in the knowledge economy. Each offered to locate the fellow in the organisation for an agreed period of time (optimally 3 months) and agreed to four aims for the secondment:

Site for fieldwork - The organisation facilitates the fellow's research by offering itself as a site for research and by giving the fellow contacts in other organisations in the sector

Experience - The fellow joins in the daily life of the organisation and gains experience of how the organisation/sector works

Reciprocity - The fellow may carry out an agreed piece of work that is both useful for the organisation and contributes to the fellow's research project. The fellow feeds back results from this piece of work and/or from the fellow's own research project in a way that is useful for the organisation

Skills - Through involvement in the daily work of the organisation and possibly by carrying out an agreed task, the fellow gains work experience and/or new skills that are beyond those available in PhD training and that widen his/her scope for future employment both inside and outside academia.

and possible tasks with each organisation in the process of preparing the ITN application, when the fellows were in place and were designing their research project in detail, plans were discussed and refined between the secondment organisation and the fellow, with the mediation of UNIKE's Coordinator or the supervisor. For some fellows, learning how to approach such an organisation and negotiate their work and research arrangements was the first new skill acquired through their secondment.

The Coordinator provided a template for a Secondment Agreement (UNIKE 2014: Appendix 2). This was used as the basis of discussions and covered: how the organisation could help the fellow's research project, and how the fellow's work could help the organisation, including any specific task; the salary and expenses covered by the university; the working facilities provided by the organisation; the fellow's ownership of material collected; how confidential issues would be made clear to the fellow and how the fellow would maintain confidentiality; coordination between the fellow, the university supervisor and the secondment supervisor; and practical issues such as who covered health and accident insurance.

Preparatory Training
In order for fellows to use secondments as sites for fieldwork, it meant learning how to conduct academic research in organisations. At the UNIKE workshop in Bristol, training was provided by Susan Wright and Jana Bacevic on doing ethnographies of organisations and by Brian Staines on practical considerations for planning a secondment.

Secondments of UNIKE fellows:

Fellow and Project	Secondment organisation	Duration	Purpose
Miguel Lim: The Global Ranking of Universities: The industry of rankings and the rise of audit culture in higher education	Times Higher Education, London	3 months	Engagement with THE World Rankings
Chris Muellerleille: New landscapes of publishing and knowledge dissemination	Berghahn Books, New York	1 month	To gain knowledge of the changing landscape of publishing
Jie Gao: Conjunction of Chinese and Western educational traditions in the design and teaching of Sino-Danish Centre courses	Sino-Danish Center, Beijing	2 periods of 3 months	Research on design and delivery of new Danish-Chinese MA programmes
Corina Balaban: The ITN and the IGERT: A comparative study of emerging visions for doctoral education in the global knowledge economy	Centre for Innovation & Research in Graduate Education, USA	3 months	Participate in evaluation of IGERT programmes and learn evaluation skills
Tatyana Bajenova: Think Tanks and Academic Entrepreneurs in the Production of Knowledge	Academic Cooperation Association, Brussels	2 months and two weeks	Develop knowledge of think tanks and skills to work in a research consultancy
Janja Komljenovič: Mapping the field of higher education industries and choosing case studies	CHE Consult, Berlin	1 month	To gain knowledge of internationalisation of higher education
Que Anh Dang: Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM): Regionalism and Higher Education 'policy travel' between Europe and Asia	Sino-Danish Center, Beijing ASEM Education Secretariat, Jakarta	1 week research visit 2 weeks	To gain knowledge about Asia-Europe joint campus To gain knowledge on how the inter-regional organisation works
Sintayehu Kassaye Alemu: Internationalisation of higher education in centres and peripheries	UNESCO, International Task Force on Teachers for Education for All, Paris	3 months	Participate in Education for All programme
Sina Westa: Academic Freedom in Teaching in Higher Education in Europe and the Asia Pacific Rim	Magna Charta Observatory	3 months	To gain knowledge about the work of the Magna Charta Observatory, academic freedom and academic values in general

Figure 1: List of UNIKE secondments

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN ORGANISATIONS: THEORIES, ETHICS, STRATEGIES (PART I)

by Susan Wright, DPU, Aarhus University

Location of organisation in the field

Susan Wright started by presenting a 'map' of UNIKE's field of study: an emerging field, variously called a knowledge economy, or knowledge-industrial complex, or maybe 'knowledge ecology', in which the nature of universities and higher education is being re-created and re-thought (Figure 2).

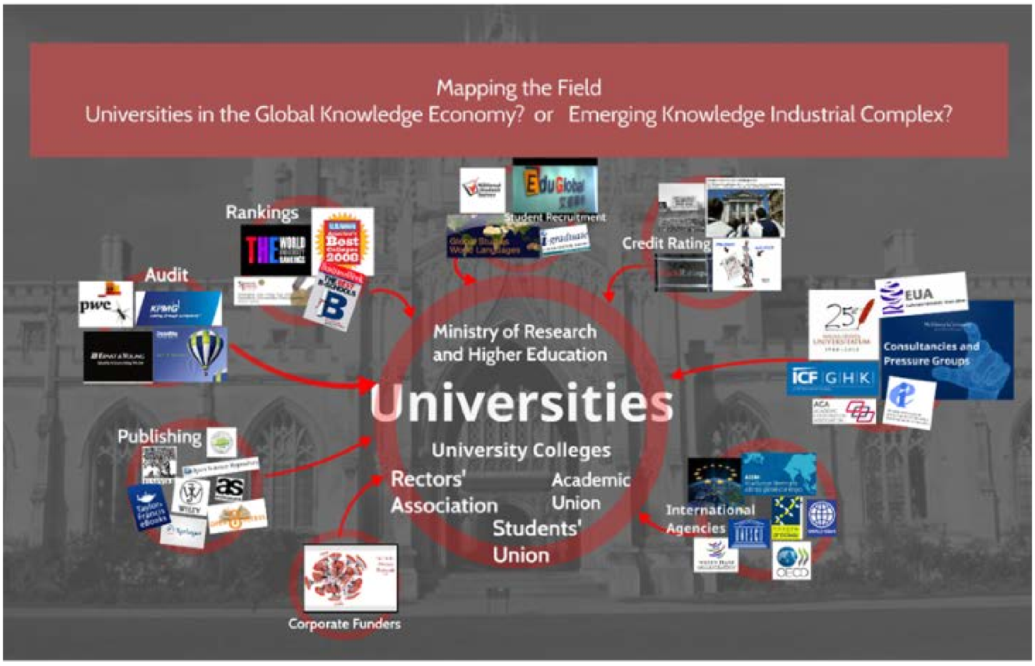

Figure 2: Mapping the field of UNIKE

What used to be called the university sector is increasingly surrounded by a complex web of corporate funders, publishing giants, audit and financial credit-rating companies, ranking organisations, student recruitment companies, joint ventures, private education providers, professional associations, consultancies and pressure groups, NGOs, and international agencies. Half of the UNIKE projects are located in different 'sites' in this field to provide 'windows' onto the process of transforming 'universities in a knowledge economy' (Wright 2011). These projects are located in this range of organisations, to see how they are operating, what new relationships are being forged between emerging constellations of actors and universities in this knowledge economy, and how boundaries between organisations are being negotiated. The other half of the projects are located in universities to see how core concepts and operations are being re-thought as relations are developed with other actors in this field. The questions to ask about the field are, Where is 'my' secondment organisation located within the knowledge economy? What are the strengths and vulnerabilities of 'my' organisation as it tries to position itself within the emerging knowledge economy? (These questions might also reveal likely politically sensitive points where the researcher will need to treat carefully). How will systematic analysis from 'my' site refocus attention on what is happening in the wider field of universities in the knowledge economy?

Position within the organisation

The ideal position for an ethnographer within a fieldwork site is to be simultaneously an insider and an outsider. To be an insider means working on a daily basis in the organisation, so that the researcher can participate in the working life and learn through experience how the organisation works, how it relates to other organisations in the field, and what ideas, values, ambiguities and tensions are in play. In most cases, this means having a desk in the organisation, and often it involves having a specific task, which could range from doing a piece of research for the organisation to helping arrange an event. It also means having a manager act as supervisor or gatekeeper who, optimally, is strong enough in the organisation to guide the researcher well and to mediate his/her relations with the organisation's powerful people. At the same time, it is important to make people aware that the researcher is a Marie Curie PhD fellow, employed by the university and visiting the organisation on a secondment. This outsider identity enables the researcher to maintain a distance from the organisation and view its activities from a critical, analytical stance.

This double identity is not easy to maintain as the insider identity means the researcher must conform to the organisation's ways of doing things while the outside identity is important because the university protects the academic freedom of the researcher. Anthropologists aim to maintain relationships as simultaneously insider/outsider, participant/observer and friend/stranger, and by doing so keep an oscillation in their day-to-day analysis between experience-near and experience-distant concepts, and between phenomenology and objectification.

Reflexivity
It is now a truism in social sciences that researchers are positioned within their own research. There is no location outside of the research site from which to gain a bird's eye view. As Bourdieu (1990: 28) put is, there is no Archimedean point of enlightenment, no all-knowing 'point from nowhere'. Haraway (1998) labels attempts to write about everything from nowhere 'the God trick'. On the contrary, social research is a 'positioned' activity where the researcher uses himself/herself as their own best research tool.

The way in which the researcher is being positioned by colleagues in the organisation is not a once-and-for-all event and it changes continually. This also opens the possibility for the researcher to negotiate and adjust their positioning too. A reflexive analysis of how the researcher is positioning himself/herself and being positioned in the research site involves asking questions such as: How are people looking at you – are you getting stereotyped or side-lined? And how are you behaving or responding? Are you inadvertently endorsing an assumption about yourself? How could you become positioned differently? Should you be developing relationships with a wider range of colleagues? Whereas these questions touch on feelings and emotions, the importance of these questions is very practical: Is the researcher in the right position and developing a suitable range of relationships to get the kind of information needed for their research?

The researcher will not be the only person who is being reflexive. Many companies now expect employees to be reflexive workers: they are asked to objectify themselves and reflect on their attitudes, behaviour and role in the company in order to change their conduct and work relations in keeping with the corporate values and optimise their contribution to the company's productivity. But this is not the same as researchers' reflexivity where the aim is to critically examine how your positioning and behaviour is opening up or closing down fieldwork relationships, and how to make adjustments so as to maintain an ethical stance yet maximise your research.

Organisational Processes
Organisations usually present themselves as bounded entities with a clear structure, often depicted in an organogram. Ethnographers do not take these claims for granted: organisations are in a constant state of organising, and boundaries are always being made or reasserted (Wright 1994, Wright and Krause-Jensen 2015). There are various ways of studying these processes. One way is to explore a 'value chain' by following how things pass through the organisation and looking at how value is added – or not. For example, how does an academic text get written and what processes does it go through to get published, and who adds what value at each step of the way? What blockages occur – if any? This can be extended to a 'systems approach' where the value chain is not confined to a single organisation, but links constellations of organisations in a wider value chain of the 'knowledge economy'.

Another way to study processes of organising is to focus on the governance and the legal mechanisms, management technologies and key words used to try and order a sector or an economy internationally and nationally as well as the organisations and the individuals within it. Do the activities on different scales come into alignment, or how are they contested or resisted? A third way, according to an anthropological adage, is to 'treat the familiar as strange'. For example, organisations often claim to 'know what the customer wants'. How are they imagining the customer? How do they define 'wants'? How do they 'know' this? A variation is to latch onto weirdness. For example the phrase of the Danish Minister of Research for reforming universities in 2003 was 'From thought to invoice' (Government of Denmark 2003). How did such an initially weird saying become instantiated in changes in universities and in their relations with 'surrounding society' such that it was gradually taken as a new orthodoxy, even if not fully accepted? Such claims involve creating new categories and conceptual regimes for ordering the world. How are they imagined and how do they work? Organisational participants are rarely able to gain an overview of their organisational processes, and such an insight can be a valuable way to give feedback to the organisation.

Methods
Ethnography works incrementally. It starts by researching initial questions, which inevitably lead on to more questions. Importantly, the researcher is not only pursuing his or her prior questions, but is eliciting and responding to what people in the site find important – their own 'selection of relevance' (Okely, 2011: 18). As new sets of questions emerge, a review is conducted to consider which array of methods would best address them. It is important for ethnographers to have a range of research methods available at their fingertips, so they can deploy them as needed. If the basic method involves different combinations of participation and observation, others include surveys, mapping, collecting documents, questionnaires, semi-structured interviewing, informal conversations and conversations on social media.

One of the central features of ethnography is 'serendipity'. That is, in fieldwork things happen unpredictably but a well prepared researcher will notice incidents that could open up ways to pursue his or her research interests and will grasp these opportunities. Ethnographers find unexpected things are said or happen and explore these 'surprises' (Willis and Trondman 2002) as 'rich points' (Agar 1996) or research 'problems' (Wright 1994) by tracing their ripples through a site and a field.

Ethics
Working as an ethnographer raises a number of ethical issues, which must be continually kept under review and cannot be laid aside once any bureaucratic formalities of 'research approval' or

'ethics approval' have been satisfied. The researcher's gatekeeper will no doubt let his/her colleagues know that the researcher will be joining them, but it is important not to rely only on this communication alone – make sure the daily colleagues understand the role of the researcher, their interests, their topic of research, that they are ever conducting their research, even in proverbial chats around the water cooler, and not just in fixed interviews. How can the researcher find a way to both fit into the organisation's life and signal that they are researching? One way is by always carrying around a notebook and constantly jotting things down. This needs careful thought as the way the researcher is positioned and his/her research practices feed into the reality of what is being studied.

Methods need to be established for people to make clear to the researcher what information is confidential (and these methods need to be included in the Secondment Agreement). Confidentiality is also a daily practice, as the researcher should not unwittingly pass information from one colleague to another - never say 'so and so told me that…' as office life is often tense and 'political'. If the organisation attempts to use the researcher as a resource for their politics, the researcher should turn their comments into questions, should try and leave the place better than they found it. Practices of anonymity also need to be agreed, for example, whether the researcher will use the name of the organisation and how the researcher will refer to positioned individuals without revealing their identity.

Reciprocity for their generosity can take the form of completing an agreed task, but it can also involve giving feedback based on the research, for example the researcher's analysis of organisational processes, or the organisation's positioning within an emerging nexus of organisations in the knowledge economy. As such information may be politically sensitive, and often in ways that the researcher cannot predict, as a basic rule, always present research results orally before giving them to the organisation in writing so as to avoid surprising or wrong-footing anyone. The researcher can use the secondment supervisor as a sounding board, to sense out the 'difficult' issues and work out how to put them over.

The researcher's ownership of the research material needs to be clearly established in the Secondment Agreement, but this does not prevent the researcher from giving members of the organisation sight of drafts with an invitation to comment. It is important to make clear that if they identify any factual errors, the researcher will correct the them; but whereas the researcher welcome their views on the analysis and will consider them carefully, the researcher does not promise to include them as the analysis is ultimately theirs.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN ORGANISATIONS: THEORIES, ETHICS, STRATEGIES (PART II)

by Jana Bacevic, DPU, Aarhus University

Jana Bacevic supplemented and expanded on a number of these points about doing ethnographic research in organisations.

Positionality
This concept can be refined by considering its three dimensions:

1. Epistemological positionality – What are you trying to find out? What are the theoretical and methodological assumptions that the project rests on? Do your assumptions have any consequences when you interact with the employees of that organisation?
2. Political positionality – reflecting on one's own assumptions and determining how one relates to different levels of authority within the organisation. What kind of political or ideological assumptions do you come with to the organisation, or leave with? How do they correspond/influence/are influenced by the politics of the organisation?
3. Personal positionality – How do you see yourself within the organisation (present and future)? What kinds of relationships are you developing with the people there? How do you 'organise' these relations (e.g. 'traineeship' versus 'expert involvement')? The researcher often assumes multiple overlapping positions in an organisation, for example as an academic, policy advisor and possibly others at the same time. It is key to understand that people are not test subjects and that they themselves may develop expectations of the researcher. Another aspect worth considering when building up relations in the organization is whether you might seek a future career working for that organisation.

Methods
Jana Bacevic emphasised that it is important to keep a fieldwork diary to record the researcher's reflections on what happens. Among the things that can be recorded are the ways certain people relate to the researcher in terms of position, authority etc, the unspoken aspects and gestures that will not be evident in an audio account and the hidden steering intentions of a person during a conversation. It is also advisable to write as much as possible, including comments and impressions of conversations and events, as these can already constitute the first stage of data analysis.

At the start, the ignorance of an outsider can be a great asset as it gives license to ask questions about basic things which people in the organisation take for granted.

The social aspect of fieldwork should also not be neglected. It is important not to switch off at any point during fieldwork; one should be researching the whole time - however, note-taking should take place in front of the respondents so that they are aware the researcher is still 'on duty'.

It is also advisable to research the organisation's history before starting fieldwork.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PLANNING A SECONDMENT

by Brian Staines, Former Head of Guidance, Bristol University

Brian Staines gave a presentation on how to make the most of a secondment and how to succeed as an embedded researcher.

What are the benefits of secondments?
According to the Vitae report (2010) on "What do researchers do?"

- 23.6% had already or previously worked for the organisation they worked for 3 years after their PhD
- 33.2% found work through professional, work or educational contacts or networks

Making the most of a secondment

- Know what you want to get from the experience
- Make the most of any opportunities
- Ask questions – informational interviewing

Know the Company

- Research the organisation's history
- Look at their website, their social media profile, recent appearances in the news etc
- It's always good to know more about them before you start

Define the Job

- Try to make sure you have a clear understanding of what your secondment is likely to involve before you start
- If there are things you are not sure about try to sort it out as soon as possible after starting.

Set yourself Goals

- Think also about what you want to gain from the secondment
- Setting yourself goals will give you direction and help you reflect on what you have achieved
- Try to be as specific as you can with times

Learn

- Whether you come away realising that this is your dream area to work in or not, the experience will have been valuable
- Reflect on what you have achieved, the bits you enjoyed and the parts you wouldn't do again to help you plan your professional future
- Keep notes on what you did
- When you go to future job interviews, make sure you highlight what you have gained from your secondment - it will set you apart from other applicants

Make the most of any opportunities

- Secondments planned – but plans can change
- Consider what you will do if the unexpected happens
- Chance to meet people – other researchers, colleagues in the organisation
- Network
- Attend anything else you feel appropriate if you get the opportunity e.g. training

Know what you want to get from the experience

- What skills do you want to gain?
- To what extent do you want this experience to influence future plans?
- Make a list with some deadlines
- What will you do if a problem arises?

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The presentations were followed by an Q and A-session, in which the following were discussed:

Positionality

Whereas this was a challenge that had been openly acknowledged in the first two presentations, questions asked how to address this challenge in one's own research. The suggested solution was to keep a field diary where the researcher would not only mark the important events that had taken place, but also, for example, identify emotions experienced during the interviews, register reflections on how the physical space was organised and how gender relations played out, and acknowledge the status and level of formality that the interviewees assumed. The field diary was therefore recognised as a first ground of analysis, and not just a record of interview questions and answers.

Multi-sited Ethnography

The challenge was to make sense of multiple experiences and draw connections between them. One suggestion for dealing with this was to follow something through the field – something which could be a policy, a conflict etc. (Shore et al. 2013) – and try to grasp the logic of how this played out in different settings. Specifically when dealing with policy, it was advised that one should think how people/ organisations influence one another. These interactions may occur even when the people/ organisations in question have not met directly, so it is important to be able to identify them and observe their relations.

Distance

The dilemmas were: How can a researcher manage to distance him or herself from their own cultural baggage or from the people working in the organisation they are researching? The challenge here was to maintain a balance between staying connected and keeping a distance. The thoughts raised were that it depended on planning a formal position within the organisation as simultaneously an insider (located in the office and doing a task for the organisation) and an outsider (a Marie Curie fellow employed by a university).

This formal licence to be closely involved yet to distance oneself is as important as the relations that have been developed within the organisation. It also depends on how you, as a researcher, develop social relations and manage your position, and how you are being perceived by others. Even in informal contexts, during a pub visit for example, it is important to be aware that you are still researching whereas most of your colleagues would probably be off duty; the question here is, how do you mediate the relations and transmit that you are on duty, so that they also understand it? One way to signal this to the organisation is to take notes. This situation also raises questions of ethics and confidentiality, which should be given careful consideration. Also related to the ways in which social relations are developed and fostered was the circulation of feedback. It is essential to consider how you give feedback to the organisation, through which (informal) channels, and what effects your actions may have.

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