

# **CHANGING WORK AND EMPLOYMENT INSTITUTIONS IN MAURITIUS:**

## **CHALLENGES FOR WORKERS, COMPANIES AND EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSTITUTIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis critically explores how changing work and employment institutions have brought about challenges for workers, companies and Education and Training institutions in Mauritius. The study uses a historical institutionalist approach as well as additional concepts to examine how Work and Employment as well as Education and Training institutions of Mauritius, have adjusted to contemporary economic conditions. Recently, Mauritius, a former French and British colony, has diversified its economy and launched its Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector. The sector has developed in parallel with the government's endeavour to turn Mauritius into a knowledge economy over time. In order to facilitate the setting up of numerous multinational companies, the country has adopted more flexible employment legislation. As a result, companies have been able to take advantage of the island-nation's cheap, multi-lingual and youthful labour market. The thesis identifies challenges that have been triggered by the requirement for new skill capacities, and further challenges in the form of risks experienced by young Mauritian workers in their employment relationships.

Through a qualitative empirical approach, 75 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with workers, managers, educationists and experts in Mauritius. The study argues that current and forthcoming Education and Training (E&T) Policies face several tensions that the Mauritian government did not anticipate and cannot adequately deal with. Findings show disparities between employers' expectations of workers' level of employability and skill capacities on the one hand and actual skill capacities on the other. Tensions also lie between the government and private employers in regard to who is to provide which form of training. Further contradictions are found in the government's one-sided efforts towards building a 'high-skill' workforce while new pillars of the economy, here illustrated by the BPO sector, can be comparatively low-skill. Considering the absence of union organisation and the generally low level of agency among workers, these tensions can have damaging impact upon young Mauritian workers at work and beyond. In conclusion, the study highlights the importance of considering context-specificity in the formulation of E& T policies. It suggests that there is much scope for institutional change in which education systems and policies can be more carefully designed to address new economic and social needs in Mauritius.

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*I dedicate my project to my aunt Magali Prosper and my Grandfather Antoine Emilien  
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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**BOI-** Board of Investment

**BPO-**Business Process Outsourcing

**CA-** Capability Approach

**EHRSP** – Education and Human Resources Strategic Plan 2008-2020 (Ministry of Education- Mauritius)

**ESD-** Education for Sustainable Development

**FDI-** Foreign Direct Investment

**HRDC-** Human Resource Development Council (of Mauritius)

**ICT-** Information and Communication Technology

**ILO-** International Labour Organisation

**KBE-** Knowledge-based economy

**MID-** Maurice Ile Durable (Mauritius- Sustainable Island)

**UNDESD-** United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO Programme)

**UNESCO-** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

# CHAPTER 1 Introduction

*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country.*

Abraham Lincoln (1862), Second annual address to Congress, also cited in Robinson (2011: 7)

Over the past decades there has been a common policy and scholarly focus upon the significance of acknowledging the contemporary connections between economy, work and education (Casey 2011). Such discourses have accompanied the widespread acceptance of the neoliberal ideology. It has also been argued that the legitimisation of liberalised production regimes and markets have triggered heightened pressures on national economies for maintaining their competitiveness within the increasingly globalised world (ibid). In order to face international competition, governments in various parts of the world have aimed at developing a national concern for the enhancement of individuals' skill capacities, employability and learner agency. In this vein, many governments have since endeavoured to develop knowledge-based and high-skill economies regardless of their respective institutional varieties. While these discourses have emerged in the Global North, it has not spared countries of the Global South. In this thesis, I seek to contextualise Mauritius in relation to these current trends, which I introduce in this chapter.

The thesis is a critical exploration of the contemporary challenges brought about by changing Work and Employment institutions in the island-nation of Mauritius. Located in the Indian Ocean approximately 800 kilometres East of Madagascar (Bunwaree 2002), Mauritius has developed into a multi-ethnic island state that has emerged completely from colonisation. Since its independence was formally proclaimed in 1968, Mauritius has successively demonstrated its resilience capacity with a well-diversified economy and a drive towards international trade and export-led economic growth. While James Meade predicted a bleak future for the monocrop economy in the 1960s (Meade 1961), Mauritius has later been defined as the 'tiger' of both Africa and the

Indian Ocean. This has been due to its capacity to follow timely diversification strategies that have been highly beneficial to its economic development at specific junctures of its history (Brautigam 1997; Bunwaree 2002).

Mauritius has been repeatedly extolled for its economic performance. Recently, scholars have referred to its economic success story, welfare state practices and resilience as a phenomenon that has come to be known as ‘the Mauritius miracle’ (Stiglitz 2011; Grégoire et al. 2011). To date, the Mauritian government aims at espousing the discourse of the knowledge economy model. In the same vein, it has started involving its labour market into new economic sectors where it has endeavoured to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Under such development, unprecedented challenges for the Mauritian economy and society have emerged. This thesis focuses particularly on current trends in the realms of work and education through a critical exploration of the case of young workers operating within the Business Process Outsourcing sector of Mauritius. The sector emerged with the advent of advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and has benefited from more flexible employment legislation. However, it has also developed due to the assumed availability of certain sets of skills among young Mauritian workers. Overall, the thesis aims to critically examine the institutional context within which these workers operate. More specifically, it focuses on the extent to which national policies, namely in the domain of Education and Training (E&T), have been adequately adjusted to changing Work and Employment institutions and new economic and social requirements facing the country.

In addressing these questions, the thesis will argue that there is much scope for careful institutional change in the Mauritian E&T system in order for Mauritius to address these new economic and social requirements more effectively. The thesis will also call for more consideration for context-specific needs. It will contend that some of these needs have been poorly anticipated by the government, which has endeavoured to espouse globally diffused political economic discourses on skill development and employability. The thesis will identify the challenges that have recently emerged for young Mauritian workers in this respect. It will also highlight risks facing a group of non-unionised workers with low individual agency in a context where employers can

afford much flexibility while some of the employers' expectations of skill capacities are not fully met.

At its initial stage, the present study was informed by major industrial disputes which erupted in 2011 within the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector of Mauritius. Workers in a major BPO company did not receive their monthly wages for a period of more than three months, despite contractual agreement (L'Express Mauritius 2011a). In the absence of union organisation or any form of indirect representation, workers resorted to unofficial industrial action and went on hunger strike to express their discontent. The 2011 disputes probed various questions regarding workers' level of agency and the risks that they may encounter by operating in this sector. In addition, a new Employment Rights Act and Employment Relations Act came in force in 2009 in Mauritius. These raised questions regarding the way in which Work and Employment institutions have changed in recent years and regarding the impact on workers. I elaborate on the 2011 disputes and the new employment legislation in chapter 4.

The very emergence of the Business Process Outsourcing sector within the Mauritian economy is an element which, I argue, provides material for scholarly and policy reflection on the case of Mauritius. As the study intends to demonstrate, the sector relates both to the past and to the present of the country. To start with, the sector emerged as a new economic diversification strategy that follows a series of similar strategies which have punctuated the history of the Mauritian economy. As I will discuss in chapters 3 and 4, diversification strategies at critical economic junctures seem to have become a standard practice for successive Mauritian governments. In addition, past legacies such as linguistic proficiency and cultural proximity with countries of origin of multinational companies, have proven to be of relevance to the BPO sector. The study therefore looks back at some of the salient economic, political and cultural conditions which have shaped the institutions of Mauritius as we know them today. I provide a more elaborate historical background of Mauritius in chapter 3.

Although the thesis focuses on the contemporary context of Mauritius, the objective of looking back onto some of the country's historical features lies with the assumption that national responses to current conditions are historically grounded. This in itself may be argued to be self-evident for any country. However, my objective is to

understand the main aspects, practices and patterns that have persisted within the institutions, and examine their implications. In order to achieve this endeavour, I argue that the study requires an approach in which history matters and in which close attention is afforded to the institutions of a specific context. This endeavour echoes with the attributes of the historical institutionalist approach which I introduce in section 1.3 and describe in more detail in chapter 5. Other concepts, namely taken from the Capability Approach, inform the study by enabling the researcher to look closely into the role of the Mauritian government and the opportunities made available to young Mauritian individuals today. In chapter 2, CA is discussed as a humanistic discourse that distances itself from more neoliberal discourses on work and education. In chapter 5, I explain how CA supplements the historical institutionalist approach in this study.

In the light of more recent debates, however, BPO has been argued to epitomise the contemporary shape of work (Thite and Russell 2010). Its relevance in contemporary academic literature and the manner in which it relates Mauritius to its past and present, allow the sector to be a pertinent field of investigation for this study. The advent of the 2011 disputes drew attention to the profiles of Mauritian workers in the BPO sector of Mauritius. In addition, the fact that the Mauritian government has announced its increasing focus on skill development and on the building of the knowledge economy raises further questions regarding national Education and Training (E&T) policies. While the 2011 disputes have called into question the level of employment security in the new sector, the thesis asks whether young Mauritian workers operating in such sectors are provided with opportunities for the sustainable development of their skills and agency. Given that workers had to resort to such industrial action, the study aims to explore the institutional context within which the sector has emerged.

As Crouch et al. (2004) contend, economic trends of the past decades have brought questions regarding the role of governments in providing education and training to the national workforce. In addition, employers, while not necessarily offering employment security, have new expectations of labour markets in terms of skill levels (ibid). The thesis therefore aims to critically assess the appropriateness of national Education and Training (E&T) policies in order to examine the Mauritian government's responses to current economic requirements and in regard to young workers' skill capacities. While Mauritius appears to have remained on its well-known path by diversifying its

economy, the thesis asks whether adjustment needs in the domain of national Education and Training (E&T) have been adequately anticipated by the government. The study therefore seeks to understand the institutional context within which young Mauritian workers operate, and how past institutions affect the contemporary context, in the realms of economy, work and education. Finally, the study aims to examine how national Education and Training policies are being adjusted to contemporary requirements and especially to the government's endeavour to develop a knowledge economy. In sections 1.1 and 1.2, I elaborate on the contemporary debates on work and education. In chapter 2, I will then discuss further discourses associated with these debates as well as alternative ways of envisaging national policies.

### ***1.1 The contemporary shape of work***

Across the world, work and employment institutions have undergone transformations which have had major implications for societies and have altered collective and individual perceptions of work (Durand 2007). As Casey (2011) notes, transformation pressures in developed countries have emanated from the diffusion of a recent political economic discourse that advocates the need for increased liberalisation of markets and for the intensified competitiveness of economies. Although parallel neo-institutionalist debates have claimed the persistence of varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice 2001; Amable 2003) and of national responses to such pressures (Brown 1999; Crouch et al. 2004), it has been argued that various economies have tended to converge towards the common acceptance of neoliberalism as the underpinning ideology and mode of governance in the development of their statutory policies (Casey 2011).

Neoliberal doctrines, which gained prominence from the early 1970s onwards, dwarfed Keynesianism, which had prevailed in policy-making during the immediate post-world war era in advanced economies. As an ideology and mode of governance, it has emerged as a governmental response to advocated economic challenges in both the developed and developing world. Debates geared toward the worldwide proliferation of neoliberalism have been well rehearsed in academic literature (Harvey 2005; Cooper and Ellem 2008; Ghosh 2010). As neoliberal advocates in the Global North brought back ideas originally born from classical liberalism (see Steger and Roy 2010),

neoliberalism has revitalised capitalist-oriented characteristics, such as individual entrepreneurial initiatives and the strengthening of private property rights (Harvey 2005). The neoliberal project has been argued to be a deliberate attempt to restore class power and the concentration of income and wealth in upper echelons of society (ibid). Accentuated market liberalisation and economic rationalisation as promoted under neo-liberal ideology have been argued to allow the notion of individualism to percolate more significantly within respective societies (Casey 2011). Neoliberal ideology stresses the responsibility of individuals in making their own future and creating their own opportunities.

The impact of neoliberal thought over national institutions has been far reaching. According to historical institutionalist Steinmo (2010), neoliberal thought grew in popularity because more people came to believe in its overarching argument. Citing former US President Reagan's phrase, Steinmo (2010: 132) notes how individuals, especially the richest, came to commonly believe that the 'government was not the answer but the problem'. However, neoliberal practices have required the state's intervention in multiple ways and have not necessarily reduced its role. Neoliberalism has challenged the role of the state while contributing to the legitimisation of business-led demands that emanate from ever increasing efficiency aspirations of the firm. While the neoliberal form of capitalism has entailed the deregulation of markets and the privatization of various industries, such strategies have had to be orchestrated by no other entity than the state. As Dicken (2007: 173) argues, to speak of a reduction in the role of the state in the Western deregulated environment can somehow be 'misleading.' In addition, neoliberalism has legitimised the 'creative destruction of traditional institutional frameworks' while posing new challenges to 'division of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought' (Harvey 2005:3). A liberal capitalist orientation to attending to employer demands has led to the statutory provision of various facilities such as innovative technologies and the enhancement of global traffic. Although it has been argued that the neoliberal state may at times ensnare itself into situations that are beyond its control (Dicken 2007), policy making and governance dictated by the ideology have remained an institutional choice.

According to Casey (2011), transformation pressures have generated the democratisation of risk and uncertainty. The institutional frameworks that have

surrounded employment throughout the modern project have, since the injection of neoliberal mentality, been undermined where they have not been completely eliminated. In the developed world, the demise of socio-cultural institutions that once ensured solidarity, a sense of community and social citizenship of workers have entailed the erosion of employee power in industrial relationship and the dwindling of collective bargaining of increasingly individualised workers (Casey 1995; OECD 2007; Cooper and Ellem 2008; Hodson and Sullivan 2008). Under neoliberal governance, the state has also facilitated the firm's volatile strategies. Human resource management (HRM) practices that have rendered employment relationships ever more asymmetrical have been significantly supported by flexible legislation. In addition, governments have provided their support by absorbing the task to provide a level of security of income which private firms are not necessarily keen to fulfil. A major example of such national welfare regimes is the flexicurity model.

Flexicurity has entailed the development of policies which simultaneously legitimate the flexibility of labour markets while safeguarding 'workers' security of income and stability of life conditions' (Casey 2011: 141; see also Muffels 2008). While it was initially developed in the Dutch and Danish employment regime, flexicurity has been manifest in other countries' regimes in variegated forms (Casey 2011). Although it indicates a desire to maintain a flexibility-security balance, it is clearly a mechanism designed to allow a high level of labour market mobility where companies are able to make timely adjustments to changing conditions (Muffels 2008). However, the 'security' aspect of the bargain is increasingly being eroded as states withdraw the safety net they used to provide. Heyes (2013), for instance, recently observed how the conditions that have appealed most to trade unions in the flexicurity model have been undermined with austerity measures in various EU member states.

In his analysis of Work and Employment institutions in France, Durand (2007), for example, notes how on-going deregulation affects labour relations by placing the individualisation of labour relations at the heart of the new system, far away from conventional protection that was once guaranteed by collectivism. Although the situation of labour markets vary across nations (Thompson and McHugh 2009), deregulation in the form of forbidding strikes in key economic sectors and the restriction of employees' rights to unionise in advanced economies have been argued to



be illustrations of neoliberal governance (Harvey 2005). The adoption of alternative HRM practices at organisational level has often been legitimised with private firms claiming that they need to adjust to an increasingly unstable environment (Godard 2007). However, the decline of unionism has also been attributed to the direct correlation of the unionist culture with more traditional organisations such as those in the coal and steel industries (Noon and Blyton 2002). Noon and Blyton (2002) for instance, attribute the statistical waning of union membership to the decline of employment in industries where unions have once been strong.

To be sure, the weakening of socio-cultural institutions also has to do with transformations in the shape of work per se. Despite the persistence of typologies of work that emerged in the industrial era, it has been argued that work has become less physically demanding and less manual (Durand 2007). With the advent of technological advancements, it has been possible to reorganise work in ever more efficient configurations while novelties such as the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have been responsible for the recruitment of workers into new types of jobs. In the modern era, work configurations mainly involved mass production as reflected by efficiency-driven systems of mechanisation and standardization, embodied for instance within respective concepts of theorist-practitioner Frederick W. Taylor and of Henri Ford (Casey 1995; Hodson and Sullivan 2008; Thompson and McHugh 2009). Taylorism and Fordism involved the technical fragmentation of occupations and skills into finer tasks (Hodson and Sullivan 2008). Such division of labour was aimed at maximising efficiency through an instrumental approach to labour.

In scholarly debates, questions regarding eventual transformations in the shape of work have revolved around the rational or 'scientific' approach to work. Various scholars argue that a break occurred at the end of the 1970s from Fordist practices in capitalist production. In the so-called 'Post-Fordist' phase, scholars claim that there has been a shift from traditional mass production to flexible production practices that are technologically more advanced, more efficient, more customer-focused and more innovation-led (Piore and Sabel 1984 in Noon and Blyton 2002: 157). 'Flexible specialisation', as Piore and Sabel (1984) named the phenomenon, was designed to revolutionise the manufacturing sector and provide a better-calculated response to

demand (Watson 2008: 94). The elimination of stocks and the 'just-in-time' production principle have emerged from flexible production practices (for instance, Durand 2007). Similarly, Durand's (2007: 27) concept of the *flux tendu* (tight flow) helps describe 'flexible specialisation' as a system that involves the 'non-stop circulation of workers, material and information' in the production process. However, the scholar contends that a concern for cost and quality within the model has remained (ibid: 29). In addition, it has been argued that flexible production practices enabled by technological advances have often involved work intensification for some groups of workers and job losses for others (Casey 1995; Crouch et al. 2004; Thompson and McHugh 2009). In other words, Post-Fordist configurations have not entailed a reduction of rationalisation at work, but instead, have consisted of an enhanced control system. Rationalisation of work remains the inherent feature of any capitalist project, regardless of technological advances.

Nevertheless, new trends have been observed. Durand (2007) notes how in many industrialised nations there has been an increase in various forms of office work and in industries engaged in service provision. The growing amount of work in service industries has been weighed against the decline of agricultural and manufacturing work in Western societies (Casey 1995; Crouch et al. 2004; Durand 2007; Thompson and McHugh 2009). In addition, the rapid increase in employment in the service sector has often been attributed to novel opportunities created by technological advancements predominantly in the form of information technology (Bell 1973, Castells 2000; Levy and Murnane 2004; Hodson and Sullivan 2008; Watson 2008). Levy and Murnane (2004), for instance, propose the conceptualisation of a new division of labour, which, according to the scholars, has emerged from the computerisation of work and has required the rearranging of tasks in accordance with technology-driven work organisation. It has been argued that we have now reached an Information Age, which has led us to living within a network society (Castells 2000; see also Hodson and Sullivan 2008).

Several scholars have also noted multiple ways in which work organisations have become more flexible and worker expendability ever more legitimised in contemporary conditions (Dicken 2007; Thompson and McHugh 2009, Flecker and Meil 2010 *inter alia*). For instance, it has been observed that technology-enabled service provision is often characterised by shift, temporary or part-time arrangements. Working patterns

have been re-defined at organisational level to ensure the matching of service worker availability with customer information demands now unconstrained by traditional approaches to time (Noon and Blyton 2002; Watson 2008). Flexibility has also entailed an increase in the employment of both female and male part-time workers as has been the trend in the UK (Thompson and McHugh 2009). Female workers have taken advantage of the suitability of part-time work for family commitments. Changes brought to Work and Employment institutions by technological advancements have therefore served the capitalist project by ensuring continuity in output production in various industries.

Of relevance to this study are the primary concerns of contemporary organisations to separate unproductive tasks from their core activities and to lower production costs by devolving risks towards subcontracted peripheral suppliers (Atkinson 1984; Durand 2007). Firms' adaptability to market shocks and to heightened competition in contemporary conditions have led to further rationalisation that has been particularly manifest in accentuated flexibility and cost-driven strategies (Standing 1999; Flecker and Meil 2010: 693). As capitalist organisations seek to establish forms of corporate 'best practice' in their attempt to maximise gains, mergers, diversification and subcontracting have become common corporate strategies (Hodson and Sullivan 2008). In Atkinson's (1984) core-periphery model of the flexible firm, workers involved in the firm's core competencies are often made functionally flexible, while peripheral labour are more likely to be subjected to numerical flexibility. As a result, workers involved in performing tasks subcontracted by other organisations which aim to achieve cost effectiveness, are inherently brought to face precarity and employment insecurity. Durand (2007) notes how workers operating 'at the periphery' are almost never unionised or operate in institutional and organisational contexts where it proves difficult to unionise them.

As a result of such unprecedented technological advancements, it has been argued that recent decades have been characterised by the emergence of a new generation of white-collar workers (for instance Noon and Blyton 2002) and by the rise of the so-called knowledge economy (Noon and Blyton 2002; Watson 2008). Durand (2007) for instance, notes a significant increase in the number of mid-level professionals, employees and executives. Arguably, the phenomenon has not only altered the

occupational landscape but has also challenged the traditional institutions of work and employment. Increased numbers of offices and the rise of new locations such as call centre operations and similar configurations shelter both routine and professional tasks which have been adjusted to the technological devices designed to provide customer service with an innovative approach. The advent of the internet and of other innovative telecommunication tools has led to the emergence of a new type of relationship between the worker and her direct customer within which the latter is brought to purchase the time provided by the service worker (Durand 2007). It is argued that time, rather than physical goods, has become the main purchase of the post-industrial individual (ibid).

However, Durand (2007) also notes that new typologies of work have often retained Taylorist characteristics even if they have developed in new ways. As Durand (2007) contends, increased efficiency possibilities have not reduced constraints upon workers. Instead, technological advances and new forms of work have required more commitment from workers who cannot afford to do otherwise. In technology-enabled service provision, it is self-evident that production and consumption occur simultaneously (Durand 2007; Thompson and McHugh 2009). Be it face-to-face interaction or long distance communication via the phone or internet, the Fordist detachment of the individual worker from the end product can be argued to be obsolete in contemporary work configurations. According to Durand (2007: 5), there lies a paradox in the demands placed on workers, which the scholar identifies as ‘constrained involvement’. In spite of the persistence of traditional practices in contemporary arrangements, the nature of the end product service provision and the means by which it is distributed to customers may prove problematic for the enactment of traditional forms of employment relations.

With accelerating technological development, traditional work has been mechanised and contemporary forms of work have required new sets of skills from workers. While some scholars argue that the technological shift has necessitated the reskilling of labour (Watson 2008), others ask whether new arrangements require the multiskilling, up skilling or deskilling of workers. Due to the contemporary shape of work, however, it has been argued that the increase in white-collar work has triggered demands for more educated workers (Brown and Lauder 2006). Others have pointed to a need to transform education per se. Robinson (2011) for instance, explains how education systems have to

match current trends absorbed by economies. In order to advocate the connections that inherently exist between work and education, the scholar recalls how ‘mass systems of public education were developed primarily to meet the needs of the Industrial Revolution and [how] in many ways, they mirror the principles of industrial revolution. They emphasise linearity, conformity and standardisation’ (ibid: 8).

A more prominent debate regarding the contemporary shape of work and skill formation has led to the promotion of the so-called knowledge economy model across various countries. There has been an even more significant focus upon the notion of knowledge in policy and scholarly debates alike. Drucker (1993), for instance, argues that we have entered a new stage of capitalism within which much importance is afforded to human and intellectual capital and therefore to ‘knowledge workers’. According to the scholar, this new stage is one of post-capitalist development whereby wealth creation lies less with capital ownership and increasingly with the application of knowledge. In the next section I delve into recent debates on skill development and discuss the contemporary connections advocated by scholars and policy makers between work and education. The discussion leads onto the extent to which the knowledge economy discourse informs these connections today.

## ***1.2 Work and education: contemporary connections***

Recently, it has been argued that work and education are connected more closely than ever (Casey 2011: 5). Such connections have been revitalised under the neo-liberal regime, whereby governments across the world have tended to double their efforts to design policies that will help economies sustain their national competitive advantage. As governments strive to remain competitive within an increasingly globalised environment characterised by highly liberalised markets, risk and uncertainty, much governments’ focus has been devoted to ensuring continual innovation and productivity (Casey 2011). As a result, several scholars have observed a growing interest in human capital, education, training and learning which has led governments to focus on the continued expansion and modernisation of education systems (among others, Brown 1999; Brown and Lauder 2006; Casey 2006; Casey 2011; Hart 2013). However, according to Brown (1999), accentuated policy focus on skill formation had emerged in

the last two decades before the turn of the new century. It appears that these policy concerns coincide extensively with the proliferation of neoliberal doctrines.

One of the major and converging mind-set shifts has pertained to the advocated transition towards a knowledge-based economy (KBE) model (Thompson et al. 2001; Bryson and O’Neil 2009; Casey 2011). More specifically, the revitalised concern for education and training has found repeated and firm expression within the KBE discourse. According to Brown and Lauder (2006: 25), governments’ concerns to move from a low to a high skill economy emanate from the dominant view that ‘we have entered a global knowledge economy, driven by the application of new technologies and collapsing barriers to international trade and investment’. A concomitant policy emphasis on individuals’ employability has also been noted at the turn of the twenty-first century (Brown et al. 2003). It is increasingly assumed that employability can only be ensured through continual skill development. Moreover, the concept of employability is associated with the increasingly shared assumption that ‘the economic welfare of individuals and the competitive advantage of nations have come to depend on the knowledge, skills and enterprise of the workforce’ (ibid: 107). The concept of the knowledge-based economy has more predominantly triggered a policy focus on the development of high skills among young workers (Brown and Lauder 2006; Casey 2011).

Scholars identify the emergence of the knowledge-based economy discourse in European directives claimed more explicitly within the European Union’s Lisbon agenda (Casey 2011; see also Supiot 2001). However, governmental endeavours towards skill development can be observed in much of the developed world. The high-skill agenda has led to quantitative expansion in post-schooling qualifications and to access to education for a wider range of populations across OECD countries. Hart (2013: 8), for instance, notes how newly envisaged avenues in British education policy are fuelled by the government’s economic instrumental goals as expressed in its 2009 commissioned report, *Unleashing Aspirations* (Milburn 2009). Its policy response to globally shared imperatives has led the UK government to extend statutory provision not only at higher education level, but at all levels from preschool to tertiary education. As a recent development, the enactment of economic rationalities in the spheres of

education has called for institutional reform of education systems (Robinson 2011; Casey 2011).

To be sure, the intensive deployment of the knowledge economy discourse ‘required institutional change to match the dynamics of change, competitiveness and innovation that are at its core’ (Casey 2011: 49). The model required a new conceptual framework and mind-shift within which innovation was assumed to be essential. The rationale for such a significant transformation lies with expectations placed upon the typical contemporary knowledge worker, as noted by Thompson et al. (2001: 923):

*‘The implicit model of the traditional knowledge worker is someone who has access to, learns and is qualified to practice a body of knowledge that is formal, complex and abstract. Knowledge work requires employment relationships and task structures that allow creative application, manipulation or extension of that knowledge.’*

According to Casey (2011), the knowledge-based economy model also required an accompanying learning economy (and society) discourse in which individuals are given the opportunity to develop their ability to learn in a manner that keeps pace with such dynamic innovative strategies (see also Lundvall and Borras 1999). As it encompasses the concept of a learning organisation (Casey 2011), the idea of a learning society may have gained prominence by underpinning policy makers’ and academics’ ‘mantra that knowledge work offers a rationale for the development of skill, learning and human capital in the workplace’ (Thompson et al. 2001: 924). Boreham (2004) notes how the discourse of the learning society, which originally developed in the 1970s, resurfaced in that of lifelong learning in order to infuse a notion of individual responsibility vis-à-vis skill development. While the discourse of the learning society has also been deployed with much impetus to promote the learner agency of individuals, the concept of the learning society serves neoliberal initiatives by accentuating the individualisation of workers, this time in regard to learning. As Edwards and Boreham (2003) noted earlier, individuals were driven to absorb the onus exerted upon them so that their continuous acquisition of skills ensures their employability. Similarly, Orton (2011) notes how under the UK’s New Labour government from 1997-2010, there had been a dominant focus on the employability of the individual in the government’s welfare-skills-

employment policy as well as a tendency to devolve the responsibility of skill development upon the individual.

Given that the discourse of employability has come to replace that of employment security (Crouch et al. 2004), the promotion of lifelong learning which has traditionally been associated with more virtuous and humanistic endeavours has been distorted into a discourse that makes an implicit contribution to extremely asymmetrical employment relationships and accentuates worker individualisation. Casey (2004: 620), for instance, highlights the importance of considering the non-economic, but equally crucial dimensions of work and education and of notions of citizenship at work. Social citizenship as the scholar explains in her 2011 work ‘refers in practice to concrete situations in which actors have to orientate themselves towards the exercise of solidarity’ (Casey 2011: 173). In an earlier study on the development of the knowledge-based economy model in Australia and New Zealand, Casey (2006) observes how educationists have noted tensions that exist between economic driven reforms and the more cultural and humanistic conceptualisation of the learning society. Later, the scholar comes to warn against non-negligible cultural pitfalls for societies.

*‘The dominant knowledge economy/learning society model appropriates and utilizes the moral imperatives of a humanistic heritage of education. It demands and assumes a popular acceptance that draws on a scarcely articulated moral premise that education is good and more of it must be better. It distorts those imperatives toward the aims of a reductionist, instrumental economic agenda that impoverishes education, diminishes culture and contravenes richer human flourishing.’*

(Casey 2011: 24)

The scholar adds that the new conceptualisation of the learning society has gained popular acceptance within these same societies due to a ‘generally favourable bias toward education and lifelong learning’ (ibid). However, this new conceptualisation is in turn biased towards a more instrumental approach towards workers’ capabilities. In a similar vein, Bryson and O’Neil (2010: 21) note how contemporary conceptualisations of human capability in the analysis of workers’ performance have often espoused managerial endeavours to ‘manage [workers’] hearts and minds solely towards organisational goals.’ As such, the scholars argue that such approaches to human



capability fail to recognise agency other than that of management. Given the increasing statutory efforts to promote market-driven ideologies and discourses in which more humanistic endeavours have come to be distorted, the state's contribution to the demise of cultural dimensions of work and education may be implied.

### ***1.3 Understanding national responses: a historical institutionalist approach***

The hegemonic character of the neoliberal discourse and the heralded power of the markets have often contained the underlying assumption that the impact of such hegemony and force upon national institutions is inevitable. To be sure, countries operating in the global economy are more likely to make constant adjustments to their regulatory framework when exogenous changes in areas such as technology, economic processes and financial arrangements occur (Crouch 2005). It can be argued that salient features of work such as the types of jobs available, levels of income, the extent of training and skill development and the degree of job security can only be fully understood within the broader context of overall competitive strategies and the political and economic milieu that surround organisations and individuals (Noon and Blyton 2002). In other words, institutions of work and employment remain embedded within broader social, political and economic institutions regardless of the punctuated transformations they are brought to undergo.

In line with the assumptions mentioned above, it is possible to argue that national responses to ever-new trends remain institutional choices and therefore tend to vary. The key role played by national institutions has been noted in the literature (for instance Maurice et al. 1980; Lloyd and Payne 2013). In a comparative study based on the organisation of manufacturing units in three European countries, Maurice et al (1980: 59) note how there is 'an institutional logic that is particular to a society' and how this produces nationally different shapes of organisation.' The approach described here is well in line with a theoretical perspective held in the neo-institutionalist tradition and will be advocated in this study.

The explanatory power of neo-institutional theory lies with its ability to highlight the institutional components which have persisted or have emerged over time and have led

to the development of specific policies and strategies at precise points in time. However, institutions can be defined in variegated ways. Crouch (2005: 10) defines institutions as ‘patterns of human action and relationships that persist and reproduce themselves over time, independently of the identity of the biological individuals performing within them.’ Along the lines of the scholar’s definition, institutions can be understood as forces or norms which take shape within a context and to which individuals as actors are subjected. Streeck and Thelen (2005) observe a dual character in what can be called ‘institutions’. According to the scholars, institutions can either be defined as regimes, or ‘building blocks of social order’ which are collectively enforced and involve ‘mutually related rights and obligations for actors, distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ actions’ (Streeck and Thelen 2005: 9). Legal-political institutions for example are said to help organise behaviour into predictable and reliable patterns (ibid). However, the scholars also identify more informal institutions such as mores and customs. While Streeck and Thelen (2005a) argue that change in the two types of institutions they identify can respectively occur by decision for formal institutions and by cultural evolution for those who are informal in nature, the scholars point to their common obligatory character. Crouch (2005) also points to the conceptualisation of institutions as generic instances which contain subtypes of institutions. In this study, the concept of ‘institutions’ is apprehended in all these multiple ways: they are considered to be policies, structures or cultural norms where respectively relevant.

In his observations on neo-institutional analysis, Crouch (2005: 2) notes that its legitimacy is advocated in scholarly debates by contending that ‘economic behaviour and the market itself, exist within a framework of patterns, routines and rules’. While economic interests are said to influence policy, politics and social life (Streeck 2010), these interests stem from a particular set of institutional pre-dispositions despite the common pressure points exerted onto distinct national economies by global trends. As a result, it can be argued that economies’ adaptation capacities to exogenous shocks are premised upon a framework of patterns, routines and rules which have developed over time within their respective contexts. Although capitalism in general leads to the development of policies which are based upon common ideological features, it has been argued that it is not helpful merely to envisage capitalism as a ‘self-driven mechanism of surplus extraction and accumulation governed by objective laws’ (ibid.) Individuals’

choices to start with, have been argued to stem from norms and factors developed outside the market (Crouch 2005). As Crouch (2005: 8) contends, decisions, tastes and preferences are shaped within institutional realities outside the market and individuals are only partly educated within the pressures of the market. For instance, the scholar underlines the role of families as social institutions in individuals' education (ibid).

Given that decisions and national responses to change and contemporary trends emanate from national institutional logics developed over time, it can be argued that the conceptualisation and shape of institutions are historically grounded whereby institutional features are developed upon distinct historical circumstances (Doellgast et al. 2009). In the industrial relations literature, for example, the influence of past logics of action are often observed in an attempt to understand contemporary actions of workers and their collective bargaining institutions (among others, see Blyton and Turnbull 2004). As a result, national responses to globally induced exogenous shocks vary because forms of capitalism are respective 'sets of interrelated social institutions and [...] historically specific systems of structured as well as structuring social interactions within and in relation to an institutionalised order' (Streeck 2010: 1).

In regard to national skill formation policies, Brown (1999) contends that the variety of responses of governments and the degree of flexibility afforded to training policies are expressions of the type of state-market relationships cultivated within distinct economies. As the scholar puts it: 'while financial markets are subject to wild fluctuations, educational, social and economic institutions are embedded in a historical, cultural and political context which are more difficult to transform' (ibid:234). Similarly, historical institutionalist Steinmo (2010) argues that actors' behaviour occurs inside particular social, political, economic and cultural contexts. While choices of human beings are argued to be individual and complex by historical institutionalists (Hay and Wincott 1998; Steinmo 2010), it can be argued that they remain highly dependent upon the context within which these choices are allowed to be made.

As such, historical institutionalism is advocated as an approach which contributes to scholarly debates due to the two-fold focus its name indicates. In other words, the approach not only helps in identifying institutional features but also in providing a logical explanation to the shape that institutions have taken over time. It inherently

advocates the importance of context specificity (Streeck and Thelen 2005). Historical institutionalists such as Streeck (2010) also argue for a need to acknowledge the interdependence between economy and society. While exogenous shocks may lead to adaptive responses by policy makers and economic institutions, these responses, historical institutionalists contend, can only be assessed and understood through an analysis of the path followed by an economy and society (for instance, Steinmo 2010). In this thesis, national responses in the form of policies will be examined in order to understand how corresponding institutions have evolved over time and the extent to which they have been able to adjust to current trends and requirements.

As Crouch (2005: 74) explains, the notion of path dependence is a major instrument in the neo-institutionalist approach. Based on the scholar's definition, path dependence is the 'means by which institutions often achieve continuity and change over time and constrain the scope for individual maximisation of actors.' As an educationist, Brown (1999: 234), also acknowledges the importance of recognising economies' 'path dependency' in order to understand features of continuity and change in institutional matters. Therefore it is only partly true that policy dispositions regarding workers' skills capacities and development of agency may be affected by exogenous pressures upon the economy and society within which they operate. The opportunities made available to individuals are constructed within specific contexts. I elaborate on the underlying assumptions enshrined in the historical institutionalist approach in the first part of my methodology chapter.

### ***1.4 The Case of Mauritius: research objectives***

In this thesis, I contextualise Mauritius in regard to how it has adjusted to global production regimes ever more liberalised under neoliberal governance. More specifically, I seek to critically explore some of the main institutional features that characterise the economy and society of Mauritius and how the implications of contemporary economic conditions and trends have recently impacted on national institutions. As noted earlier, my empirical study is based on the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector of Mauritius. While I argue that BPO is illustrative of contemporary work configurations, I also seek to understand how the Mauritian

economy has embraced global trends and discourses regarding the spheres of work and education in order to assess the impact of contemporary policies and institutional dispositions upon young Mauritian workers.

While it emerged at the beginning of the 1980s as a governmental response to economic challenges in Western economies, neoliberalism has not spared Mauritius and various other countries of the Global South. Be it economically or culturally, countries of the Global South have been brought to experience the effects of neo-liberal ideology and governance upon their respective economies and societies. For instance, Steger and Roy (2010: 10) explain how several countries of the Global South were directly affected by ‘structural adjustment programmes’ and international free-trade agreements imposed onto their respective economies by powerful economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Under this global agenda, heavily indebted developing countries were to abide by proposed reforms in exchange for loans. While the Mauritian government attended to these adjustment demands, it has been observed that Mauritius remained assertive toward these international institutions’ pressures and implemented adjustments upon some of its own terms (Bunwaree 2002).

In addition to its institutional adjustments to such pressures, however, Mauritius has demonstrated its participation to the global economy through its export-led activities since its post-independence decade. Recent possibilities brought about by technological advancements and the widespread promotion of the knowledge economy across the world have led the Mauritian government to express its intention to enhance its competitiveness by espousing such political economic discourses and by developing policies in favour of skill acquisition and expansion in the field of education. Through an empirical study based on the Business Process Outsourcing sector of Mauritius, I critically explore the challenges that may have recently emerged in the realms of work and education in Mauritius. I seek to understand how the institutional context within which Mauritian workers operate has evolved over time. Given the government’s focus on the skill development of its workforce, I examine the extent to which Education and Training policies and other related institutions have been adequately adjusted to contemporary requirements. Overall, I seek to focus on the challenges which have emerged in contemporary economic conditions for workers, companies and national

education and training institutions in Mauritius, as illustrated by the Business Process Outsourcing sector.

I therefore seek to address the following research questions:

**In the light of the BPO sector, what are the main challenges brought about by changing work and employment institutions in Mauritius?**

1. What are the main features of the institutional context within which young BPO workers operate in Mauritius?
2. To what extent have Education and Training (E&T) policies and other relevant institutions bequeathed from the country's past been adequately adjusted to current economic trends and requirements?
3. What are the contemporary challenges facing workers, companies and Education and Training Institutions in Mauritius, especially in regard to workers' skill levels and agency?

In an attempt to understand context-specific responses to current trends and global requirements, I also take a particular focus on the historically grounded development of Mauritian institutions. While I rely upon the explanatory power of historical institutionalism as an approach (Thelen 2002), I review some of the main historical facts and take account of normative forces which have shaped Mauritian institutions and the behaviour of its various groups of actors over time. I seek to understand how institutions in Mauritius have evolved as well as the patterns which explain both its much extolled economic success story and the challenges that I intend to identify in this study.

Although Mauritius is a former French and British colony, there is no intention to reproduce the scholarly debates to which social forms of colonialism and post-colonialism have been subjected, be it implicitly or explicitly (Bourdieu 1958; Gandhi 1998; Go 2009; 2013 *inter alia*). As Go (2013) rightly observes, phenomena such as colonial transformations, the dynamics of colonial exploitation and racial hierarchies

have long been studied by historians and social scientists who had taken a particular interest in colonialism or in the case of other scholars such as Gandhi (1998), in postcolonialism. While I may refer to the 'postcolonial' condition of Mauritius in this study, the hyphenated form of post-colonialism is more often used to imply the temporal marker that chronologically separates colonial occupation and its aftermath (Gandhi 1998). Nevertheless, the study is in no denial of the persistent presence of colonial bearing upon former colonies such as Mauritius. Colonialism's cultural logics and persisting effects (Gandhi 1998) are implied and observed in this study. They are more precisely considered a given.

Notwithstanding my concern for Mauritian workers, the study aims to highlight the role of the Mauritian government and the impact of its policies upon its economy and society. As such, the study bears the underlying assumption that economy and society can only be envisaged as being intertwined (Streeck 2010). In the present study I endeavour to highlight some of the tensions and contradictions that recent discourses and concepts captured in work and educational policies have triggered, while also identifying the risks and challenges facing Mauritian workers in such contemporary conditions.

Given the contemporary connections advocated between work and education both across the world and in Mauritius, the study seeks to critically examine how the Mauritian economy has embraced concepts which highlight worker individualisation, employability and skill development amid the government's endeavour to espouse the knowledge-based economy discourse and that of the learning society. The study examines the pressures experienced by Mauritian workers operating in a white-collar setting often argued to be designed for a new generation of professionals. While the implications for workers' sustainable development and agency are examined, the study takes issue with the accentuation of potentially contradictory discourses deployed by employers and policy-makers alike in a globalised and liberalised production system.

By applying institutional theory, the study also aims to highlight the aspects which depict the level of continuity and change afforded by Mauritian institutions in contemporary economic conditions. Based upon the challenges I intend to identify through the empirical study on Mauritius, I seek to investigate the extent to which a

new conceptualisation of workers' capabilities can be envisaged within an economic and institutional context characterised by the acceptance of insecurity and uncertainty. As such, I also draw upon some of the concepts from the capability approach whose main discourse has been advocated as an alternative to neo-liberal hegemony and a distinct conceptualisation of public policy (Orton 2011). While the empirical study is based on the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) of Mauritius, I seek to investigate the lessons which can be learned from the BPO experience and which may serve future policy-making and planning in the realms of work and education.

### ***1.5 Thesis Overview***

In this study, I address my research questions by taking a particular focus on the institutions of Mauritius in the realms of economy, work and education while exploring the current institutional context within which Mauritian workers operate as well as the normative forces that have taken shape over time and now impact upon these workers and national policies. In chapter 2 I elaborate on some of the major contemporary concepts which have appeared repeatedly in political economic discourse in recent years and which lay the foundations for the present discussion. As noted in section 2 above, changes brought both by technological advancements and neo-liberally-driven governance in the realms of work have pertained to policy focus upon the building of a knowledge economy and new conceptualisations of skills, skill acquisition and individualised workers' employability. I critically discuss some of the scholarly documented contradictions borne by such generic political economic discourses. At the end of the chapter, I also take account of alternative discourses which help envisage skill and workers' capabilities in less instrumental and more humane ways.

In chapter 3, I provide a brief overview of the history of Mauritius. While I highlight events which marked specific junctures in the Mauritian history, I examine the emergence of some of the major institutions which characterise Mauritius' colonial past and the decade that immediately followed its formal independence in 1968. While this chapter remains a general historical account, I often take a particular focus on economic, work and education institutions given my interest in seeking to understand how their development over time is historically grounded.



In chapter 4, I describe the contemporary context of Mauritius. I provide an overview of the Mauritian economy as it is today while noting some of the main features of its regulatory framework and institutional environment. In the last section of the chapter, I examine the development that has taken place in the realms of education in Mauritius while discussing how the ‘knowledge economy’ mantra and its accompanying concept of the learning society have started to inform Mauritian policy makers’ discourses.

In chapter 5 I present my methodology. First I describe my ontological and epistemological assumptions. I also reflect on the ontological perspective afforded under the historical institutionalist framework and which is here, supplemented by assumptions taken from the Capability Approach (CA). Second, I describe my fieldwork, my sample, the procedures and ethical practices followed during data collection in Mauritius. Finally I explain the analytical framework employed after data collection.

In chapters 6 and 7, I report my findings. In Chapter 6 I report the challenges experienced by workers and the companies within which they are employed. While findings reported in chapter 7 also concern workers’ experiences, they point more significantly to skill-related issues and to the Mauritian government’s policy approach to education and training in contemporary conditions. In chapter 8, I discuss my findings in relation to the concepts highlighted in chapters 1 and 2 and to contemporary facts on Mauritius as discussed in chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 9, I conclude and highlight the new ways of envisaging education and other institutions in Mauritius which were often suggested by some of the informants of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2 Neoliberal Capitalism: Problematic and Alternative Discourses**

In this chapter, I discuss some of the main concepts which have been revitalised due to the popularity of the knowledge-based economy discourse. I here refer to critical observations documented in existing literature on managerial and governments' discourses involving knowledge work, professionalism and employability. As I aim to demonstrate later in the study, such discourses have not spared the context of Mauritius. In the first chapter, I indicated how the study aims to contextualise Mauritius by focusing particularly on current trends in Education and Training (E&T) policies with respect to how the island-nation's economic as well as Work and Employment institutions have evolved over time. In this chapter, I seek to highlight existing debates which have called into question national and organisational policies which are meant to provide opportunities through which individuals as workers and citizens can develop their skills capacities and agency in the face of challenges encountered in contemporary conditions.

I first discuss the concepts of knowledge work, professionalism and employability in terms of how they are deployed in policies at national and organisational level. I identify contradictions which can be observed within the broad conceptualisation of knowledge work and I argue how this has often been misleading. I then discuss the discourses of professionalism and employability which, I demonstrate, are often deployed to express the level of skill capacities and agency expected from workers in contemporary economic conditions. At the end of the chapter, I refer to alternative scholarly discourses which, I argue, resonate with recent debates on the critical connections between economy, work and education.

### ***2.1 Knowledge and service work: disparities***

In recent years, several scholars have expressed their criticisms toward the discourse of the knowledge economy and society. It has been argued that knowledge, or post-industrial society theorists 'typically conflate knowledge work with service sector jobs' (Hislop 2013: 5; see also Thompson et al. 2001). As Thompson et al. (2001) argue, knowledge work and service work have often been promoted inseparably (Thompson et

al. 2001). According to Hislop (2013), aggregate statistics on the size of the service sector employment is at times used to indicate the transition to a knowledge society. Claims advocating a significant shift toward a knowledge economy and society may have emerged from the increase in service sector jobs in the past two or three decades. For instance, Thompson et al. (2001) observe how key growth areas that could indicate future employment for the first decade of 2000 onwards were in low skill service jobs. These vary, but include jobs such as security, fast food and office cleaning, which tend to be repetitive, highly monitored and in sharp contrast to the way knowledge work had initially been conceptualised (ibid). As Hislop (2013: 6) puts it, 'to suggest that all service sector employment is knowledge-intensive work does not acknowledge the reality of much service work'.

A closer inspection of the occupational landscape depicts a significant growth in low-skilled, lower paid jobs, alongside a growth in professional and managerial work (Fleming et al. 2004; Warhurst and Thompson 2006; Hislop 2013). As Hislop (2013: 6) suggests, some jobs can be specifically defined as being knowledge intensive, notably consultancy and research. Fleming et al. (2004), for instance, demonstrate how managerial work has been the fastest growing occupational group since the 1980s. In addition, scholars have established a conceptual distinction among the forms of work defined as knowledge-oriented by emphasising the types of skills required in each typology. Thompson et al. (2001) note how interactive service work and call centre work require skills which are of non-technical character. The scholars demonstrate how technical skills, which are argued to be at the core of knowledge work, are considered to be of lesser value in such service work. Instead, social skills were said to be more relevant. In addition to questioning the over-simplistic definition of knowledge work and services, such arguments also propose a broadening of the conceptualisation of knowledge per se (Thompson et al. 2001; Hislop 2013). In some cases, required knowledge can be partial, tacit, subjective and contextual. Therefore, as Thompson et al. (2001) argue, there are a number of service jobs which have misleadingly been included in the knowledge work category. These low level service jobs, the scholars contend, fall either 'outside the framework of any conceivable notion of a knowledge economy, or bear little resemblance to the dominant model' (ibid: 924).

Thompson et al. (2001) take issue with the repeated mantra that knowledge work offers a rationale for the development of skills and learning. While this was extensively advocated in the 1990s (Reich 1993; Byers 1999; Von Krogh et al. 1998, all cited in Thompson et al. 2001: 925), the scholars note how in the UK, for instance, only 10% of new jobs could be classified as knowledge work per se. More recently, Hislop (2013) calls into question the underlying hopes behind the glorification of the knowledge economy and society. Along these lines, Bell's (1973) predictions that workers will have more fulfilling jobs and that there will be a decline in unpleasant and repetitive work and individualistic behaviour in social relations are equally debatable. Clearly, the overarching discourse of building a knowledge-based economy bears significant disparities for both work and education and their institution outlets. Further disparities have been documented in the literature. Below I discuss attempts to professionalise service work, often misleadingly defined as knowledge work, and critically examine the deployment of the concept of employability.

## ***2.2 Professionalism: discursive distortions***

The relevance of career and profession as central sources of identity formation for individuals and the significant place that professions still hold in societies have been noted in the literature (Champy 2009). As such, scholars observe how there have been attempts to deploy the discourse of professionalism in contemporary organisations (among others, Fournier 1999; Marks and Scholarios 2007; Champy 2009; Noronha and D'Cruz 2009; Evetts 2011). The use of the concept has been noted both within employer jargon and that of workers (for instance Fournier 1999; Vaidyanathan 2012). Several scholars have investigated the percolation and impact of the notion of professionalism as an occupational value and discourse within variegated types of contemporary organisations. The appeal to the discourse of professionalism as an ideal is attributed to its glorified features in the realms of work. Professions are generally acclaimed as a form of work characterised with knowledge, expertise, autonomy, and altruism among other virtuous attributes (Flexner 1915; Champy 2009; Vaidyanathan 2012, *inter alia*).

It has been observed that both employers and workers have attempted to professionalise several types of jobs. According to Vaidyanathan (2012: 212), professionalisation as a project can be defined as the ‘process by which occupational groups attempt to establish themselves as professions.’ The professionalisation project, it is argued, involves the attempt to systematically replicate key features of established professions (Hodgson 2005; Vaidyanathan 2012). While the ways in which this is achieved may vary from one job to another, Vaidyanathan (2012: 212) notes how some of the most commonly followed steps involve the development of internal structures such as those concerning institutional control and collective regulation, training and accreditation bodies, professional associations among others (see also Abbott 1988: 319; Noordegraaf 2007). Fournier (1999), for instance, examines the deployment of ‘professional discourses’ in occupational domains that are not traditionally associated with the professions. The scholar gives examples of management, clerical or sales staff, secretaries, restaurant staff, security personnel, furniture retailers to demonstrate how workers in such jobs have been identified as providers of professional services. Similarly, Spillman (2009) notes the creeping up of the notion of professionalism in occupations as diverse as actors, chemists and irrigation designers.

Professionalism has a long history in which it was apprehended as an occupational value (Evetts 2011: 407). Despite contemporary uses of the concept, several scholars have delved into the origins of ‘profession’ per se in order to better understand the eagerness toward professionalisation in contemporary forms of work (Fournier 1999; Champy 2009; Evetts 2011; Vaidyanathan 2012, among others). As scholars return to the way it was theorised within much earlier academic debates, their accounts have shed light upon various rationales that potentially explain the appeal of professionalism. The importance accorded to the notion of professionalism stems from the image triggered by the appealing characteristics it has afforded on the basis of knowledge. The intrinsic value of knowledge is argued to have been present already within Weberian and Durkheim’s conceptualisations. For instance, Champy (2009: 16) notes how Weber’s (1919) *Wissenschaft als Beruf* lecture<sup>1</sup> already contained potential models to analyse professional groups. In addition, Champy (2009) notes the emergence of a clearer

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber’s (1919) *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, ‘Science as a Vocation’ in English was originally delivered as a speech at Munich University in 1918 and published in 1919 by Duncker & Humblot, Munich [see URL: <http://www.wisdom.weizmann.ac.il/~oded/X/WeberScienceVocation.pdf>].

school of thought in the sociology of professions within which traditional professions such as that of the physician, as well as the transmission of professional values, received much scholarly attention.

Flexner (1915), for instance, observed how professions tended to possess a specific technique which can be transmitted via education. Within the functionalist tradition that dominated the field between the 1920s and the 1960s, definitions of ‘profession’ also emerged in British scholarship (Champy 2009: 3). According to Champy (2009), these definitions highlighted the professional’s possession of high level qualifications, the recognition of an exclusive competence to undertake specific tasks with a significant level of autonomy and freedom to make choices on behalf of clients. Prominent sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, together with Jean Claude Passeron, noted the correlation between chances to pursue higher education and access to professions. As such, the scholars point to the social inequalities triggered by this social phenomenon (1964).

Further critiques and scholarly propositions emerged in the 1970s. To start with, post-functionalist scholars attempted to propose a less deterministic approach to the concept. Their constructivist approach was an attempt to broaden conceptualisation possibilities by departing from stereotypes (Champy 2009: 21). Post-functionalist critiques were aimed to propose a departure from the particular focus on medical and other ‘scientific’ professions (Champy 2009: 25). Among other arguments, the legitimacy of established professions was contested on the ground that advantages, such as autonomy, are not necessarily specific to such professions. The new assumption was that all occupations could be studied in similar ways (for instance, Chapoulie 1996). In addition, scholarly insights based on the analysis of American society reveal how the notion of professions includes that of individualism (Bledstein 1978). Bledstein (1978) also notes how the motivation of joining a profession can be associated to middle class aspirations to a certain social status, thus reiterating Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1964) argument.

More recently, various contemporary scholars have noted a convergence towards a more or less unified conceptualisation of ‘professions’ and professionalism across societies. For instance, Evetts (2011) observes how in addition to the obsolescence of the distinctions established in the literature between the Anglo-American and the

European regulatory framework for professions, this conceptual convergence has emerged with the increasing role of the employing organisation. According to this scholar, there has been an accentuated focus on professionalism and a departure from professions per se. Over time the notion of 'profession' has been simplified and is today well incorporated in current jargon (Champy 2009). In closer relation to original conceptualisations however, professions have been defined as 'systems of occupational groups set up to provide expert service to solve problems with jurisdictional ties to specific sets of tasks' (Vaidyanathan 2012: 212; see also Abbott 1988). Evetts (2011) notes how professional values lay emphasis upon 'a shared identity based on competencies'. The scholar explains how in addition to being guaranteed by formal licensing, this 'shared identity' is also a product of education, training, apprenticeship and the socialising opportunities these involve. Clearly connections between work and education have been inherent within the notion of professions and its associated ideology, professionalism.

While the occupational value of some professions is still relevant in specific contexts (Cant and Sharma 1995; Fournier 1999; Evetts 2011), the notion of professionalism has also been increasingly deployed as a discourse over time (Fournier 1999; Evetts 2003). The application of professionalism is now 'organisationally defined and includes the logics of the organisation and the market: managerialism and commercialism' (Evetts 2011: 406-407). Fournier (1999: 280) observes how there has been a managerial tendency to casually generalise the notion of professionalism both within the workplace and as a marketing device to seduce consumers. The scholar observes the accentuation of this phenomenon under the overarching influence of neoliberalism (Fournier 1999).

Professionalism as it is understood today often implies the norms of workplace conduct and the management of these norms in order to induce workers' enactment of professionalism and make sure that they '[play] the part of a professional' (Hodgson 2005: 53; Vaidyanathan 2012: 212). Clearly there has been an implicit departure from the focus on specific professional knowledge. The scholars observe how professionalism has more commonly involved a phenomenon which Fournier (1999) identifies as the professionalisation of conduct. Within this conceptualisation, the notion of competence cannot merely signify the extent to which a practitioner masters a specific set of knowledge. The notion also needs to capture the appropriateness of the

practitioner's conduct (Fournier 1999). Perhaps this explains the percolation of the notion of professionalism into a wider range of occupational groups. While this illustrates the ideological character of professionalism (Larson 1977: xi), the broadening of the concept and its application in more variegated settings also indicates the indeterminacy of the notion of professionalism in contemporary conditions (Fournier 1999: 302). It is precisely for this reason that scholars argue that the concept is highly contestable (Fournier 1999; Vaidyanathan 2012).

It is therefore possible to argue that more tensions and contradictions are likely to emerge at organisational level due to the fact that professionalism is casually defined in contemporary conditions. Evetts (2011: 410-411), for instance, notes how the fundamental features of professional practice have provided legitimate ground for managers in their attempts to 'rationalise, reorganise, contain and control' work. In addition, there has been a re-adaptation of these assumed characteristics with contemporary work arrangements. Its fashionable ideological components of empowerment, innovation, autonomy and discretion (Evetts 2011: 412) have ensured the persistence of its legitimacy in contemporary organisational contexts. For instance, Fournier (1999: 282) notes the deployment of professionalism through the articulation of the notion of autonomy in managerial endeavours to legitimise flexible working practices. While Miller and Rose (1995) argue that the autonomy of professional practice is predicated upon its government 'at a distance', Fournier (1999) notes how a similar control mechanism can be deployed and articulated as professional competence to control workers in flexible arrangements. Its popular acceptance allows the deployment of what Townley (1989) identified as new softwares of control and Evetts (2003) as professionalism 'from above'.

Yet, workers' aspirations toward professionalisation have been observed in a number of new service jobs often identified as knowledge work. Marks and Scholarios (2007) note how service workers in contemporary white collar settings have tended to advocate their professional status. Various contemporary scholars have examined the deployment of professionalism within new service occupations such as those found within Information Technology (IT) or Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries (Noronha and D'Cruz 2006; Marks and Scholarios 2007; Taylor et al. 2009; Vaidyanathan 2012). While IT software developers have been depicted as primary



examples of knowledge workers (Scarborough 1999), it has been noted how workers in the Indian IT-BPO industry tend to see themselves as professionals or to advocate their professional identity as a status marker (Taylor et al. 2009: 35; Vaidyanathan 2012: 226).

Self-identification to professional status has also been noted among call centre workers who, while assigned routine work in the form of over-the-phone service provision have internalised the professional identity (Noronha and D'Cruz 2006; Vaidyanathan 2012). Therefore, scholars note a paradox in the self-professionalisation of call centre workers given the averse working conditions, low discretion and high-volume induced burn out which characterise the monotonous and Taylorist character of call centre work (Noronha and D'Cruz 2006; Taylor and Bain 2008; Vaidyanathan 2012: 226). While such conditions do not portray professional practice, workers' search for social status has led to the easy internalisation of rationality and professional conduct, thus facilitating organisational control. However, it can be argued that the articulation around professionalism varies not only across industries but across jobs within respective industries. Given the 'slipperiness' of the concept under neoliberal dominance (Fournier 1999: 302), scholars contend that the highly contestable character of professionalism contain potentiality for the re-articulation of the discourse and notion and can open up possibilities of resistance or worker mobilisation (Fournier 1999; Vaidyanathan 2012). As a form of resistance to professionalism 'from above' (Evetts 2003), Vaidyanathan (2012) proposes the contemplation of professionalism 'from below'.

Advocates of resistance to professionalism as a control mechanism also concur with the fact that there has been a significant shift in notions of professionalism. According to Evetts (2011: 407), there has been a shift from 'notions of partnership, collegiality, discretion and trust to increasing levels of managerialism, bureaucracy, standardization, assessment and performance review'. Clearly, the discourse has proved instrumental to the deployment of contemporary HRM practices whose development was discussed in the previous section. In addition to generic attempts by employers to induce the permeation of attractive virtues of professionalism within workplaces, the use of terms like 'professionals', 'executives' and 'knowledge technologist' have been noted within IT-BPO contexts (Banerjee 2006; Noronha and D'Cruz 2009: 226).

Furthermore, the discourse of professionalism seems to contribute to the accentuation of worker individualisation. Vaidyanathan (2012: 212) argues that professionalism inherently has an individualising dimension attached to its heralded and conceptualised virtues. Its impact triggers both individualisation in the employment relationship and a tendency towards individualism as a cognitive behaviour. A number of scholars have observed how the professional status acts as an impediment to unionisation (for instance, Taylor and Bain 2008; Noronha and D'Cruz 2009). It appears that an antinomy has emerged due to the increasing professionalisation of non-traditional forms of work. In some cases, however, collectivism finds expression in the formation of professional associations which, as argued by Vaidyanathan (2012), explains has had to do with the increasingly unpopular image of unionism, which is also deplored by workers as an industrial relic.

Extensive research on workers operating in call centre settings has highlighted a significant link between professionalism and individualism which acts as an impediment to unionisation or the weakening of democratic institutions in general. (Taylor and Bain 2008; Taylor 2009: 209; Noronha and D'Cruz 2009: 223). As Noronha and D'Cruz (2009: 223) contend, workers advocating their professional status tend to 'take pride in their individualities as is common to professionals'. Noronha and D'Cruz (2009: 226) also note instances whereby call centre workers' protective attitude toward their professional privileges and identity has involved the exclusion of support of 'less professional' staff from their associative initiatives.

As an increasing number of workers across the world operate within multi-national work configurations today, further questions can be raised in regard to the deployment of the concept of professionalism within organisations. It is true that the discourse of professionalism emerged from the Western world. Today these employer expectations formulated through the discourse of professionalism have been globalised. It can also be argued that its articulation by employers in general, and its institutionalisation, have standardised workers' individual aspirations and undermined workers' individual aspirations as well as citizenship and voice at work. Professionalism as a discourse is instrumental to the formulation of expectations which are arguably unfavourable to workers. Although its individualising dimension has been identified above, it is more

the way in which it is used that can be called into question. Similarly, Peetz (2010) argues 'that if individualisation is the problem, we should not look at individualisation of attitudes but attempts by employers and governments to individualise the employment relationship.' In other words, it is the way in which discourses are strategically deployed that is problematic. Below I discuss how the same can be said for the deployment of the concept of employability in contemporary statutory policies.

### ***2.3 Workers' employability: contemporary expectations***

In addition to the deployment of the discourse of professionalism at organisational level, there has been a widespread adherence to the concept of employability among employers and policy-makers alike. Along with the promotion of the knowledge economy, several scholars have noted the percolation of the discourse of employability in national policies (Brown et al. 2003; Brown and Lauder 2006; Orton 2011, among others). As noted in chapter 1, policy focus upon individuals' employability stems from the popular acceptance that national economic advantage can only be achieved through the increase of highly employable individuals who will have developed the skills required to face contemporary requirements. In this section, I discuss how the impact has been two-fold. On one hand, the discourse has entailed additional pressure on increasingly individualised workers, while on the other a new conceptualisation of skills has developed over time with a shift in employer expectations that has broadened the concept of what it means to be employable.

Employability, which has been defined as individual workers' ability to gain and retain employment (Hillage and Pollard 1998), has become highly popular as a discourse within national policies in various developed countries. For instance, Orton (2011) notes how the deployment of the discourse by the UK government has implied the diffusion of a new mind-set within which the individualisation of workers is intrinsically promoted. According to the scholar, policy emphasis is laid upon the increase of human capital through skills acquisition on the supply-side (ibid). Within this mind-set, unemployment has come to be viewed as an issue attributable to individualised 'worklessness' and therefore to workers' cultural and personal failings (ibid.) It requires that the individual develops a certain 'learning agency' that will allow

him or her to adapt to the highly legitimated level of uncertainty he or she is to face in the field of employment.

Earlier I also noted how employability as a mechanism has come to replace the notion of employment security in contemporary conditions. As Crouch et al. (2004: 69) observe, this shift has entailed that the employer ensures stable employment while the individual employee is responsible for ‘ensuring continuing employability by acquiring skills and planning his or her career’. Similarly, Boreham (2004) notes how the concept has more likely implied a shift of the onus on the individual of his or her personal skill development with the assumption that the role of the state in this respect pertains to provision that will help enhance employability. Clearly, the emphasis on individuals’ learner agency on account of the development of their employability can be viewed as another policy device which contributes to the individualisation of workers.

According to Cremin (2010: 133), there lies within the concept an emphasis upon workers’ ability to ‘sustain a fitness for work’. Earlier, I noted how professionalism as a discourse is deployed at organisational level by both employers and workers. Employability, Cremin (2010) notes, can imply fitness for work not only within specific organisations or industries but also within the labour market in general (*ibid.*). In a similar vein, Brown et al. (2003) note how employability is more often related to demands placed on the labour market rather than being strictly concerned with the capacities of the individual *per se*. It can be argued that the neoliberal concept of employability constitutes another paradox. As Brown et al. (2003: 122) put it, ‘it is possible to be employable but not in employment’. In other words, workers are required to be employable without guarantee of being employed.

It also appears that the policy focus on employability has stemmed from governments’ absorption of the pressure exerted by firms’ expectations to recruit individuals who are ‘employable’ according to their standards. Scholars also note how the pressure has been devolved onto national education and training institutions (Andrews and Higson 2008; Casey 2011). However, the concept of employability has come to be associated with a broader conceptualisation of skills. Andrews and Higson (2008), for instance, note how higher education institutions are increasingly expected to

foster the development of key transferable skills or ‘soft skills’, which are argued to be integral to graduate employability. I discuss this further.

While technical or ‘hard’ skills remain an essential criterion at recruitment level, new forms of work as well as organisational arrangements have led employers to covet far more skills than before. Despite claims that the discourse of a knowledge economy has essentially implied an unprecedented focus upon high levels of technical skills and academic degree qualifications, there has been an equal concern for employing candidates with the right non-technical or so-called employability skills in contemporary organisations. Others have noted employers’ focus on recruiting workers who possess the right set of personal abilities on top of technical skills (Brown and Lauder 2006). While there have been assumptions that a knowledge economy implies the development of technical skills, there has equally been an increasing consideration for potential candidates’ personal characteristics and so called social or soft skills in the workplace. As they call for a broader definition of skill demands in knowledge-based economies, Brown and Lauder (2006: 48-49) observe a shift in employers’ expectations:

*‘Employers want people with drive, commitment and business awareness. They want new employees who can hit the ground running and who have the social confidence and emotional intelligence to get on with colleagues and customers. They want people who are able to work without close supervision and who are willing to embrace change rather than resist it. These personal characteristics are associated with higher levels of education regardless of the technicalities of the job. Therefore, the demand for skills within a knowledge-driven economy cannot be understood in a linear way from low to high skills based on a model of technological evolution.’*

Depending on the type of service work, others have noted employers’ interest in potential candidates’ aesthetic, social or soft skills at recruitment level (Thompson et al. 2001, Warhurst and Nickson 2007). However, scholars also note the diversity of soft skills expected from employers nowadays. In an attempt to attend to the conceptualisation of employability, scholars have established variegated lists of skills more likely to be in line with employer expectations. For instance, Hinchliffe (2006) names more generic aspects such as knowledge-gaining skills, analytical skills, fluent

communication and the ability to work in teams. Rosenberg et al. (2012) identify numeracy and literacy skills, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, Information Technology (IT) skills, work ethic disposition, critical thinking and management as eight potential dimensions. Others have included further possibilities such as professionalism, reliability, ability to cope with uncertainty and under pressure, creativity, self-confidence and self-management (Mc Larty 1998; Nabi 2003; Elias and Purcell 2004 cited in Andrews and Higson 2008: 413).

In addition to varieties of employer expectations in regard to non-technical skills, Crouch et al (2004) explain how expectations of workers' behaviour are inherently characterised by contradictions and disparities. For instance, autonomy, a feature conceptually associated with professionalism, is often accompanied by the simultaneous requirement of workers' obedience in various contemporary work configurations (ibid.). Regardless of the set of non-technical skills, such contradictions potentially indicate corporate endeavours to facilitate their acculturation process (Crouch et al. 2004; Casey 2011). For instance, Casey (2011) notes how changes to the internal organisation of work have been accompanied by increased psychological attention toward workers. As the scholar observes, the selection of potential candidates is often premised on psychological criteria which may involve selection techniques such as psycho-technical tests (ibid: 73). It has been observed how such requirements have stemmed from employers' concern to recruit candidates who are more likely to comply with organisational culture (Crouch et al. 2004; Casey 2011). However, acculturation has not necessarily entailed a desire to promote retention of workers. It has been observed how it has more to do with employers' aspirations to enjoy greater ease to hire and fire workers at their convenience (Crouch et al. 2004: 223). In line with the discussion in the previous section, it can be argued that the notions of employability and professionalism have come to be deployed as measurements of workers' acculturation respectively at recruitment level and within the daily life of an organisation.

Clearly, such scattered conceptualisation demonstrates the flexible character of the concept of employability and the challenge facing workers in attempting to maintain their level of employability. Amid contemporary corporate attempts to hyper rationalise work and exert control 'at a distance', employer expectations are infinite. As Cremin (2010) critically argues, it appears that workers will 'never [be] employable enough'. It

also indicates how the notion of skills has broadened in the contemporary context. As such, the fixated pursuit of a high skills economy as promoted in recent political economic discourses can be argued to be inherently problematic.

Furthermore, Brown and Lauder (2006: 48-49) highlight two major factors. Based upon research evidence, the scholars demonstrate how the focus on the development of a high-skills economy through the rapid expansion of tertiary education has not always been followed by significant demand for high-skilled workers. The disparity also lies in the fact that highly educated people often find themselves in jobs for which they are overqualified. (ibid: 48). While the shift from low to high skills is also attributed to new possibilities that technological evolution has presented, Brown and Lauder (2006) depict the rather ironical situation whereby so-called 'knowledge' work has tended to be routinized and standardised due to technological advancements. As a result, such jobs are more easily relocated to developing economies where lower wages are coveted by companies often headquartered in more advanced economies. Below I discuss further contradictions observed in the literature in regard to the diffusion of discourses that have emerged with the promotion of the knowledge-based economy model and its accompanying notion of the learning society.

## ***2.4 Workers' capabilities: alternative discourses***

The widespread percolation of neoliberal doctrines has brought a drive towards education due to its instrumental attributes towards economic imperatives. Above I have discussed how, in the discourses of professionalism and employability, much importance is afforded to knowledge and to individuals' possession of specific sets of skills. While the ideological attributes of professionalism are deployed at organisational level as a control mechanism upon workers, employability is equally promoted in governments' discourses. In such discourses, the common aspect remains the imposition of employer expectations upon workers' potential aspirations. However, in regard to employability, the promotion of a high-skill economy and efforts to devolve skill development responsibilities upon the individual also pertain to the contemporary role played by various governments in espousing globally diffused discourses.

Critical scholars have proposed alternative conceptualisations of individuals' capacities, skills and competencies. One of these conceptualisations can be found in the Capability Approach. The concept was first proposed by prominent economist, Amartya K. Sen (1982; 1992; 1999; 2009) and his close collaborators (for instance Nussbaum 2000; 2003) in relation to development thinking and welfare economics for developing nations (Bryson and O'Neil 2009; Orton 2011). However, the approach has also been used by western scholars to explicate issues faced under neoliberal governance by employment and education institutions in developed economies (Supiot 2001, Bryson and O'Neil 2009, 2010; Orton 2011; Hart 2013, among others). The appeal of the approach is moral and philosophical. However, unlike the equivocal and often deceitful deployment of discourses such as professionalism by employers, the Capability Approach inherently proposes a more humane concern for individuals' choices in regard to the life they have reason to value.

As an economist, Sen proposed the Capability Approach as a critique of mainstream economics approaches to human well-being. CA underlines the real opportunities made available to individual citizens of a nation to expand their achievements (Orton 2011). It helps cast a particular focus on the individual's freedom to choose the things which he or she believes will allow him or her to live a flourishing life. However, real freedom, it is argued, can only be achieved based on the real opportunities a nation offers to its citizens. Advocates of the Capability Approach (CA) are therefore concerned with the extent to which government policies allow individuals to achieve such freedom. In other words, CA proposes a focus upon individuals' capabilities at work and beyond while emphasising the role of the state in helping individuals develop these capabilities.

As an alternative discourse, CA offers a distinct conceptualisation of workers' skills and competences in the form of 'capabilities' and 'functionings'. As advocates of the approach, Bryson and O'Neil (2009: 1) point to dictionary definitions in which capability is described as an 'ability and power' or as an 'underdeveloped or unused faculty'. In other words, capability refers to what actors could do. The scholars note how the concept lends itself well within the domain of employment relations, to workplace skills and skills development. This is because 'capability' contains a notion of human potentialities rather than actual human actions (Bryson and O'Neil 2009:1). According to Sen (1999), functionings are what people may value doing or being. As



such, real freedom can be achieved by individuals through the choice among alternative combinations of functionings they wish to achieve based upon the opportunities, or capabilities, at their disposal. While the approach acknowledges personal heterogeneities in regard to their choices of functionings, it also contends that alternative combinations of functionings only depend on collectively available opportunities which in turn depend on context-specific social arrangements (ibid.). In other words, individuals' aspirations are shaped according to both collective opportunities and to the choices to which the individual is brought to aspire by the context itself.

The Capability Approach resonates with the humanistic agenda of education which today is challenged by strictly economic-oriented discourses. For instance, recent emphasis upon education and learning by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is aimed at empowering individuals within the economy and society. Equally, there have been accentuated efforts towards the acknowledgement and promotion of the connections between work and education. For instance, a recent agreement was signed between the UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) with a view to conducting joint work in key areas such as technical and vocational education and training (TVET), youth employment opportunities, the elimination of child labour and contributions to poverty eradication (ILO 2014). The agreement emanates from an initiative aimed at recognising the complementary roles between the two agencies in which provision of education and skills support lies with the endeavour to help people 'live better lives' (UNESCO) and help today's youth 'in having the right skills for quality jobs' (ILO).

While this collaboration expresses an attempt to revitalise critical connections between work and education, it calls for the need to envisage skills development, here through vocational education and training, as a means to a bigger end. However, in their comparative study on skill formation in seven developed countries, Crouch et al. (2004) highlight the contradictions that have emerged with the business-led conceptualisation of the learning society. In their conceptualisation, the scholars refer to Vocational Education and Training (VET) as any foundation and intermediate level of training while they leave out more specifically advanced professional and academic skills at Masters, MBA and doctoral levels (ibid). Crouch et al. (2004) also note how VET has

traditionally been designed to cater for the unemployed. However, they also observe how the government has become increasingly dependent on the private sphere of the individual firm for the provision of skills acquisition opportunities.

Furthermore, Crouch et al. (2004) also identify two major caveats in policy trends. On the one hand, the privatisation of skill provision and governmental tendencies to defer merely to the private sector's priorities, are argued to undermine the state's capacity to sustain collective concerns (ibid: viii). On the other hand, the scholars contend that firms inherently tend to be selective in their skill provision endeavours and cannot attend to skill maximisation for a society as a whole. The popular uptake of human capital theory and resource-based views of the firm under which individual capabilities are implicitly envisaged, may be appealing logics for organisations to behave in a short-term, self-interested manner (Bryson and O'Neil 2009: 5). To be sure, a short-term approach to training is now considered a given in contemporary conditions (Robinson 2011). Given that VET has been traditionally provided by the government, it can be argued that these new trends bear in themselves a paradox in regard to the role of the state in education provision.

Crouch et al. (2004) also note employers' lack of faith in government intervention in the field of work-related training. As the scholars observe, government intervention is inherently viewed as being 'inimical to innovation' (ibid). Employers demand that the government provide sound general education that is more closely geared to the world of employment (Crouch et al. 2004: 222). Crouch et al. (2004: 219) provide further potential rationales for this lack of faith in government intervention at training level. According to the scholars' findings, 'where the public education system is the main provider of vocational education, there is almost inevitably a gulf between education providers and firms' (ibid). Defining this phenomenon as an emerging 'major handicap' in a fast-changing environment, the scholars go on to explain that 'it is extremely difficult for systems of this kind to respond quickly to market opportunities for making new and better uses of work skills' (ibid.). This was mainly recognised in their study on the cases of Sweden, France and Italy.

In the case of the last two countries, Crouch et al.'s (2004) analysis refers to their respective governments' attempts to revive apprenticeship. The revival of

apprenticeship has also been recently of relevance to the UK context. In 2012, entrepreneur Douglas Richard compiled an independent report which was designed to be a stepping stone for a new conceptualisation of apprenticeship in the UK education system. Richard (2012) proposes that this offshoot of vocational education helps revitalise the relationship between the employer and the apprentice in order for specific and more targeted skills to be developed. While acknowledging the need to help individuals develop more transferable skills, Richard (2012) implicitly cast doubts upon training provision provided under the generic approach assumed by vocational education and training institutions.

While the topic of skill creation brings together public policy ambitions and the market economy (Crouch et al. 2004: vii), the contradictions noted above raise a series of questions regarding the role of the government. By subjugating national training provision to the firm, there lies a risk of legitimising short-term approaches to skill development and a narrow conceptualisation of skills. The government now faces the challenge of finding a balance between its high-skill policy and its original and collective agenda in which it catered for the unemployed in the form of training provision. More specifically, Crouch et al. (2004: viii) recommend that the government as an institution finds an equilibrium and new ways that ‘neither repeat the remoteness of government departments nor continue the present trend of relinquishing policy leadership to firms’. In the case where the government subjugates the opportunities it has to offer to individuals to the leadership of firms, it contributes actively to increasing the agency of managers while implicitly reducing that of workers. Below I discuss further propositions made by advocates of the capability approach due to new challenges placed on the individualised worker’s agency by market-driven statutory policies in the realms of education.

## ***2.5 Education and agency: contemporary challenges***

More recently, the diffusion of the Capability Approach in western literature has lied with an attempt to critically reflect upon contemporary economic and social issues in developed nations (Bryson and O’Neil 2009: 2). For instance, in what has come to be known as the Supiot report, the concept of human capability in relation to the

transformations of work and employment relations in the European Union (EU) has informed debates over EU social and economic policy<sup>2</sup>. Given the use of human capability in EU debates, Bryson and O'Neil (2009: 2) note how the concept has helped reflect upon the far-reaching implications of economic transformations that stretch beyond the employment relationship. In this particular case, human capability has been discussed in regard to the need for enhanced social protection and more proactive security for individuals in the labour market (ibid: 3). It has been noted how the concept of the capability approach is used by scholars in developed countries to advocate the re-insertion of 'society into labour market issues' and a broader view of the concept of skills in the workplace (Bryson and O'Neil 2010). Through the CA framework, the instrumental character of workers' skills is criticised in favour of a broader conceptualisation that includes achievement at work but only in addition to factors that allow individuals to secure their wellbeing. Bryson and O'Neil (2010) claim that there is pressing need to revitalise conceptualisations of workers' capacities beyond employment skills.

As education has come to be increasingly considered as a subsystem of the economy (Casey 2011: 83), workers as economic actors are expected to contribute to the building of the national economic advantage as means of production (Sen 1999). Contemporary discourses have eschewed the fundamental purposes of some institutions in favour of economic development at times to the detriment of societies and the individuals who live within them. As noted in chapter 1, the cultural degradation in the realms of work and education has also reduced the level of citizenship at work. Social citizenship, which in chapter 1 was defined as the exercise of solidarity by a specific group of actors, has not been encouraged within the economic discourses that now prevail. One can question whether the individual is given the opportunity to develop his or her agency and 'quest for subjectivation and self-production' in concomitance with a 'will to live together' (Touraine 1995: 339). Casey (2004) calls for education and skill development to be equally directed towards goals of (both) self and community development needed for living and participating in a participatory democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> The Supiot Report has been published in English in 2001 although it was released in 1999 in French. (See bibliography). It is a report compiled by Prominent French Scholar Alain Supiot on a new perspective initiated by the European Commission, over the changing nature of work.

To be sure, the demise of socio-cultural institutions such as unions as well as the hyper-rationalisation of work described in chapter 1 and this chapter have not been conducive to capacity development beyond work-related skills. This is exemplified through the concept of employability. For instance, Orton (2011) notes how ‘work first’ is a dominant notion that lies within the concept. In contrast with neoliberal-driven approaches to employability, Orton proposes a step beyond this reductionist notion and suggests that active labour market policies need to enhance workers’ capabilities by allowing them to ‘lead the life and perform the job they have reason to value’. By borrowing Sen’s conceptualisation, Orton (2011: 356) explains:

*The performance and success of employability policies should be evaluated in terms of capability enhancement for recipients, with two necessary preconditions for the development of capabilities. First is the empowerment of the recipients of active labour market policies, who should be adequately equipped in terms of capacity to act. In Sen’s terms, beneficiaries should be provided with sufficient material resources and means to convert these resources into enhanced capacity to act [...]. The second precondition is the insistence of the capabilities approach on the real freedom to lead the life and perform the job one has reason to value. In such a perspective, if recipients are adequately empowered, but are not free to use their capacity to act in the way they choose to, the objective of enhancing capabilities is missed.’*

Although constraints are bound to persist in some cases (Orton 2011), it appears that this alternative discourse to neoliberal hegemony advocates the role of the state as a facilitator and provider of real opportunities to its citizens. Based upon the current discussion, the CA proposition to look ‘beyond skills’ (Bryson and O’Neil 2010) is two-fold. On the one hand, CA advocates call for a broader conceptualisation of capabilities, one that encompasses both the skills developed by the individual and the means by which she is able to develop them. On the other, CA calls into question the type of skill that workers may be brought to develop. Envisaging only work-related skills is argued to be inadequate. Employability as a concept encompasses a wider range of skills and the level of employment insecurity democratised within the contemporary economic environment calls for the contemplation of skill development beyond current employment.

A similar proposition lies within the pathways concept as discussed by Raffe (2003). According to the scholar, the concept is concerned with the relationship between pathways as structured opportunities and young people's active use of them (Raffe 2003: 13). The concept arguably offers a broader perspective of the role of the state in the provision of development opportunities to individuals. Instead of the strict subjugation of training and development to the needs of the firms, the concept proposes that policies take a broader approach in order to respond more widely to the increasing diversity of young people's needs and aspirations. Based on the concept, young people are given the chance to 'navigate' across different options during their employment-related transitory phases.

Arguably, the 'pathways' concept is more apt to take into account young people's aspirations which CA scholar Hart (2013) argues are far from being linear. From a policy-making perspective, the concept of pathways offers governments more potential to develop a drive for lifelong learning among their citizens, provided adequate information and guidance are made available to these individuals (Raffe 2003: 12). Amid an economic environment characterised by risk and uncertainty, the concept presents possibilities to envisage lifelong learning needs for individuals beyond their current jobs and despite the demise of lifelong employment (Robinson 2011). Although the concept of pathways promotes the individualisation of youth transition (Furlong and Cartmel 1997), it can be argued that the concept has more to offer to the collective endeavour of building a society within which individuals are given adequate opportunities to make individual choices that allow them to build a life they have reason to value as the Capability Approach advocates. Nevertheless, the underpinning of lifelong learning with the creation of pathways by governments can only take account of context-specific features, given that pathways depend on the circumstances of each country (Raffe 2003). It presents more scope for valued individual choices that can arguably be beneficial to respective communities.

## ***2.6 Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have discussed the series of discourses and concepts that have emerged or have been revitalised with the promotion of the knowledge-based economy

model. As discussed above, there are several inconsistencies in the deployment of the discourses of knowledge work, professionalism and employability. The chapter highlights the slipperiness of these discourses and the contradictions that emerge as they are deployed within national policies or as control mechanisms within the workplace. More specifically, I argue that employability is used to foster worker individualisation by devolving the responsibility of their employment and learning on workers, while professionalism is used by employers as a source of power within their management practices. In the light of alternative discourses such as the Capability Approach, however, the discussion calls into question the role of the government in helping individuals enhance their capacities, in the form of both work skills and agency.

The chapter points to the need to reconceptualise the notion of skills in contemporary economic conditions and highlights the role of national institutions in providing the appropriate skill development and career opportunities to individuals. The discussion hints at the possibility to avoid limiting this reconceptualization to economic imperatives as heralded within the neoliberal agenda. As mentioned in chapter 1, however, governmental provision of opportunities for individuals' skill development can only emanate from specific institutional choices. Despite convergence towards globally acclaimed discourses, decisions and pathways designed to foster human development are bound to remain context-specific.

In relation to the present study, I have attempted to provide a critical discussion on various concepts which relate to national policies in the realms of work and education today. In this chapter, I argue that concepts, such as knowledge work, professionalism and employability, that have recently received scholarly and policy attention may be misleading or problematic. In some cases, their deployment exerts direct pressure on individualised workers. The relevance of this discussion lies with the fact that the Mauritian government has recently expressed its endeavour to espouse the knowledge economy discourse. In this study, the appropriateness of current national policies will therefore be examined in relation to the concepts discussed here. After providing a historical overview of Mauritius in chapter 3, I shall elaborate on the Mauritian government's contemporary E&T policies in chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER 3 A Historical Overview of Mauritius (1598 – 1983)**

In this chapter, I present a brief overview of the history of Mauritius. I highlight some of the main facts and political events which have marked the birth of the island as a colonial territory and have characterised the immediate period after decolonisation. I argue that the past of Mauritius as a colony that was essentially built on trade, has helped define the new Mauritian government's strategy for economic development after independence was proclaimed. I explain how economic diversification was a key strategy through which the development of the Mauritian economy and job creation were ensured in the post-independence decade. I refer to past economic strategies prior to demonstrating in later chapters how successive Mauritian governments have led the economy on the same economic path until today.

In line with the themes that are at issue in the present study, I also discuss the main features that have historically characterised the realms of work and education in Mauritius. More specifically, I refer to the Mauritian government's policies which consisted in the promotion of work and education for all. Overall, the chapter introduces the economic *path* which Mauritius has maintained over time and the development which has taken place in parallel in the spheres of work and education. It refers to the various junctures which have marked the end and beginning of distinct development phases between 1598 and 1983 and how the country was then economically, politically or culturally affected.

### ***3.1 The colonial past: initial context (1598-1946)***

Mauritius has developed into an island state which has emerged entirely from colonisation. While brief visits which took place prior to the year 1600 A. D. did not mark Mauritian history extensively, several scholars note the arrival of Dutch settlers in 1598 (Ramdoyal 1977; Brautigam 1997; Meisenhelder 1997). It has been noted that the land was easily appropriated due to the absence of an indigenous population at the time of the first attempts of colonisation (Ramdoyal 1977; Houbert 1981; Meisenhelder 1997). The second attempt of Dutch settlement in 1638 was accompanied by the introduction of both sugar cane and slavery (Ramdoyal 1977).



It has been argued that capitalism took root in the new colony from its very emergence, although Mauritius was only properly colonised by the French in 1715 (Ramdoyal 1977; Houbert 1981). As Houbert (1981) explains, capitalism in the island of Mauritius took a specific form which did not express an attempt to merely replicate the capitalist development that took place in Europe during the same period. Nevertheless, colonial and commercial activities rapidly grew in intricacy given that settlers did not have to handle any pre-capitalist problems, as was the case in other parts of the world (ibid). Mauritius distinguishes itself from other newly independent countries of Africa and Asia given that it was completely forged by Western colonisation (ibid). As Houbert (1981) notes, the economy, society, polity, flora and fauna, all stem from colonial history.

Under the French administration, notable initiatives consisted of the importation of more slaves, mainly from Africa, and of the introduction of education. The colonial society was then composed of French settlers as estate planters and slaves as labourers (Meisenhelder 1977). In other words, sugar estate administration and slavery became the two main forms of work with the new society. Amidst such dynamics, any asset required for proper settlement was imported. Administrative concordance with mainland France and the outcome of the 1789 French revolution brought about a parallel concern for education in the colonies (University of Mauritius 2012). Once the significance of education was acknowledged by the colonial assembly, an *école centrale*, later called the *Lycée*, was set up as a national institution designed to provide primary and secondary education. While primary education was provided to both the white elite class and free coloured people, secondary education was reserved for the elite group (Day-Hookoomsing 2011). More specifically, in their analysis of the history of education in Mauritius, several scholars have noted how education was strongly related to the strand of the population consisting of French settlers and was designed to ensure political and economic control in the island (Prithipaul 1976; Ramdoyal 1977; Day-Hookoomsing 2011: 254, 255). At the end of the eighteenth century, however, the Mauritian population was mainly composed of three classes of inhabitants, namely the white, the free coloured, and coloured slaves (Ramdoyal 1977). Such configurations would endure until the British conquest of Mauritius in 1810.

According to Tinker (1977), French capitulation in 1810 remains a key event in Mauritian history. However, while the capture of Mauritius by the British stems from the strategic decision of depriving the French of a base in the Indian Ocean, a political partnership developed between the British officials and the French-speaking settlers (Houbert 1981). It was ostensibly to both administrations' advantage to accept the partnership given that their interests in sugar, the main source of the island's revenue, made their relations inextricable. From 1810, the colonial society featured the co-habitation of two powerful entities, namely the French and the British authorities. However, developments to the nascent education system were noted. Under the newly established regime, the French *Lycée* became the *Royal College* (Day-Hookoomsing 2011: 256). In addition to the choice of a label much in line with the new regime, British intervention also consisted in confirming reserved access to the Royal College for the elite in order to ensure the availability of future administrative officers for the island. However, the arrival of the British administration also brought Christian organisations, which joined the colonial enterprise to work toward the island's educational needs. The work of missionaries set the tone for a series of campaigns in favour of the diffusion of education in the island.

It has been noted that Mauritius had a similar experience to other former British colonies regarding the work of missionaries in the development of education and in the setting up of schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Day-Hookoomsing 2011). In 1815, free day primary schools were set up by a Reverend from the London Missionary Society to instruct the destitute and coloured children in Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius. Education provision to slaves was also introduced by a British planter in 1830, despite French estate owners' hostility toward the initiative (Day-Hookoomsing 2011). In a similar vein, a campaign was led by a free coloured individual for the opening of access to the Royal College for the coloured people. The Mauritian middle class emerged from this initiative.

In 1835, slavery was abolished by the British administration despite French opposition (Day-Hookoomsing 2011). Due to the significance of sugar and its large scale production in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the decision would bear notable implications for Mauritius (Houbert 1977). Within the British Empire, Mauritian planters had a vast market for sugar and the island was highly dependent upon its export. Within an

environment where external socio-economic forces exerted an important level of influence on Mauritius (Houbert 1981), sugar production was institutionalised in the form of centralised sugar mills. With the abolition of slavery, however, sugar-related imperatives entailed a new need for labour (Houbert 1981) and indentured labourers or *coolies* from India were sought to resolve the labour shortage issue (Day-Hookoomsing 2011). Houbert (1981) notes how the coolie trade remained a form of exploitation for the planters in addition to being a lucrative activity. The arrival of Indian labourers also brought changes in labour relations while adding to the ethnic composition of the island.

Scholars have compared the conditions experienced by former slaves with those experienced by Indian labourers (Houbert 1981; Gabriel 1983). Indian labourers were remunerated for their labour. As Indian labourers moved into sugar cane fields from which former slaves departed, planters started selling and leasing plots of land to the Indian labourers during less productive times. Indian field foremen, known as *Sirdars*, benefited extensively from this new custom. Land ownership would later determine the ability of small Indian planters to afford education for their children and the children's ascendancy up the social ladder. As Houbert (1981: 81) notes, the arrival of the Indians gradually displaced from the plantations ex-African slaves who went to earn a meagre living by fishing and working as drivers or artisans, with a lower chance of progress. The phenomenon would prove to be an important aspect of Mauritian history.

However, the opportunities mentioned above did not come without labour protests against poor working conditions (Gabriel 1983: 99). In addition, Day-Hookoomsing (2011: 259) notes that the conditions under which Indian immigrants were contracted made no provision for the education of their children. It was at the end of the nineteenth century that the building of more schools was included in the government agenda. Both government schools and so-called Grant-in-Aid schools subsidised by religious entities increased in number. Ramdoyal (1977: 72) notes how in 1882, 6571 children were enrolled in 47 government schools while 5316 children were enrolled in 57 Grant-in-Aid schools. As a result, the twentieth century opened with an increasing number of children attending school in Mauritius. According to Ramdoyal (1977: 89), further advances in the education of the Indian community emanated from a combination of institutional change. The 1908 Labour Act rose the age at which a minor individual

might enter into written working contract from 10 to 13 years while the government set more schools and Indian workers' economic situation improved.

At this historical point, Mauritius was becoming a multi-ethnic island with the additional arrival of a number of Chinese immigrants and the preservation of linguistic and caste subdivision within the Indian community (Gabriel 1983). However, the emergence of a social transformation of the colony predominantly lay within the socio-political ascendancy of the Indians and their descendants. Better economic conditions led to access to European or European-type education for the Indians' offspring and guaranteed their entrance to professions or government jobs. In relation to the development of education in Mauritius, Houbert (1981: 97) argues that the myth within which education is viewed as the 'best way of getting out of sugar cane fields into a prestigious job in town', emanated from this visible transformation. Access to education granted to a group of people other than the white elite led not only to the development of a distinct intellectual group but also to the latter's economic and political frustration toward the Franco-Mauritians, depicted as the Mauritian bourgeoisie (Seegobin and Collen 1977: 112). As a middle stratum was emerging, confrontation with the white planters was inevitable. While sugar estates were animated by industrial unrest from 1937 (Tinker 1977: 328), the colonial society of Mauritius saw the establishment of its first unions after the passing of the Industrial Association Ordinance in 1938 (Brautigam 1997: 55). Unsurprisingly, sugar plantation workers were the first to organise.

The 1930s and 1940s were characterised by instability and class struggle in Mauritius (Seegobin and Collen 1977: 112). In addition to industrial unrest, the rise of the cost of living together with a lower rise of wages and the soaring of unemployment were, according to Seegobin and Collen (1977), responsible for difficult times in the colonial society. It was precisely within this atmosphere that the Mauritian Labour Party was founded in 1936 (Houbert 1981: 80). At the start, the party was organised on a non-ethnic basis and gathered Creole artisans and intellectuals of Indian origin (Tinker 1977). As Tinker (1977) notes, both ethnic communities mobilised mass support, whereby radical-minded Creoles were equally active within what then appeared as a combination of a trade union and political party.

However, although both Creoles and Indians were mobilised against the thickening Franco-nationalism of white planters, a division existed in the proletariat (Seegobin and Collen 1977; Gabriel 1983). Incompatibility in the collective consciousness of the working class pertained to a difference between the ideological motives of two main categories of workers. As scholars have observed, the group of non-agricultural workers were well organised in unions and were mainly Creole factory workers or dockers (Seegobin and Collen 1977; Gabriel 1983). Agricultural labourers, mainly Indian, geared their motivations in mobilising towards nurturing Indian nationalism and culture. Already at this milestone of Mauritian history, ethnic-based conflicts could be feared. Their impact could be envisaged especially in the main spheres of politics, work and education. During the second half of the century, ethnic-related tensions and divisions, intensified as the Mauritian Labour Party was trying to lead the country towards independence<sup>3</sup>.

### ***3.2 En route towards independence (1947-1968)***

The ethnic sense of belonging proved to be as intrinsic in the political concerns of the Mauritian society as were economic conditions. The case of Mauritius appears to be one where categorisation under classes could not be detached from ethnic differences during this period of Mauritian history. Scholars have later identified different groups and their ideologies by differentiating them simultaneously on a class and ethnic basis (for instance, Seegobin and Collen 1977; Tinker 1977; Houbert 1981; Gabriel 1983; Meisenhelder 1997). As at the 1980s, Gabriel (1983) attributes the birth of the phenomenon to the arrival of the Indian labourers on the island and notes how division among ethnic communities has been a major feature in the production relations in Mauritius throughout the twentieth century. The scholar argues that there has been a nationalist move among Indo-Mauritians within which there has been an endeavour to replicate the native Indian model. Besides, workplaces with a concentration of non-Indian workers were rare except for the Port where workers were mainly black

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<sup>3</sup> Cross-ethnic tensions in Mauritius are often identified by the press and politicians as a form of *communalism*. The term is commonly used within the Mauritian context to describe ethnic division in politics. These tensions are more latent in everyday life while being significantly present on the political scene. It is a topic which has been subjected to scholarly debates (see for instance Bunwaree 2002). In the present study, the topic will not be discussed in more depth given that the Mauritian population is here considered as an aggregate facing global and exogenous challenges. Ethnic history is mentioned here given its inherence to Mauritian history.

Mauritian Creoles (Tinker 1977). As the Creole community felt threatened by the Indian majority, support was sought from other minority groups such as the Chinese and middle class Roman Catholics (Houbert 1981). Within such community division, work was increasingly politicised through the proliferation of unions in Mauritius (Seegobin and Collen 1977).

Illustratively, Tinker (1977) describes the development of the Mauritian Labour Party during the period as having moved from operating on a non-ethnic basis to a Hindu-dominated environment. The scholar attributes such development to the fact that the movement managed to develop an industrial base among the large group of Indian sugar workers (*ibid.*). It was the Mauritian Labour Party which initiated a movement in favour of universal suffrage and independence during the same period (Meisenhelder 1997). Wealthier Indian farmers and professionals joined Indian and black Creole labourers to oppose white Mauritians and Creole elites in the political arena (*ibid.*). As electoral and constitutional reforms began in 1948 (Houbert 1981: 80), the Hindu-dominated community felt they were able to counteract the political power of white sugar barons as trade unions and strikes, though highly regulated, were permitted under the new constitution.

However, the extension of suffrage granted by the 1948 constitution only accentuated ethnic considerations. The degree of fairness in the eligibility could have been called into question. The right to vote was not only associated to the level of education of Mauritian individuals but also to their linguistic proficiency. As Day-Hookoomsing (2011) notes, an individual was able to enjoy his voting rights provided he was able to read simple English, French, Gujarat, Hindustani, Tamil, Telegu, Urdu, Chinese or Creole. The list of languages implicitly demonstrates that the voting condition was made favourable to the Indian community, especially to a wide range of its subdivisions.

Although the 1944 Education Ordinance prescribed that ancestral languages were to be learned outside school hours, more Indian citizens were likely to have the opportunity to vote regardless of their educational level. Moreover, other loopholes were identified in the education system in respect of citizenship of the Mauritian population. As noted in a 1947 official report, called the Nichols report (Day-

Hookoomsing 2011: 261), the absence of other objectives of education, such as citizenship skill development or the acquisition of ethical notions at school level could have legitimately deprived the Mauritian individual of a sense of citizenship. The report also highlighted the poor mastery of languages by Mauritian individuals. The same was observed in regard to the mastery of the English language at primary schooling level (ibid.).

Languages were also a dividing element in the Mauritian colonial society. Within the Franco-Mauritian community, more attachment to French language and culture and the reintegration with France rather than independence were advocated (Houbert 1981). On the other side, the Hindu-dominated party received encouragement to be in favour of independence from the British Labour Party, in power from 1945 to 1951. In reality, the Mauritian Labour Party was guided towards independence by the British administration (Houbert 1981). British support also included the development of the class of small planters and was operationalized by the sale of plots of land and encouragements to a section of a so-called petite bourgeoisie in an attempt to curb workers' organisation (Seegobin and Collen 1977).

With its Indian leaders stepping up the social ladder with political power (Gabriel 1983), and the colonial administration in its favour (Seegobin and Collen 1977), the Mauritian Labour Party was well set on its way to leading the island to independence. The party would have to face another well-defined opposition consisting mainly of the white Creole 'plantocracy' (Houbert 1981). The British regime acted as a facilitator in the Mauritian Labour Party's endeavour towards independence, establishing constitutional reforms accordingly and delaying elections in 1967 to ensure the adequate percolation of a pro-independence drive across the island (Houbert 1981). In addition, the 1959 adoption of universal suffrage (Brautigam 1997), and the fact that much of the male electorate had had one generation of experience in forms of democracy, were favourable to the possibility of change in 1968.

Constitutional reforms supported by the British administration helped in the definition of large ethnic alliances in favour and against independence. The Mauritian Labour Party allied itself to the Muslim Committee of Action and the Independent Forward Block to face the Parti Mauricien Social Democrat (PMSD), formed by the

white Creole plantocracy (Brautigam 1997). On the victory of the pro-Independence alliance, Independence Day was to be formally proclaimed at the beginning of 1968. Although violence in the form of riots erupted two months before Independence Day, the British administration made sure to re-establish civil order on the island.

### ***3.3 Post-independence: a challenging transition (1968-1982)***

On March 12th 1968, the formal independence of Mauritius was proclaimed. At the dawn of the new socio-political era, the notion of independence that pertained to its new context was widely called into question. In several socio-historical analyses of the case of Mauritius, scholars concurred that the term ‘independence’ might have been rhetorically inappropriate to describe the new national context (Durand and Durand 1975; Houbert 1981; De L’Estrac 2009). Contrary to the emancipatory inferences frequently attached to the pro-independence movement, the formation of the Mauritian nation operated within particular arrangements. Mauritius was driven toward independence under the auspices of the British regime itself. As Durand and Durand (1975: 127) observe, formal decolonisation was strategically planned and abetted by the colonial authorities, and bore no revolutionary actions. The fact that Mauritius formally moved away from its colonial ties without any struggle against the dominant regime, perhaps explains the ensuing implications this has had onto the newly born nation. To start with, the dependence of Mauritius on its former colonial ties proved crucial despite decolonisation, especially in respect of its economic imperatives (Durand and Durand 1975: 137). This echoes the phenomenon observed by Phau (2009). The scholar notes that decolonisation did not always lead to an automatic and immediate break between the mainland and its colonies especially when decolonisation took place peacefully.

The British administration bequeathed a Westminster-type parliamentary democracy to Mauritius, with a long tutelage, similar to India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) (Brautigam 1997). However, Mauritius was left with ethnic community division known as *communalism* as an underlying socio-political issue. The drive for independence did not result in unification and failed to steer the multi-cultural people towards any nascent or promising nationalist sentiment. The Mauritian population did not advocate decolonisation via a strong collective movement, but instead, independence was



implicitly imposed by the colonial administration. Independence divided the Mauritian population further, rather than triggering unity. The more notable implications conveyed by the riots mentioned above have been widely noted throughout the literature (Durand and Durand 1975; Bunwaree 2002; De L'Estrac 2009 among others). Importantly, Mauritians were rebelling against themselves, with divisions emanating from racial distinctions. While the Hindu-dominated pro-independence party won the 1967 parliamentary elections, violence that divided the Creoles and the Muslims was, according to the scholars, merely an expression of fear. Moreover, 44% of the population had voted against independence (Bunwaree 2002; De L'Estrac 2009). Although the rationales for taking this position may have diverged among groups of voters, this figure is not insignificant.

Given that tensions were intrinsically linked to the colonial past, they had been identified and acknowledged by the British authorities prior to independence. In order to forestall such tension and fear triggered by Hindu dominance, ethnic belonging was given consideration in the political arena. As Bunwaree (2002:12) observes, the British were responsible for establishing a plan to tackle issues around ethnic representation in parliament. The Best Loser System, a method ensuring that ethnic minorities were adequately represented in the post-independent Mauritian Parliament, was recommended by the British government during the decolonisation process (Cuttaree 2011).

Although Mauritius embarked on its post-independence journey as a fragmented nation, its government planned to operate with democratic principles (Juggernaut 1993; Brautigam 1997). According to Brautigam (1997: 46), the first Mauritian government allowed itself to be mainly guided by Fabian democratic socialism and export-led growth at independence. Mauritius was immediately confronted with the economic challenges that a single-crop economic configuration and a young population posed. As a result, Mauritian elites were driven to advocating a 'shared normative consensus on democracy' (Brautigam 1997: 46) as well as on economic reforms.

The new government in office inherited a frustrated young population facing high unemployment. Regardless of ethnic belonging, a new conception of work had emerged within the Mauritian society due to the changing level of education. According to

Ramdoyal (1977) and Houbert (1981), the British grammar-type education bequeathed from past ties had incited a distancing from sugar cane fields in favour of a born interest in obtaining governmental jobs. Such initiatives would sometimes remain unsatisfied given the limited amount of white collar employment opportunities (Ramdoyal 1977). Whether Mauritius was ready to undergo such transformation in the sphere of work and employment at this particular stage is questionable. In being highly dependent upon its single-crop economy at independence, the increasing number of young individuals in their 20s entering the labour market every year became problematic. This group of semi-educated young individuals felt entitled to office jobs, which were insufficiently available (Houbert 1981). While frustration and a general feeling of insecurity might have been major rationales for the drive towards emigration to destinations such as Australia (Tinker 1977; De L'Estrac 2009), the government's vision continued to be geared toward growth, development and stability. Tinker (1977), for instance, notes the considerable expansion of primary education immediately after independence. 90% of the 5-12 age group were enrolled in schools, with English and French as formal languages of instruction. Creole was also widely used.

In the meantime, the coalition government divided soon after independence. As a result, the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) invited the Parti Mauricien Social Democrat (PMSD) into coalition despite ethnic and ideological division (Brautigam 1997). Perhaps a drive towards development was the common ideology that related the parties in the early 1970s. The anti-independence campaign had been heavily financed by white capitalists, mainly sugar estate owners who were attempting to preserve their capital (Cuttaree 2011). Fear of nationalisation of their assets had been their primary motivation (ibid). As the government endeavoured to remain economically buoyant despite the limited amount of natural resources, heavy dependence on sugar plantations and the geographical isolation of the island (Brautigam 1997; Meisenhelder 1997), the pro-sugar oligarchy group might have proved to be a promising ally. Meisenhelder (1997) argues that it was the striving for development and progress that justified the first post-independence decisions.

However, amidst heightened efforts toward the implementation of economic reforms, the new coalition government had to face fierce political challenges and opposition at the beginning of its time in office. The expression of anti-government

sentiment was underpinned by a radical movement of young Mauritian individuals shortly after independence was proclaimed. Consisting mainly of young intellectuals who had experienced the May 1968 movements in Europe, the newly born party, Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), advocated alternatives to communal politics and capitalist economic strategies (Durand and Durand 1975; Seegobin and Collen 1977; Brautigam 1997; De L'Estrac 2009). Inspired by Marxism (Gordon-Gentil 1996), the MMM worked at overcoming the so-called race struggle with a notion of class-based struggle which started with the proposition of radical changes such as the nationalisation of sugar estates and the redistribution of income (Meisenhelder 1997). Its anti-government position appealed to young, frustrated, and often unemployed individuals as a voice against the gloomy future which, they sensed, was awaiting them. Gabriel (1983) also attributes the party's success to its effort in decrying unemployment and ethnic division in an unstable context where social malaise prevailed. Finally, the party gradually found legitimacy amid the working class which might have felt that the Mauritian Labour Party (MLP) did not represent workers (ibid).

As a result, unionism became the MMM's primary instrument in their politically-driven endeavour to gain popularity. Houbert (1981), for instance, notes that the party's alignment to the working class struggle proved fruitful as trade unions were successfully organised in key sectors such as the sugar and transport industries as well as the docks. However, the anti-government movement would result in political turbulence in the island (Brautigam 1997: 49). More precisely, the year 1971 was marked by a series of strikes initiated by the MMM. (De L'Estrac 2009: 25). The General Workers Federation (GWF), formed at the time, controlled several unions and was able to operate easily against more dormant Labour Party unions (Houbert 1981: 98).

In addition, the period was equally marked by government repression. A series of measures, namely, a state of emergency, ten-month imprisonment of MMM members, suspension of the radical party's newspaper, postponement of the first post-independence elections to 1976, the closing down of the GWF and strike prohibition were adopted by the government (Durand and Durand 1975; Seegobin and Collen 1977; Brautigam 1997; De L'estrac 2009). Such events posed serious socio-political challenges to the new Mauritian administration. The Mauritian government worked at

legitimising its authoritarian measures by describing the series of worker strikes as being essentially politically-driven and not union-oriented (De L'Estrac 2009). Legitimacy might also have stemmed from the lack of consistency of the workers' movement. The inability of workers to fight back in front of such repression was later noted in the literature (Seegobin and Collen 1977). Unionism and the working class struggle triggered by the MMM appear to have been merely instrumental to more political enterprises. It has been argued that the MMM used unionism to further its political endeavours. Similarly, the PMSD, another political party, would compete with the MMM to obtain unions' support after it would have detached itself from the government later during the same period.

However, prior to any dissolution, reforms were implemented by the MLP-PMSD coalition government in an attempt to react to the radical movement. Perhaps the major institutional reform came with the promulgation of the Industrial Relations Act of 1973, which aimed to lower barriers to forming unions and promote social dialogue. Several frameworks were introduced in the form of institutions such as the tripartite committee, the Pay Research Bureau and the National Remuneration Board (Brautigam 1997). The Act also led to the proliferation of unions while arbitration became compulsory prior to the legalisation of any strike movement (*ibid.*). Despite political turbulence, the Mauritian government persisted in orchestrating a process of economic diversification (Gordon-Gentil 1996). According to Lincoln (2006), the new administration was driven towards the re-articulation and development of the Mauritian economy from the moment independence was proclaimed. Brautigam (1997) attributes this endeavour to a legitimate endeavour toward economic stability. Notwithstanding the importance of sugar at the time, the pro-development drive was highly fuelled by the urge to solve the unemployment issue (Brautigam 1997). The Meade report, which was written under British administration and examined the economic structure of Mauritius, had recommended industrial diversification among other measures in 1961 (Meade 1961; Juggernaut 1993; Lincoln 2006). However, it was only at independence that Mauritians would witness major economic diversification and the MLP-led government started to integrate the majority of the measures in its development strategy (Meisenhelder 1997).

Among the measures, the suggestion of setting up a labour intensive manufacturing industry held the new government's attention. As the Mauritian elites advocated export-led growth (Brautigam 1997: 46), the Export Processing scheme was launched in the early 1970s (Gordon-Gentil 1996; Brautigam 1997). Favourable trading relationships with OECD countries as well as business bonds with newly industrialised Asian countries were factors that contributed to the success of the project (Brautigam 1997). The results were notable. The economy of Mauritius recorded a growth of 31% per annum between 1971 and 1975 (Brautigam 1997). Also, the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) accounted for 38% of the number of people in employment in Mauritius during the same period (ibid.). While the EPZ is argued to have served governmental strategies, several scholars note its contribution to job creation, more precisely to the *Travail pour Tous* (Work for All) governmental programme (Houbert 1981: 93; Meisenhelder 1997: 285). However, Meisenhelder (1997) notes how the economic structures of a developmental state like Mauritius are bound to be dependent on foreign relations and markets. To the scholar, the Mauritian state's ability to negotiate market access both for sugar and for other goods was the primary factor to be taken into account in measuring the growth that would result from its developmental strategies (ibid).

Scholars have noted statutory efforts to attract investors. Tax incentives and repatriation of profits were the main measures implemented to encourage foreign investment (Teelock 2001). Notwithstanding the percolation of foreign capital into the Mauritian economy, the government's strategy equally consisted in attracting local capital into its projects. As Brautigam (1997) observes, the post-independence government demonstrated its ability to turn opposition into opportunity. It indirectly encouraged doubtful Franco-Mauritians to join the EPZ project by increasing export taxes on sugar and by providing a set of relevant incentives to the local investors. As the Franco-Mauritian minority had preserved its economic power despite independence (Durand and Durand 1975), its capital also proved valuable in the development of the tourism industry in Mauritius and therefore to further job creation on the island (Tinker 1977; Meisenhelder 1997; Lincoln 2006).

Above all, the Mauritian workforce was perhaps the most valuable asset that underpinned statutory economic endeavours. The Mauritian labour market

demonstrated its capacity to meet the economy's changing requirements. Lincoln (2006: 67) argues that a labour market's composition and adaptability have a bearing upon whether there is room for structural change within an economy. In accordance with the scholar's argument, the changes and development that took place in post-independence Mauritius were only possible given the way in which the labour market had developed and in the post-colonial acceptance of catering for a foreign market. In respect of the EPZ, the entry of women in the labour market during this period has also been noted (Durand and Durand 1975; Hein 1984; Lincoln 2006). As they distance themselves from sugar estates and domestic work, women found more permanent employment in the tourism and manufacturing industries from the 1970s (Houbert 1981).

However, apart from the societal implications triggered by women in employment, the exploitative nature of the enterprise has also been pointed out (Durand and Durand 1975; Lincoln 2006). The fact that more women were employed was identified as a cost-effectiveness endeavour in the private sector rather than as a society-related governmental policy. Female labour was cheaper and less challenging as women accepted lower pay than their male counterparts and tended to be less unionised (Lincoln 2006: 67). In the tourism industry, however, ethnic differences were more prevalent. In his study regarding ethnic distinctions present in Mauritius in the 1970s, Tinker (1977: 337) highlights the dominance of Franco-Mauritians in the Tourism industry leadership. In contrast, cleaners, clerks and waiters and lower-level employees were mostly if not entirely from non-white ethnic groups. In addition to increasing employment opportunities, Meisenhelder (1997: 285) notes that the government's *Travail pour Tous* programme brought about improvement in wages and living conditions. The government's loyalty to its four-year plan (1971-1975) for social and economic development was noted (Juggernaut 1993). While the Mauritian government became a major employer in the 1970s (ibid), its promotion of the private sector proved beneficial to society. However, questions were raised regarding the compatibility of its education system with current economic requirements.

According to Ramdoyal (1977), Mauritian politicians had given importance to national literacy before independence. However, the scholar also argues that the development of education in Mauritius was hindered by a series of issues (Ramdoyal

1977). To start with, initiatives in favour of development have always been more of a quantitative than of a qualitative character. Ramdoyal (1977: 125) notes how the government worked mainly at providing education to an increasing number of young individuals, to the detriment of potential improvement in the quality of existing schooling. Moreover, other local scholars concur with Ramdoyal (1977) and similarly call into question the nature of education and its compatibility with the wave of development that was animating the Mauritian economy during the same period (for instance, Juggernaut 1993; Teelock 2001; De L'Estrac 2009). In fact, national education in Mauritius was bequeathed from its last colonial tie, and was therefore subjected to the institutionalisation of western-type curricula and English as the main language of instruction (Ramdoyal 1977: 165). To the scholar, such a system could only be problematic for a heterogeneous population like Mauritius. Furthermore, there was a degree of disparity in the development of Mauritian education from the start. According to Juggernaut (1993), educational programmes did not cater sufficiently for the main economic activity of the island when sugar industry prevailed. In his critical analysis of the development of education, Juggernaut (1993: 337) also notes how finding employment in sugar estates based on kinship, political ties, religious beliefs or cultural identities was a common social phenomenon at the time. In other words, the connections between the economy and the education system were not necessarily well established from the start.

National education was impregnated with colonial traces at independence. Although France was a major aid donor to local schools and the University of Mauritius (Gabriel 1983) British culture dominated the Mauritian education system. Scholars note the presence of a grammar-school-type secondary education combined with a university-established in 1965-that reflected the values of the British university system (Ramdoyal 1977; Juggernaut 1993). Scholarly criticisms of national education concern the strictly academic nature of its curriculum (Juggernaut 1993; Teelock 2001). To Juggernaut (1993), an education that was highly dependent and based upon ideas from abroad could not be conducive to innovative thinking. Despite compliance to cultural requirements of the University of Cambridge and the London Board of Examination (Juggernaut 1993), decision-makers and educationists sensed a need for change in the education system. The same local scholars acknowledge the government's efforts in laying emphasis in its four-year plan on the identified need to move national education

from its academic nature toward a more technical and vocational character (Juggernaut 1993; Teelock 2001). The need for change was accentuated further with the outbreak of a student strike in 1974 (De L'Estrac 2009: 134).

Encouraged by Marxist-Leninist inspired local academics, Mauritian students advocated reform of the education system (De L'Estrac 2009). Although camouflaged under issues such as the lack of teaching staff and sports equipment, it was, according to the local journalist and author, De L'Estrac (2009: 179), a deeper revolutionary intention that animated the student movement. Secondary education was not free at the time and could have been the subject of a legitimate debate. However, the government suspected that the radical political party, the MMM, played a major part in the uprising among educated youth. Although the specific demands of the student cohort have not been clearly recorded in the literature, the government adjusted itself by rapidly introducing institutional measures. Perhaps this explains why the voting age was strategically lowered to 18 years while political parties were en route to the 1976 general elections (Brautigam 1997).

The 1976 elections marked another turning point in the history of post-independence Mauritius. The MLP-led government was to face the MMM as its main political rival at the first general elections after independence. At this stage, the radical party was demonstrating considerable efforts at attracting a majority of young, educated Mauritians towards its ideological propositions. Houbert (1981: 101), for example, notes how amidst its very active and well-organised enterprise, the MMM knew how to make use of this group of Mauritians, especially in rural areas of the island. It became apparent that the country was ready for change regardless of individual ideological preferences. The MMM won the elections although it was two seats short of an overall majority (Tinker 1977). Rather than demonstrating that the MMM discourse on class consciousness had touched an important number of Mauritians, its victory may have indicated, as Meisenhelder (1997) suggests, that politics in Mauritius lacked ideological weight. The MMM itself will provide evidence to such argument as it would gradually move from its radical position as the party of the poor and the young to a more flexible agenda in the 1980s (Tinker 1977; Houbert 1981).



Although the MMM won the 1976 elections, the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) formed a coalition government with the Parti Mauricien Social Democrat (PMSD) for the second time during the post-independence period. Challenged by pressures from the opposition, the MLP-led government maintained its Fabian-oriented approach as it returned to office. Brautigam (1997) notes how wages were increased and how social welfare expenditure soared by 500% in the period between the years 1972 and 1979. For instance, social welfare improvement could be observed in terms of the provision of health services for the masses in rural areas (Houbert 1981). The development of education was bolstered in a similar vein (*ibid.*). Education was one of the main electoral assets exploited by the MLP prior to general elections (*ibid.*). Although secondary education was made free in 1977 as promised by the MLP, the politically-strategic connotation attached to the decision was deplored in the literature. Day-Hookoomsing (2011), for instance, senses in this decision, political expediency rather than pedagogy. Also, Ramdoyal (1977) identifies a direct correlation between the proposition of making secondary education free and the political endeavour to attract young voters after the strategically lowering of universal suffrage to the age of 18 years.

However, scholars also acknowledge the primary place education has had in government plans during the whole transitional period and this regardless of ideology (for example, Day-Hookoomsing in Grégoire et al. 2011). In respect of education, the government's new plan endeavoured to meet the socio-economic requirements of Mauritius and positioned education as a 'lifelong process' (Juggernaut 1993). The spreading out of schools and the promotion of equal educational opportunity (Ramdoyal 1977; Juggernaut 1993) might have been presented as legitimate responses to student claims and to increasing social demand for education in the 1970s (2008-2020 EHRSP 2007). However, immediate excessive demand for enrolment clashed with inadequate feasibility study and infrastructure at the beginning of the project (Day-Hookoomsing 2011: 263). Near universal enrolment was reached at primary level long before primary education was made compulsory in 1982 (EHRSP 2007). Also, a salient transformation brought about by the development of education consisted in the demand for enrolment from girls after 1977. When financial resources were required for education before 1977, priority in secondary education had traditionally been given to male family members (Hookoomsing 2011: 263).

Progress in the realm of employment was recorded, with 64,000 jobs created during the period 1971 to 1977 (Selvon (2001: 415). However, unemployment still rose to 20% during the second half of the 1970s (Brautigam 1997: 50). Apart from unemployment, the coalition government faced further macro-economic issues during the period. The global oil crisis and cyclonic conditions affecting sugar harvests, were detrimental to the Mauritian economy (Brautigam 1997: 50). Devaluation of the Mauritian currency, the rupee, also contributed to the economic slump Mauritius was to experience (ibid; Teelock 2001: 404). The period was marked by the government's heightened efforts to remain buoyant despite alarming economic conditions. In this respect, the Mauritian government remained open to foreign capital (for instance, Juggernaut 1993) but faced stagnation in respect of new investment. However, its principal measure was to demand support from the World Bank and the IMF towards the end of the 1970s (Brautigam 1997).

At the start of the 1980s, Mauritius adhered to the stabilisation policies and adjustment programmes recommended by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to redress the economy. Foreign aid was also designed to develop Mauritian education although, as Juggernaut (1993: 328) argues, aid programmes in this sphere did not contribute to the engineering of an independent Mauritius. Aid was primarily directed at higher education (ibid). The period of economic instability was nevertheless propitious for the MMM to accentuate pressure onto the government and to trigger another series of social protests (ibid). However, Brautigam (1997) notes how the democratic government demonstrated its maturity towards the end of this so-called transitional period. Spontaneous repression toward MMM's general strike during this period of recession was very rapidly followed by negotiation with the opposition (ibid).

### ***3.4 Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have attempted to depict the historical context of the island of Mauritius. The chapter traces some of the main historical facts which highlight institutional development in the realms of economy, work and education in both colonial and post-colonial Mauritius. I have attempted to analyse the impact which

colonisation has had on a small island like Mauritius and have discussed the ways in which Mauritius was first built under colonial administration to eventually become a formally independent economy from 1968. With variegated difficulties encountered during the first periods of its history, the nation of Mauritius was built on foundations of economic and more latent ethnic division. From the analysis above, it becomes apparent that national cohesion was hindered by the supremacy of economic hierarchy.

Unlike later chapters, this chapter takes a particular focus on the political events that occurred especially after formal independence was proclaimed in 1968. The discussion focuses on the political atmosphere that reigned over Mauritius during the post-independence era in order to highlight the conditions within which some of its norms first emerged. For instance, that period bears much significance for unionism in Mauritius, and therefore, for workers and citizens' agency. In chapter 6, I will examine the extent to which these norms have remained over time.

Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates how the focus on ensuring parallel development in the spheres of work and education has been that of a developmental state. For instance, policy makers in office during the post-independence decade supported the quantitative expansion of employment opportunities and education. In the advent of much more recent economic development, the current study endeavours to examine the extent to which the Mauritian government has now made the appropriate adjustments to its Work and Employment as well as Education and Training (E&T) institutions. While the political environment is bound to have changed over time, the study asks whether there has been institutional change that matches new conditions, in an era where the turmoil of the post-independence decade are forty years away.

Overall, the Mauritian government demonstrated its willingness to play its key role in supporting and engineering the first developmental steps of the Mauritian economy. While Mauritius might have failed to prove its capacity to build a united nation at this stage, its economic diversification strategy resulted in export-led growth which had beneficial effects for the Mauritian economy and society. The logical persistence of division – economic or ethnic – after independence appears as the mere corollary of colonisation. Amidst such configuration, the Mauritian population proved its adaptability to the country's new economic requirements and this, to the detriment of

any genuine loyalty to ideological adherence. It is most probable that the only ideology that unified the newly born nation was economic flexibility as promoted by successive governments at the time. I elaborate on this in the following chapter, where more recent facts are discussed.

## **CHAPTER 4 Economy, Work and Education in Mauritius: Contemporary Conditions**

In this chapter, I describe the contemporary context of Mauritius. More specifically, I report some of the main facts regarding recent development within its economic, work and employment and education and training institutions. I argue that changes within its Work and Employment institutions have started triggering new challenges for Mauritian Education and Training (E&T) institutions. As it opened up new sectors such as its Business Process Outsourcing sector, Mauritius is now faced with the requirement of having a young labour market that demonstrates adequate skill capacities to adjust to new demands. Despite the country's notable capacity to adjust to new economic conditions and its resilience to exogenous shocks, the chapter calls into question the appropriateness of current E&T policies and systems. It therefore questions the role and decisions of the Mauritian government as Mauritius has arrived at a new critical juncture in its economic history. The chapter also introduces the discussion which follows in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 and in which the main challenges identified in the empirical study will be reported and analysed.

Below I first report some of the main figures which demonstrate the Mauritian economic performance after its difficult post-independence decade. Then I briefly review recent scholarly literature on Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) prior to examining the impact of the BPO phenomenon on Mauritius. At the end of the chapter, I report some of the challenges identified by different groups of Mauritian actors and institutions in the sphere of education and training. As an introduction to the following chapters, I aim to demonstrate how new economic development and the emergence of the BPO sector, triggers new thoughts regarding the need to consider contemporary connections between economy, work and education within the institutional context of Mauritius.

### ***4.1 The Mauritian economy today***

Recent retrospectives of the case of Mauritius highlight its economic success story, especially in comparison with other African countries (Zafar 2011; Grégoire et al. 2011; Stiglitz 2011, among others). According to observations made by Zafar (2011: 91) on

behalf of the World Bank, its vulnerability to exogenous shocks has not prevented Mauritius from '(crafting) a strong growth-oriented developmental path' and maintaining regular growth despite challenging times experienced even after the post-independence decade of the 1970s. Its reputation as the tiger of its region was supplemented by further acclaims which highlighted what has been called the Mauritius miracle. Zafar (2011) goes on to demonstrate how Mauritius has stood as a top-ranked African country in the World Bank statistics with a well-diversified economy, trade-led expansion and improvement in human development sustained since the 1970s. Scholarly rationales for the Mauritian economic success appear to converge extensively. Overall, Mauritius is praised for its well managed economic regime, good governance, its institutionalised trade and development strategy, its openness to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and concomitantly, its high capacity to embrace globalisation despite its size and geographical isolation from potential partners of the Global North (for instance, Subramanian 2001; Zafar 2011; Grégoire et al. 2011). In 2011, its welfare system was equally praised by prominent economist Joseph Stiglitz in a note where the scholar described the 'Mauritius miracle' after a short visit to the island.

To be sure, figures illustrating the economic performance of the small island economy can be argued to be impressive. As Zafar (2011) notes, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has, on average, increased by 5% per year since 1970, while GDP per capita was seven times as much in 2008 as in 1976. Here it is instructive to note that the average real GDP growth for Sub-Saharan Africa amounted to 3.2% between 1977 and 2009 (ibid: 93). Earlier figures demonstrate the export-led growth of the Mauritian economy since the mid-1980s. According to Subramanian (2001), high levels of productivity achieved mainly in its Export Processing Zone (EPZ) between 1983 and 1999 are significantly responsible for its notable economic development. In other words, Mauritius achieved high growth rates in the 1980s and 1990s despite a difficult turn at the end of the 1970s (for instance Bunwaree 2002).

For Mauritius, the 1980s were marked by the beginning of an extensive process of structural adjustments proposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As Frankel (2010) notes, Mauritius was not spared from the drawbacks of the 1970s oil crisis. Frankel (2010) observes, however, how Mauritius distinguished itself by undergoing structural adjustments ahead of many other developing countries.

Reforms consisted of both macroeconomic and microeconomic policies. For instance, compliance with IMF programs led to devaluation of its currency, the Mauritian Rupee, while provision of structural adjustment facilities by the World Bank help implement a trade reform in 1984 (Subramanian 2001; Bunwaree 2002; Frankel 2010; Dinan 2011).

According to Bunwaree (2002), governmental policies were geared towards restructuring the economy through the stimulation of entrepreneurship, reinforced export-led expansion and the pursuit of price liberalisation. The Mauritian scholar also notes the positive implications of such governmental policies which found expression mainly in employment creation, incentives to small businesses and attention to the impact of adjustment measures upon particular groups (*ibid.*). It has been argued that economic diversification of the 1970s as well as the structural adjustment programme contributed to turning post-colonial Mauritius into a middle-income country (Bunwaree 2002). However, other scholars note less positive consequences that emerged from the reforms. For instance, Gulhati and Nalhari (1990) also observe the ensuing rise in unemployment, real wage decline and welfare setbacks for lower income groups. Nevertheless, the Mauritian approach to the difficult 1980s remains notable. Perhaps a major distinction from its African counterparts lies with Mauritius's resistance to IMF recommendations to abolish free education and subsidies on food (Bunwaree 2002). According to Bheenick (1991), the government's commitment to reform was accompanied by its insistence of having 'intensive policy dialogue' with the World Bank and the international Monetary Fund (IMF). As Bunwaree (2002: 4-5) puts it, reforms were 'bank supported rather than bank dictated'.

According to Zafar (2011), Mauritius remained economically afloat in the 1980s and 1990s due to its institutionalised attitude to international trade. It appears that Mauritius has built its economic development upon past legacies whereby economic ties, developed in the colonial era, were allowed to persist in the post-colonial period. As a result, Mauritius maintained preferential access to trading partners who originate mainly from the cluster of Global North economies that today form the European Union (Zafar 2011; Grégoire 2011). According to Zafar (2011), Mauritius received subsidies in the sugar and textile sectors which provided significant foreign exchange to its economy and explain the strong growth in total exports between the 1970s and 1990s. Its liberal investment regime and tax incentives to attract Foreign Direct investment

(FDI) have contributed to the economic growth despite the simultaneous need for economic restructuring.

It has been argued that by the end of the twentieth century, a form of *economic nationalism* highly premised on international trade had been allowed to develop in Mauritian society. Although this claim may require further investigation and conceptualisation, the term has been used in Bunwaree's work to describe how Mauritius, as a nation, has always adjusted to international trade requirements. As Bunwaree (2002) argues, the image afforded by Mauritius as the 'tiger' of its region has impacted upon Mauritian individuals' psyche over time. The scholar goes on to add that Mauritius has developed two unifying principles in its post-colonial era: economic nationalism, as the scholar labels it, and Creole language. In political economic terms, capitalism as a type of social order came in the form of a policy focus on international trade. It is interesting to note how the Mauritian form of economic nationalism – that is one geared towards international trade – persisted regardless of the political party in office. For instance, the 1980s were marked by similar export-led endeavours, although the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) took office in 1982. After significant efforts to oppose the capitalist endeavours of the parties in office in the immediate post-independence era, Brautigam (1997: 51) notes how the MMM, the party inspired in the early 1970s by Marxist ideology (see Chapter 3), took a left-to-centre to the management of the economy from the early 1980s. The party equally supported export-led activities in the country when it came in office.

Scholarly observations of the Mauritius economy highlight how the national drive towards international trade involves three major and related aspects. To start with, Mauritius demonstrates its adaptability towards business opportunities dictated by global market forces and trends (see for instance, Subramanian 2001; Zafar 2011). According to Zafar (2011: 92), Mauritius has demonstrated its national capacity to adapt to shifting global economic conditions. The scholar adds how this has often implied strong intervention and the deployment of subsidies. In addition to embracing globalization in a notable manner (Subramanian 2001; Zafar 2011), Mauritian policy makers have developed the habit of constantly searching for new drivers of economic growth and niche markets (Zafar 2011: 92; Grégoire 2011).



Finally, the third feature that underpins its economic nationalism has been argued to be a strong public-private partnership (Zafar 2011), which in the context of Mauritius pertains to the extent to which the government acts as a facilitator of private sector expansion. As noted in Chapter 3, this has been instrumental to its economic construction as a nation recently made independent after formal decolonisation in 1968. Notwithstanding the management of industries concerned mainly with domestic activities, it appears that government support for international business has remained significant and decisive over time. As Zafar (2011: 101) notes, well-articulated policy frameworks and the implementation of strong sectoral policies has been geared towards stimulating the private sector. The scholar notes how this often results in strong private sector responses. Concomitantly, Zafar (2011) notes the flexible public policy framework in regard to labour market regulation in the 1980s as a form of support to employers of the Mauritian textile industry. This is notable given that the textile-dominated manufacturing industry was the first indicator of the economic diversification strategy which Mauritius was to follow repeatedly over time.

The textile industry maintained its prominence in the 1980s by contributing significantly to economic improvement. According to Zafar (2011: 99), the Export Process Zones (EPZs) provided employment to numerous Mauritian workers, 80% of whom were women. By the end of the 1980s, more Mauritians were employed in the EPZs than in the agricultural sector, although the percentage of female workers decreased in the 1990s and 2000s (ibid: 100). Overall, it has been argued that the share of the textile industry in the Mauritian GDP tripled between 1980 and 1988, while unemployment fell from 20% to 5% between the mid-1970s and the 1990s (Zafar 2011). However, the international-trade oriented economy of Mauritius was to be challenged by a significant loss of access to European Markets which had been established under the 1970s preferential regime (see Chapter 3).

According to Grégoire et al. (2011), the turn of the twenty-first century was marked by a critical rupture for the Mauritian economy. Loss of preferential access to Europe affected both the sugar and textile industries. As Zafar (2011) describes, loss of post-colonial advantages materialised as the Mauritian Textile industry was to suffer the phasing out of the Multifibre Agreement from 2004. In addition, the European Union reduced sugar prices by more than 50 % in 2005 (ibid). As Mauritius became exposed

to global market forces and highly liberalised regimes, the former colony could no longer rely upon the form of trade security maintained in the post-colonial era. As Grégoire et al. (2011: 338) note, Mauritius was to face international competition from countries such as China, India, Bangladesh and Vietnam which were formerly constrained by quotas. The impact of accentuated market liberalisation was directly felt by the Mauritian economy. Its growth rate decreased from 6% at the end of the 1990s to an average of 3.7% between 2001 and 2005 (ibid).

Further figures indicate the transformation undergone by the pillars of the Mauritian economy in recent years. In regard to the sugar industry, its share of the GDP moved from 25% in 1968, to 12.5% in 1990 and finally to 2.1% in 2009 (Grégoire 2011: 75). Economic improvement brought by the Manufacturing industry in the 1980s is reflected in its GDP share which increased from 4.4% in 1980 to 12.5% in 1990 (ibid). Repercussions of changes brought by accentuated liberalisation of production regimes and international competition is captured in the decrease of the GDP share of the Manufacturing industry by 6.8% in 2009. According to Zafar (2011), tourism expanded rapidly between 1988 and 2008. Citing figures collected by the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce, the scholar notes how tourist arrivals amounted to 240,000 in 1988, 400,000 in 2000 and 900,000 in 2008 (ibid). As the third pillar of the economy was developed in the early 1970s (see Chapter 3), it contributed a share of 2.3% of the GDP in 1980 (Grégoire 2011: 75). While in 2007, its share had reached 9.2%, Mauritius was not spared from the indirect effect of the global financial crisis. Fewer tourists visited the island during the period and GDP share was estimated at 8.6% (ibid).

According to Zafar (2011), the tourist and hospitality industry was underpinned by a statutory 'master plan' which ensured that Mauritius remained a luxury destination for a significant period of time. As the Mauritian government built its development strategy upon resources such as its beautiful beaches and its multi-ethnic society, the scholar argues that the sector's success and that of the textile industry have relied heavily upon the Mauritian government's capacity to design a well-articulated policy framework. The scholar notes how the two sectors epitomised the high level of public-private collaboration for expansion in the private sector, here more specifically in sections dedicated to export-led economic growth (ibid). Further evidence of Mauritius's capacity to sustain its economic resilience lies with the more recent emergence of

strategic sectors. While economic diversification has involved offshore banking and the development of a Freeport from the 1990s (Grégoire 2011: 131), the critical juncture at which Mauritius arrived at the turn of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of several other sectors and an endeavour to turn Mauritius into a service-oriented economy.

Mauritian policy-makers as a common group of actors have increasingly been brought to develop the collective entrepreneurship drive of its public sector, and innovation has consisted in the development of new sectors at times of crisis (Crouch 2005: 3). Due to this collective entrepreneurship, economic diversification strategy has developed more as a national pattern which characterises the path dependent economic trajectory of Mauritius. It has also strived to maintain strong relationships with countries of the European Union while establishing increasingly strong connections with India and China among others (Zafar 2011). Clearly, Mauritius's capacity for embracing globalisation has developed into a post-colonial legacy which has not stopped serving the economy well despite global crises.

Today Mauritius is a well-diversified economy which has demonstrated its adaptability potential to exogenous shocks. In its 2007/2008 budget, the government in office laid emphasis on consolidating its economic base by increasing the number of pillars that underpin the Mauritian economy (EHRSP 2007: 22-23). New sectoral prospects such as the land based oceanic industry, the seafood hub, the real estate sector, the pharmaceutical industry, the financial sector, a diversified tourism sector, an alternative energy sector, and the transformation of the sugar industry into a cane industry, have come into play. In line with current trends at global level, the Mauritian economy now has a broad-based ICT sector which includes Business Process Outsourcing activities (EHRSP 2007: 22-23; Grégoire 2011; Zafar 2011). In the 2008-2020 Education and Human Resource Strategic Plan (EHRSP) launched in 2007, the Mauritian government also expressed its endeavour to embrace further developments that would turn Mauritius into a knowledge economy. Although Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) developed as a sector of activity due to globally diffused technological advancements, Mauritius has once again relied upon its well-known path of economic diversification strategy to boost its economy despite the setbacks experienced in sectors once heralded as its main economic pillars. Below I provide an

overview of the BPO phenomenon and discuss its emergence and development in Mauritius.

## ***4.2 The BPO phenomenon***

Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is a phenomenon with attributes which can be argued to epitomise typical work arrangements that emerged within contemporary globalisation. While BPO is one of the forms of Information Technology-enabled services which have developed in recent years (Thite and Russell 2010: 2), the term 'BPO' defines arrangements concerned with the subcontracting of 'work flow that is required to produce a certain output' (ibid). With its recent emergence, the growing relevance of Business Process Outsourcing as a contemporary business model has been noted repeatedly in the literature (for instance, Metters and Verma 2008; Kuruvilla and Ranganathan 2010). BPO has been advocated as a potential terrain for further research due to its newness and relation to current socio-economic trends (Thite and Russell 2010: 3).

As Thite and Russell (2010: 2) contend, the dynamics triggered by the globally-shared neoliberal ideology is nowhere more visible than with the emergence of this model of work organisation. During their study of the case of India, a major BPO destination, Kuruvilla and Ranganathan (2010: 136), observe how India's rapidly growing and so called Information and Technology-enabled service (ITES) industry, has propitiously emerged at a time when service sector 'offshoring' and 'outsourcing' in general, had increased. Throughout the last decade, it has become increasingly common to offshore work, that is, to base part of an organisation's processes overseas to take advantage of lower costs. Also, companies may choose to outsource, that is, to contract work out to another company, be it local or foreign. Business process activities in the domain of Information Technology-enabled services are undertaken on the basis of both offshoring and outsourcing principles. The term Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) used in the present study importantly includes processes that are contracted offshore.

BPO appears to be a pertinent embodiment of the internationalisation of division of labour which has taken place in various innovating industries. It is an epitome of the phenomenon captured by the core-periphery model which has involved the conceptualisation of forms of flexibility increasingly afforded by contemporary organisations. While it has been observed how contemporary organisations have become flexible in multiple ways, the relocation of basic activities to cheaper labour destinations pertains to external flexibility. The so-called core-periphery model (Atkinson 1984; see also Kalleberg 2001) implies that policy makers and employers are to focus on core activities within the national or organisational context, especially in their employment relationships. Peripheral activities are externalised or outsourced to cost-effective sources of service provision. As discussed in chapter 1, this often implies that multinational companies also benefit from institutional features afforded by host countries. In terms of employment relations, workers involved in core activities are more likely to experience employment security while the cost-effectiveness strategy implies that peripheral workers operating in a distinct geographical location are collectively subjected to numerical flexibility (for instance, Kalleberg 2001).

To date, an array of services is delivered by BPO operations over the world. These range from data entry, multiple back office tasks, administration, insurance form processing, customer service call centre work, customer care for airline reservations, credit card processing to telemarketing, among others (Kuruvilla and Ranganathan 2010: 137; Thite and Russell 2010: 2; Vaidynathan 2012). Often, activities are differentiated from each other based upon whether they are of voice or non-voice character (Board of Investment 2011). Voice services as provided by call centre operations are therefore part of a wider business process industry. BPO operations have also been identified as ‘low end’ services in contrast with ‘high end’ activities also known as Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO) (Kuruvilla and Ranganathan 2010; Thite and Russell 2010). Kuruvilla and Ranganathan (2010: 140), for instance, depict how KPO is a sector that requires higher skills and is concerned with expertise linked to areas such as medical education (creation of corresponding databases), financial data analysis and R& D outsourcing. Thite and Russell (2010) add IT/software work under the KPO sector. It appears that KPO has yet to be developed in established BPO destinations, although India has already been identified as a precursor in the domain (Kuruvilla and Ranganathan 2010). Given KPO adds more value to its clients’

activities, it requires longer-term outsourcing strategies and is not necessarily concerned with the degree of volatility involved in BPO. Hence, KPO will not be considered in the present discussion which takes an implied focus on work that is inherently characterised by a high level of precariousness.

Due to the varieties that exist among BPO activities, their categorisation has often proved challenging (Kuruville and Ranganathan 2010). BPO is often considered to be synonymous to voice-based, call-centre work given the prevalence of the typology (ibid). Paradoxically, it has also been noted that BPO in the domain of Information Technology does not owe its origins to over-the-phone customer support. Although the development of call centre work is argued to capture the ‘explosiveness and suddenness of the technological impact’ upon work arrangements (Metters and Verma 2008: 143), it has been noted that computer programming has been an important part of BPO after having triggered its emergence (ibid). In a paper that retraces the origins of Business Process Outsourcing, Metters and Verma (2008) note how its sudden and circumstantial emergence in the late 1990s was mainly related to the rewriting of old computer codes susceptible to cause problems with the year 2000. This ‘collaboration of necessity’ (Metters and Verma 2008: 144) consisted in the involvement of Indian programmers who were to alleviate US programmers from too large a task. For Metters and Verma (2008), India’s success to fulfill such tasks efficiently, accurately and at low rates may have marked the beginning of BPO partnerships between multinational companies from the Global North and emerging economies.

Clearly, contemporary technological advancements have played a major part in the advent of such work configurations. The work of Metters and Verma (2008) on the history of offshoring services underlines how offshoring has been possible due to technological novelties such as the ‘bandwidth revolution’ (ibid) and the implementation of the fiberoptic cable. Although technology proved to be the ‘most easily seen transformation’ from which offshoring services such as Business process outsourcing have emerged (Metters and Verma 2008: 146), other factors have had to come into play. As Thite and Russell (2010) note, several BPO activities have required multinational companies to seek cheap-labour countries with a labour market supplying a young and educated workforce. In addition, the national linguistic proficiency of these

young and educated labour markets has remained intrinsic to assessing workers' capacity to perform required tasks.

To be sure, governments of cheap labour destinations have had to be favourable to the development of such partnerships. There has had to be a mindset in respect of business relationships and governance for outsourcing to develop to such an extent. Notwithstanding cases where firms find themselves with no choice but to outsource, Grossman and Helpman (2003) note how partner suitability is often assessed in accordance with the contracting environment. In other words, where technology allows work to be undertaken away from core activities, investment made in the context of outsourcing is highly relationship-specific (ibid). Arguably, outsourcing has required a specific and shared mind set from partners of both the core and peripheral ends. As much as governments from which multinational companies originate are argued to support core activities undertaken within their boundaries, countries hosting peripheral activities have had to adjust to liberalised regimes that have been crucial for the core-periphery dynamic to be operationalised. As Doellgast et al. (2009: 354) note, such business partnerships also rely upon flexible regulation and institutional loopholes that may be turned into advantages for multinational companies. In line with the trends depicted in this section, below I provide a brief overview of the development of the BPO sector of Mauritius and outline some of the institutional adjustments initiated by the Mauritian government within the same period.

#### ***4.3 The BPO sector in Mauritius: Changing Work and Employment Institutions***

The development of the Business Process Outsourcing sector in Mauritius has emanated from recent initiatives in line with the nation-state's repeated economic diversification strategy. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Mauritian government expressed its endeavour to turn Mauritius into a 'cyber-island' modelled on Indian cities as well as a regional hub for the provision of outsourcing and telecom services (Grégoire 2011: 145). Heightened governmental efforts to develop its ICT/BPO sector of which Business Process Outsourcing is an essential part have been observed. In order to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the sector, preferential access is offered to international markets and Mauritius has been actively

advertised in terms of its strategic geographical location and its developed telecommunications abilities (Republic of Mauritius Portal 2010). To date, leading companies such as Accenture, Ceridian, DHL and Deutsche Bank have chosen to locate a centre in Mauritius (Board of Investment 2011).

Furthermore, the Mauritian government has also invested in the development of its infrastructure. While Mauritius had been successively connected to the South Asian Far East (SAFE) fibre-optic cable and other cables leading to Europe and the USA from 2002 (Grégoire 2011: 145), a notable innovation remains the construction of a cyber-tower. Inaugurated in 2004, the construction of the eleven-floor building preceded that of a second tower and several other buildings which to date form the cyber city of Mauritius. Although ICT/BPO companies are spread across the island, the cyber city is the central representation of the development of Information Technology enabled services (ITES) in the Mauritian economy. Arguably, it bears a symbolic character given its construction involved the removal of significant portions of sugar cane fields.

In recent years, Mauritius has positioned itself as a leading global outsourcing destination. In 2009, it was ranked 25<sup>th</sup> on the A.T Kearney Global Services Location index and second in Africa in the Commonwealth Business Council report (Board of Investment 2011). During the same year, its ICT/BPO sector contributed 5.7% of the Mauritian GDP (ibid). According to Grégoire (2011: 144), the Mauritian government has expressed its aspiration to develop its ICT/BPO sector into one of the main pillars of the economy. As a result, the government has put in place various strategies related to the sector. For instance, Grégoire (2011: 145) notes the series of Acts passed since the start of the twenty first century in an attempt to consolidate the legislative framework within which companies involved in the ICT/BPO sector operate. Among several others, the ICT Act and the Data Protection Act were respectively promulgated in 2001 and 2009 (ibid).

Stemming from its colonial past there exists in Mauritius proficiency among the population in two European languages, namely French and English. In 2010, Mauritius was said to be one of the least costly destinations for Francophone BPO operations although not the cheapest for Anglophone services (Maarlott and Khalda 2010). Over the last decade, its involvement in BPO partnerships and activities has proved



successful. Since 2004, the ICT/BPO sector of Mauritius has expanded in a notable manner. Based on figures compiled by the Board of Investment (BOI), 72 companies existed in 2004, 148 in 2006, 248 in 2008 and 400 in 2010 (Board of Investment 2011: 12). By December 2011, approximately 500 companies were employing 16,800 people. The majority of companies are owned either by Mauritian, French or British entities<sup>4</sup>. Call centre operations cater mainly for the French market (Grégoire 2011: 147).

The contribution of the ICT/BPO sector to the Mauritian economy is expected to grow by 8% by 2015 with direct employment in the sector amounting to 25,000 posts. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) accounts for 43% of the ICT/BPO sector of Mauritius within which 14% are voice-based and 29%, non-voice operations (Board of Investment 2011). According to Grégoire (2011), 51% of the workforce employed in the sector can be found in call centre operations. Grégoire (2011) notes how in 2011, the average monthly salary of a call centre worker amounted to approximately 200 euros, that is one-fifth of a French call centre worker's salary. Despite the accumulation of such assets, however, it has been noted that the future of the sector remains uncertain. While international competition remains a major challenge for companies operating in the Mauritian ICT/BPO sector, the Mauritian economy faces the challenge of having a limited number of qualified or otherwise potentially suitable workers to meet employers' expectations (Grégoire 2011). Grégoire (2011) observes the extent to which companies have had to increase qualified workers' salaries in various cases, more specifically in the software development field.

Nevertheless, Grégoire (2011) notes how Mauritius possesses a series of assets which provide the economy with much comparative advantage in the global ICT/BPO industry. Among others these include its political stability, statutory *laissez-faire*, free circulation of capital, a good banking system, bilingualism, among others. It has been argued that Mauritius has mindfully aligned itself with global standards in regard to employment right and relations. Mauritius was one of the first African countries to join the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2012: 10). In addition, Zafar (2011) has underlined how Mauritius has ranked high in surveys of institutional quality especially in regard to governance measures, application of the law and control of corruption.

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<sup>4</sup> Grégoire (2011) also notes the presence of Indian and South African BPO companies on the island.

Given the figures mentioned above, it appears that the Mauritian government has aligned itself with demands triggered by liberalised production regimes and has therefore provided a flexible environment which appeals to contemporary organisations. A notable transformation in the Work and Employment institutions of Mauritius lies with the promulgation of the Employment Rights and Employment Relations Acts in 2008.

The Employment Rights and Relations Acts were promulgated in 2008 and came into force in 2009. The two acts were designed to re-define the employment relationship in the Mauritian context in order to adjust to demands of a new era (ibid). According to the ILO Decent work programme report for Mauritius (ILO 2012), the Employment Rights Acts (ERA) 2008 was designed to replace the 1975 Labour Act, while the Employment Relations Act (EReA) 2008 was a revision of the 1973 Industrial Relations Act. Statutory endeavours to provide a better structure in its employment legislation framework is significantly apparent in the EReA (2008). Based upon the ILO Decent Work Programme report (2012: 10), the new legislation renews the government's effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining and provides more structure in this respect.

The ERA 2008 revises employment law in respect of employment and service contract, minimum age for employment and hours of work, among others (ILO 2012). The minimum age for employment has been raised to 16 years in renewed consideration for education (ERA 2008). It also makes provisions for workers, offering them the opportunity to lodge a case at the industrial court for unjustified dismissal and to claim a severance allowance at the rate of three months' remuneration per year of service. The ERA 2008 also defines the flexicurity measure as per the Mauritian context. A Workfare Programme (WP) has been added as an innovative approach to worker redundancy. Its attributes have also been summarised in the Decent Work Programme report (ILO 2012: 10):

*The WP is specifically designed to provide for immediate assistance to laid-off workers by offering them, along with the payment of a Transition Unemployment Benefit for a period not exceeding 12 months, the choice of either being replaced in a job through the Employment Service; or being trained and re-skilled for greater*

*employability through the National Empowerment Foundation; or starting up a small business with the assistance of the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Authority.*

However, the extent to which collective bargaining and social justice are promoted in Mauritius has been called into question. To be sure, Mauritius has several trade unions which have been institutionalised over time. Its National Trade Union Confederation, Labour Congress and Trade Union Congress are well in place. Yet, it has been noted how Mauritian trade unions question the Mauritian government's claims that notable efforts are made towards ensuring social justice (ILO 2012). Subramanian (2001) also noted how workers in the public sector were thought to be the group who benefited the most from such arrangements. I also indicated in an earlier section how export-led industries were deliberately characterised by flexible employment regulation in order to facilitate employers' endeavours.

More recently, it was noted in the local press how, as a traditional industry bequeathed directly from the colonial past, the sugar industry has been regularly shaken by union action in contrast with the tourism industry where workers are poorly represented despite the existence of some unions (Le Mauricien 2013). The extent to which social justice is effectively applied in employment relationships varies by sector, to the detriment of private sectors directly involved in catering for the West. The sugar industry is an exception of the phenomenon, given that unionism had been institutionalised before independence and the tumultuous post-independence decade. During the colonial era, the sugar industry was the main employer of Mauritian workers. That unionism developed within the industry appears to be logical. To date, the list of trade unions compiled by the Mauritian government indicates the absence of trade unions in emerging sectors such as BPO although there were 378 unions registered as at December 31<sup>st</sup> 2010 (Mauritius Ministry of Labour 2011).

Major industrial disputes, which erupted in the BPO sector at the beginning of the year 2011, highlighted some of the risks facing workers in the BPO sector. As noted in Chapter 1, workers of a BPO company, Infinity Ltd, which at the time employed 400 young individuals, were deprived of their salaries for more than three months at the end of 2010. After abstaining from voicing out their concerns during these three months, a

group of workers took the drastic initiative of starting a hunger strike in front of the premises of the BPO Company in question. In the absence of representation by a trade union, strikers received support from activists of a local political movement which had recently started to raise awareness and concerns in regard to workers' rights and protection across various industries. The hunger strike received heavy media coverage and may have been the most significant scandal in the island since riots which had erupted in 1999<sup>5</sup> for reasons distinct from industrial conflicts. Inspired by the Infinity disputes, workers from two other BPO companies went on strike for the same motive.

The hunger strike lasted no less than ten days and required active government intervention and promises of solutions. According to the local press, the company's failure to pay workers was due to the disappearance of funds in consequence of one of the managers' fraudulent practices. There has been little light shed upon the case to date. The Labour minister in office publicly accused the employers of Infinity Ltd of law infringement and firmly insisted that workers report the case to the Ministry of Labour, Industrial relations and Employment of Mauritius (L'Express Mauritius, 2011b). While payment of the salaries of the month of December 2010 was eventually made (ibid), it is also instructive to note that the remaining amount due to 180 workers of Infinity Ltd was finally paid in June 2011, not without further protests in front of the trade court during the same period.

The Infinity case and the sequels suffered by young BPO workers raised a series of questions regarding workers' rights protection and awareness. Although BPO workers have been identified in the literature as representing a new genre of working class (Ramesh 2004: 492), it can be argued that their situation is distinct from that of sugar cane field and textile workers. In such white collar settings assumed to bear a professional character, workers in the BPO sectors are expected to possess a fair level of education which is higher than that of manual and factory workers. Although the government has chosen to follow its habitual economic diversification strategy, it appears that the new shape of work has triggered new skills requirements both in accordance with employer expectations and in favour of workers' protection. Below I

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<sup>5</sup> In February 1999, riots erupted in Mauritius after a famous local singer was beaten to death by the local police. However, it has been argued that the singer's death was only a trigger and allowed Mauritian individuals to express a latent malaise (see Bunwaree 2002).

provide a brief overview of recent policy debates regarding the government's aspirations and plans for the enhancement of the Mauritian education system.

#### ***4.4 Education and training: contemporary conditions***

In the past decade, the Mauritian government has expressed its endeavour to align itself with political economic discourses and common policy objectives which have recently been deployed in the developed world and have been geared towards the promotion of the knowledge economy model. As noted in chapters 1 and 2, the revitalisation of the notion of knowledge which has accompanied the development of technology-enabled forms of work has brought a revitalised concern for education and training across the world. As it recently opened up to new sectors, the Mauritian government has acknowledged the need for a more 'versatile' workforce that would fulfil the new pressures facing the Mauritian labour market within the global economy (EHRSP 2007).

In 2007, the Mauritian government developed a 12-year Education and Human Resources Strategic Plan (EHRSP) in order to emphasise the reform needed for its Education system (MID Working Group Report 2011). In line with current trends, the government has endeavoured to position Mauritius increasingly as a knowledge-based economy and as a learning society. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources has advocated its goal of 'shaping the future (of Mauritius) through lifelong learning and Human empowerment' (EHRSP 2007: 130). In addition to its focus on employability and increased productivity, the Mauritian government has recognised the need to adapt more to international practices and demands (EHRSP 2007).

Overall, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources has set to achieve 'increased access, improved quality, morally-binding equity, contextual relevance and high-order achievement' through a new approach to education and training (EHRSP 2007: 10). It has also expressed its intention to make provision for the improvement of the pedagogical approach to learning (ibid). Lifelong learning is to be promoted through the Mauritius Qualifications Authority which will have to facilitate individuals' mobility between different education systems and training institutions (EHRSP 2007:

131). In other words, the government acknowledges the scope for improvement in general education, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education.

The Mauritian government's objectives as outlined in the strategic plan are multi-fold. Among others, new policy attention is afforded to employability (EHRSP 2007). In addition, the Mauritian government aspires to turn the country into a knowledge hub. Importantly, the Mauritian government has acknowledged the need for a mind-set change in regard to education and training. A shift from a mere policy focus on access to one that takes into account the vision of providing quality education for all is suggested (ibid). Quality education entails the diffusion of sound moral values and the development of a mind-set in favour of lifelong learning and citizenship (ibid: 11). Finally, a more dynamic and less static education system is contemplated.

Arguably, the Ministry of Education of Mauritius has aligned its policy endeavours to UNESCO recommendations. In its United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) project (2005-2014), UNESCO established a set of principles that advocates a focus on sustainability, a holistic concern for environment, society and economy and attention to locally and culturally appropriate measures (UNESCO 2005). The promotion of lifelong learning, which implies a need to ensure individuals' sustainable development, has also entailed a need to focus on the individual learner. It also implies the development of reflection upon the content of curricula and pedagogy techniques that will help develop transferable aptitudes such as thinking skills. The holistic approach also bears the interdisciplinary characteristic of ESD which, it is understood, implies a blend of specific attention to each discipline taught during schooling and a wider vision that acknowledges potential connection among these disciplines. Dynamism in the development of the education system has also been recommended.

Statutory initiatives to reform the Mauritian education system especially at compulsory schooling level have been noted both before and after the turn of the new century. As from the year 2001, the government in office at the time worked at dismantling some of the institutions which had endured for long in the Mauritian education system. For instance, the government abolished the ranking system at primary level and mode of admission to secondary schools. Viewed as a major

dysfunction, the ranking system at the Certificate of Primary Education had been responsible for the institutionalisation of a highly selective mode of admission to public and free elite schools, thereby reducing equity among Mauritian children (Ministry of Education 2004: 5). As a result, a grade system has been adopted since 2002, according to which children only need to obtain the minimum pass grade to be admitted to any secondary school on a regional basis (ibid). In addition, new state secondary schools have been built during the same period (ibid: 7). At primary and secondary level, statutory endeavours have involved the guarantee of free and quality compulsory education. Education is now compulsory up to the age of 16.

At higher education level, however, quantitative expansion has been more apparent than attention to quality. To date, the Mauritian education system also includes more higher education institutions. This has involved the building of new national institutions as well as the proliferation of Mauritian campuses of foreign universities and vocational education institutions such as Middlesex University (UK), Vatel Hotel School (France) and Birla Institute of Technology (India) across the island (Board of Investment 2012). Other education providers have developed collaborations with foreign higher education institutions such as Curtin University of Technology (Australia), University of Surrey (UK) and *Université Paris-Dauphine* (France), among many others. It has also been argued that Mauritius has now become a global leader in the training of chartered professionals for international chartered entities such as Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), Cisco Certified Network Engineer (CCNE) among others (ibid.).

These added to the existing national higher education institutions. The University of Mauritius, which was created in 1965, that is, during the late colonial era, has moved from a focus on agriculture to providing a wider range of courses. The hotel school of Mauritius was founded in 1971 as a joint project of the United Nations Development Programme, the International Labour Organisation and the French government at a time when, given the emergence of the Tourism industry, apprenticeship paths were offered. Today the Hotel School of Mauritius operates under the aegis of the Mauritius Institute of Training and Development (MITD), which is also the main body responsible for the provision of other forms of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). In accordance with the increasing number of education and training providers, it was noted

in 2011 that the enrolment at tertiary education level had increased from 25% to 45% over the previous five years (MID 2011: xiii).

In 2008, however, the introduction of the concept of *Maurice Ile Durable* (MID)<sup>6</sup> called into question the operationalization of statutory policies announced in the 2008-2020 Education and Human Resources Strategic Plan (EHRSP 2007). Once again in line with UNESCO contemporary principles, the Prime Minister in office in 2008 announced the government's intention to develop a long term vision for the sustainable development of the country (MID working group report 2011). The Mauritian government has endeavoured to attend to the five E's of the sustainable development project, namely: Environment, Education, Employment, Equity and Energy (ibid). In 2011, a working group on education was set up by the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development in collaboration with the Prime Minister's office. The group was brought to include representatives from governmental institutions, private institutions, non-governmental organisations, trade unions and the civil society (MID working group report 2011: ii).

In a vein germane to that expressed by the government in its 2007 strategic plan, the *Maurice Ile Durable* (MID) Project was designed to encompass education at all levels, that is from early childhood to higher education. In the MID working group's report (2011), it was noted that many of the policies formulated in the 2008-2020 EHRSP (2007) had yet to be implemented. In addition, the working group is critical of the current education system which, it argues, 'places too much focus on formal education.' (MID working group report 2011: xi). In reforming the education system the group recommended a broader approach which would help develop creativity among the young population and would afford more importance to multiple skills, including artistic abilities, at all levels, including higher education.

A notable observation made by the MID working group lies with factors that pertain to the more humanistic agenda of education. The lack of individual social responsibility was noted and the development of educational policies to inform and empower citizens was recommended (MID working group report 2011: xvi). Moreover, the working

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<sup>6</sup> *Sustainable Mauritius*, or literally: Mauritius sustainable island (see list of abbreviations).



group envisaged statutory provision in the sustainable development project for ‘capacity building’ in order for workers develop skills such as decision making, adaptation to critical situations, the ability to work in teams, and finally a conscious attitude at work and within the community (ibid).

In other words, groups of actors within the Mauritian context have identified the need for statutory policies that will allow the education system and other relevant institutions to have a broader vision in regard to knowledge and skill development. However, while the Sustainable Development Project was launched in 2008 in Mauritius, the former Chairman of the MID painted a pessimistic portrait of the project in 2011. The Chairman argued that the development of new slogans such as those aimed at promoting sustainable development for individuals had yet to be followed by concrete governmental initiatives that would bring the advocated change. To be sure, the Mauritian government’s aspirations do not seem to be matched by actions which directly attend to the needs identified.

With the development of sectors such as the ICT/BPO sector, new requirements are bound to emerge. The analysis of the MID working group calls into question the extent to which the Mauritian education system has been able to go past discourses and slogans and operationalize their newly developed strategies. Illustratively, BPO companies settled in Mauritius recently deplored the lack of employable candidates (Mauritius Business Magazine, 2012). To start with, the level of linguistic proficiency has itself been called into question (Grégoire 2011). Observations made by employers and reported in an issue of the Mauritius business magazine point to the lack of skills now identified as essential for contemporary business activities. For instance, the lack of ‘global thinking’ among workers operating within the ICT/BPO sector of Mauritius was noted by BPO employers (ibid). The same employers called for reforms in the education system which would allow the youth to develop skills beyond technical knowledge. In fact, Brown and Lauder (2006) observed that employers had made similar claims in other settings. It appears that the Mauritian government has reached a juncture where rethinking its education system has become crucial in regard both to economic and social imperatives.

## ***4.5 Conclusion***

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Mauritius has once again demonstrated its eagerness to remain attuned to global trends and its capacity to adjust to new economic conditions. In regard to the opening up of the Business Process Outsourcing sector, its capacity to adjust to new demands can be argued to have come from an opportune match. Mauritius was able to align new business development opportunities with post-colonial legacies such as linguistic proficiency and the path dependent phenomenon which its recurrent economic diversification strategy has become over time. In line with its past experience with export-led industries, the Mauritian government has also ensured that multinational companies operate in an institutional environment that is favourable to their flexibility needs. This found expression in the promulgation of the new Employment Rights and Employment Relations Acts in 2008. As discussed in the chapter, however, new work configurations have required more than changes in the Mauritius employment legislation. The Mauritian government has become aware of the need to afford more consideration to national skill development.

Based on the facts reported above, it is clear that the Mauritian government has been able to achieve quantitative expansion in the spheres of Education and Training. However, recent events and observations call into question the extent to which statutory policies are clearly attending to the new needs that have emerged from recent economic development. The present study aims to assess the extent to which current policies in favour of skill development in Mauritius contribute, not only to the economy, but also to the Mauritian society. Besides, the new employment legislation and its explicit intention to accommodate multinational companies call into question the level of rights protection for young Mauritian workers. The 2011 industrial disputes also drew attention to these young workers' skill levels and agency. The study asks whether current E&T policies and systems are able to address the actual challenges and needs for the Mauritian economy and society. The empirical research undertaken to address these questions and findings are presented in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 5 Methodology

In this chapter, I present the methodological approach used to conduct this empirical study. Prior to discussing my underlying assumptions, I first reiterate my research objectives and questions. I then refer back to my theoretical framework composed mainly of the historical institutionalist approach, on the one hand, and of some of the conceptual insights from the Capability Approach (CA), on the other. I discuss my theoretical framework in further detail in this chapter in order to advocate how ‘method and theory are inextricably intertwined’ (Langley 1999: 691). In addition, historical institutionalism has been described as an approach rather than a particular theory or a specific method (Steinmo 2010: 118). I seek to explain the role of historical institutionalism in the shaping of concepts and assumptions that underpin both theory and method in this study. The way in which the historical institutionalist approach meets the main ontological and epistemological assumptions will be discussed in section 2 of this chapter. As mentioned in chapter 2, CA informs the study as an alternative-thinking framework applied to concepts on the realms of work and education (Bryson and O’Neil 2010; Orton 2011; Hart 2013). CA provides a distinct way of envisaging the role of the government in the provision of opportunities that will allow individuals to develop skills that serve them both as workers and citizens. It also helps take a particular focus the role of national institutions in the present. The study is underpinned by this combination of approaches to allow a particular focus on the features of Mauritian institutions and the implications for the actors concerned, with an examination of both the past and present.

Ontology is here understood as the questioning of the nature itself of entities. It refers to what can be considered as ‘being’. As Bryman and Bell (2011: 20) explain, the question of ontology involves choosing between the assumption that social entities are ‘objective entities that have a reality external to social actors’ and the assumption that actors socially construct their realities through their perceptions and actions. The two distinct positions are respectively referred to as objectivism and constructivism. They characterise distinct research approaches by indicating the epistemological assumptions that underpin the mode in which research is to be conducted. As Bryman and Bell (2011: 21) contend, however, ontology and epistemology are intrinsically related. Epistemology refers to how interpretations of ‘what is’ – ontological perspectives – are

distinctly communicated as knowledge to fellow human beings' (Burrell and Morgan 1979: 1). How the nature of an entity is interpreted and how this form of knowledge is communicated, depends on the researcher's beliefs and assumptions of what can be considered as knowledge. Burrell and Morgan (1979: 2), for example, argue that ontological and epistemological assumptions define 'the way in which one attempts to investigate and obtain knowledge of the social world'. In this section, I indicate how my ontological assumptions are more related to the constructivist perspective.

In section 3, I describe my research design with a particular focus on my sampling strategy as well as my data collection method and procedures. I explain my rationale for resorting to purposive sampling in this research prior to detailing my endeavour to capture individuals' experiences and ideas through a qualitative approach. In this section, the overarching rationale for conducting semi-structured individual interviews with a variegated sample will be discussed. In section 4, I reflect upon my role as a researcher and upon some of the ethical considerations observed during the empirical study. In the last section of the chapter, I provide a brief explanation of my thematic approach to data analysis as undertaken after data collection.

### ***5.1 Research questions and objectives***

Recalling research objectives stated earlier, this study critically explores the challenges which changing work and employment institutions have triggered for workers, companies and Education and Training institutions in Mauritius. I endeavour to contextualise Mauritius while the pro-business agenda pursued by the Mauritian government has led to recent adaptive adjustments of the national employment legislation to foreign employers' interests (see chapter 4). As a result, I seek to examine the institutional context within which Mauritian workers have operated over the past decade. As discussed in chapter 4, a major development in the Mauritian economy has pertained to the emergence of its Business Process Outsourcing sector at the turn of the twenty-first century. In the advent of such economic development, the study attempts to take into account workers' experiences amid contemporary work arrangements as embodied by Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). Based upon their choice of Mauritius as their low-cost BPO destination, the study also seeks to contextualise

employers' experiences and expectations as well as the implications these may have in terms of the level of BPO workers' employment security and skills development opportunities. Also, the thesis critically examines policies recently envisaged by the Mauritian government with the emergence of globally acclaimed political economic discourses which advocate contemporary connections between the spheres of economy, work and education.

In addition, the 2011 industrial disputes, and young workers' absence of reaction in the face of these disputes, led to the questioning of young BPO workers' agency capacities at work and beyond. Historical institutionalist Steinmo (2010), among others, has underlined the importance of taking into consideration relatively rare (political) events. The assumption behind this consideration lies with their potential to unleash explanations provided the event is contextualised within a historical context (ibid). Just as human actions are argued to be embedded within a set of institutions, these events are outcomes which emanate from dispositions and circumstances triggered by the nature, shape and development of relevant institutions. In other words, there is much scope to advocate that an event is an outcome that also needs to be contextualised within a specific institutional path. As I explained in chapter 1, the 2011 disputes triggered questions regarding the institutional context within which young BPO workers operate in Mauritius. They hinted at the relevance of looking at the source of this unexpected event on a well-known path, and looking back in time to understand the current features of the context within which they occurred. As a result, the 2011 industrial disputes were one of the starting points to the research. My research questions are as follows:

**In the light of the BPO sector, what are the main challenges brought about by changing work and employment institutions in Mauritius?**

1. What are the main features of the institutional context within which young BPO workers operate in Mauritius?
2. To what extent, have Education and Training (E&T) policies, and other relevant institutions bequeathed from the country's past, been adequately adjusted to current economic trends and requirements?

3. What are the contemporary challenges facing workers, companies and Education and Training Institutions in Mauritius, especially in regard to workers' skill levels and agency?

In order to address these research questions, I take a qualitative approach for two main reasons. First, the study aims to examine the evolution of Mauritian institutions as a process over time. In order to understand the present, it seeks explanations that address these 'how' and 'why' questions (Bryman and Bell 2011). Later I explain how the responses of the group of participants classified as 'experts' attend specifically to the endeavour of looking at both the past and present in the study. Second, I seek to capture the experiences of those who operate within these institutions and how they socially construct their realities. My initiative stems from the assumption that explanations about institutions cannot do without an account of the experiences of actors who are embedded in them.

I therefore seek to supplement data on the evolution of Mauritian institutions with narratives of workers affected by the shape of these institutions in the contemporary context. The study therefore affords equal importance to the 'native's' point of view' (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:1) and to more generic narratives that help capture institutional evolution over time. The study aims to identify some of the main challenges that have emerged with the operationalization of the most recent economic diversification strategy and which, the study also argues, deserve both scholarly and policy makers' attention. While the study examines contemporary conditions, its focus on existing institutions and their inherent connections with past statutory decisions and national events demands an equal focus upon the historical dimension. I discuss this further in the following section.

## ***5.2 A historical Institutionalist Approach: Assumptions***

Historical institutionalism implies a particular focus on both institutions and history as its name indicates. Recalling and synthesising definitions outlined earlier, institutions are argued to be formal and informal mechanisms that ensure the maintenance and enforcement of individual behaviour within a collective setting. In line with this

scholarly tradition, the study is premised upon the overarching assumptions that events and (political) decisions are historically grounded. This study is conducted along the line of various epistemological and ontological assumptions afforded in the historical institutionalist tradition, and advocates the explanatory power of the approach (Thelen 2002).

Be it implicitly or explicitly, several scholars who associate their works with historical institutionalism have synthesised its particular social ontology (among others, Skocpol 1995; Hay and Wincott 1998; Steinmo 2010). For instance, Hay and Wincott (1998) point to the ontological and foundational premises of the approach by distinguishing it to other predominant forms of new institutionalism, namely rational choice theory and sociological institutionalism. While these traditions respectively advocate that actors make fixed individual choices or underplay actors' agency (ibid: 954), historical institutionalism is argued to accord equal importance to actors and the institutions which surround them. Steinmo's (2010) evaluation of its ontology has led the scholar to emphasise the fact that historical institutionalists position their views in a middle ground between those afforded by the other two forms of institutionalism mentioned above. According to Steinmo (2010: 124), human beings are viewed as 'both norm-abiding rule followers and self-interested rational actors' under the historical institutionalist tradition.

The ontology associated with historical institutionalism therefore apprehends the dynamic and complex character of institutions as well as processes and decisions they potentially trigger. As Hay and Wincott (1998: 954) explain, 'actors are strategic, seeking to realise complex, and often changing goals.' Hay and Wincott's (1998) assumption resonates with an argument advocated years before by Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 10):

*'The institutions that are at the centre of historical institutionalist analysis [...] can shape and constrain political strategies in important ways, but they are themselves also the outcome of deliberate political strategies of political conflict and of choice.'*

In this case, it is assumed that actors, especially policy-makers, both shape and are shaped by their institutions. Legitimacy is also attributed to Hay and Wincott's (1998)

recommendation regarding the ontological perspective to be observed for institutions. The scholars recommend that institutions ought to be ‘understood less as functional means of reducing uncertainty, so much as structures whose functionality or dysfunctionality is an open-empirical and historical-question.’ In comparing the ontologies of the different forms of new institutionalism, Hay and Wincott (1998) associate a more dynamic, rather than static, connotation to the sociological concepts of *structure* and *agency* in this approach. Insofar as actors are strategic and have complex goals, dynamic processes and interactions between actors and institutions can be equally assumed.

In this approach, history matters. As the terminology indicates, history is a fundamental source of knowledge in analysing how institutions have evolved over time. Historical institutionalist Skocpol (1995) explains how an attempt to look for patterns to understand the present has to do with the endeavour to observe sequences of outcomes with the assumption that earlier outcomes impact on subsequent development over time. Historical institutionalism is concerned with the dynamic processes that have characterised a particular context and that can be traced along an institutional path (ibid). In regard to the deployment of a historical institutionalist approach in industrial relations literature, Blyton and Turnbull (2004: 13), for example, explain how the analysis of institutions also begins ‘with the immediate period in question, following a historical narrative to the present’. Arguably, history as a source of knowledge and as an analytical tool is likely to inform an analysis by highlighting a historical logic which has come to characterise decisions and strategies over time. From a combined ontological and epistemological perspective, it can be argued that history under this approach can be analysed in order to interpret contemporary arrangements within a particular context. The importance of context-specificity is advocated within the approach. Through my empirical research, I seek to attend to historical institutionalists’ recommendation of affording importance to real case-examples (for instance Streeck and Thelen 2005) in order to capture the dynamics that exist among institutions and among actors.

Previous chapters of the present study point to the regularity of economic diversification strategies deployed by the Mauritian government as an institutionalised mechanism that has each time ensured the persistence of its economy’s resilience (see



chapters 3 and 4). Prior to the emergence of the BPO sector, the institutionalisation of economic diversification strategy in favour of development appears to have coloured economic policies at specific junctures in time. In chapter 4 I also discussed more contemporary institutional change which, as the 2011 industrial disputes demonstrated, has had (potentially unintended) consequences for the young labour market targeted by the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector. As I set to highlight manifest and more latent challenges triggered by the development of the sector, I also seek to examine the relevance of both continuity and change within the institutional context of Mauritius. The phenomenon whereby decisions and processes are caught within the mechanism of *path dependency* is discussed below in relation to the dual concepts of continuity and change.

Continuity and change are at the heart of historical institutionalist analyses, and debates over their duality have been well rehearsed in the historical institutionalist literature (among others, see for instance, Streeck and Thelen (2005b) and the collective of discussions in this edited book). Equally, path dependence has been identified as a major instrument of neo-institutionalist theory (Crouch 2005). Citing other institutionalists, such as North (1990), Putnam (1993), Thelen (1999, 2003) and Pierson (2000a and 2000b), among others, Crouch (2005: 74) adds that constraints may at times involve ‘preventing change that might be in all actors’ long-term best interests’. Similarly, Peters et al. (2005: 1276) emphasise how path dependence involves ‘extended time periods of considerable stability’ in the conceptualisation afforded to public policy-making and political change.

While path dependence has often been associated with continuity on a path taken by a set of institutions and actors, Crouch (2005) notes a variety of responses among historical institutionalist scholars in this respect. Crouch (2005) distances himself from the deterministic assumption that ‘actors are ineluctably condemned to follow out a specific trajectory without possibility of change or exit’ (Crouch 2005: 74; see also Putnam 1993). On the contrary, the scholar is more favourable to the scholarly arguments which have acknowledged possibilities of endogenous change-and not only exogenous change- within a path dependent model. Scholars who embrace this assumption reject the rigid distinction between stability and change (for instance Streeck and Thelen 2005b) and tend to claim that ‘major change can happen through an

accumulation of little changes, that is incremental change with transformative potential' (Crouch 2005: 75). The theory of cumulative change was developed earlier by Thelen (2003). Although Peters et al. (2005) do not specify whether they refer to exogenous shocks or endogenous change in their observation, the scholars note how in the historical institutionalist tradition, some scholars have acknowledged change in the form of interruptions 'by turbulent, formative moments within which public policy is assigned new objectives'.

The present study aligns itself with the above mentioned assumptions and explores the extent to which change may occur over time despite the overarching path dependent character of the some of the institutions within a specific context. As implied in Chapters 3 and 4, economic diversification strategy in the case of Mauritius may epitomise a mechanism of reproduction that the policy makers as actors have intuitively adopted since independence in 1968. History as depicted in these chapters also demonstrates how economic diversification strategies have been initiated at specific critical junctures. In the case of Mauritius, these have mainly been at times where there have been losses of post-colonial commercial agreements and political instability. Institutional change in the form of adaptive legislative adjustments in 2008, and unexpected events, such as the 2011 industrial disputes, raise challenges which are suspected to be conducive to further changes. By distancing this study from a too deterministic approach (Crouch 2005), I endeavour to acknowledge change – however little or incremental – in view of assessing their implications and the opportunities they represent.

I argue that my constructivist approach matches the explanatory power of the historical institutionalist approach in my exploration of both institutions and Mauritian workers' experiences. Both of these approaches allow me to look into how policy makers as actors have constructed the realities of the Mauritian economy and society over time, and into how workers construct their realities within these institutions in the present. Limiting the exploration to the identification of a path dependent relationship in political decision making and outcomes as a 'dead hand' (Crouch 2005: 74) is, I argue, a counter to the imagination of innovative ideas and development opportunities. I therefore argue that historical institutionalist assumptions may be supplemented by further concepts if the exploration is to be taken beyond a deterministic analysis of the context at issue.

### ***5.3 Additional assumptions: the Capability Approach***

In addition to advocating historically grounded analyses of institutions, actors and institutions are afforded equal attention within the present study. While the non-static character of actors' interactions with and within their institutions is a crucial assumption within this exploration, it is also taken into consideration for its power to help envisage possibilities of innovative approaches within the institutional context. On the one hand, the study makes full acknowledgement of the possibility of path dependency – that is continuity – in regard to statutory strategies and measures taken especially after decolonisation. On the other hand, it also takes into account the significance of change along the institutional path followed by successive Mauritian governments. Along with this ontological perspective, individuals (institutionalised subjects as Hay and Wincott 1998 suggest) are also assumed to have complex goals. As a result, the assessment of their level of agency is argued to be of relevance to the study.

In chapter 2, I discussed the Capability Approach as a potential alternative to the conceptualisation of workers' capacities and agency. While the capability approach aligns itself to the historical institutionalist endeavour of bringing 'the state-society relationship to the fore' (Skocpol 1995: 103), its advocated relevance to the realms of work and education (for instance, Bryson and O'Neil 2010; Orton 2011; Hart 2013) equally matches the research objectives of this study. The concept of the human capability approach originates from scholarly contributions to debates within welfare economics and was advocated more as an alternative to utilitarian approaches to welfare (see chapter 2). As Hart (2013: 22) notes, the approach takes issue with traditional measurements of the financial health of a nation through resource indicators such as GNP and the accumulation of financial assets. As the Capability Approach premised upon Sen's work takes a particular focus on human well-being and substantive freedom and, I argue, helps revitalise more humanistic notions about education.

The Capability Approach involves the analysis of how individuals can achieve lives they have reason to value (for instance Bryson and O'Neil: 23). Here, individuals are the actors or institutionalised subjects whose individual aspirations and capabilities are taken into account while they are simultaneously considered as members of collective settings. One of the main contributions of the approach pertains to a redefinition of an

individual's capability and well-being that involves more than mere economic success (Sen 1999: 19). In order to enlarge the conceptualisation of well-being, the Capability Approach includes the notion of functionings. According to Sen (1999), functionings pertain to the array of things which an individual may value being or doing and these vary from the basic aspirations and actions to more complex endeavours. Two major assumptions lie within this conceptualisation. First, the approach demands a particular focus upon individuals' agency. Functionings are understood as personal choices or more precisely, the actions or states individuals choose to take or experience (for instance Bryson and O'Neil 2010: 24). Capabilities, in turn, refer to the ability of individuals to be and do something based on the opportunities made available to them. Capabilities are what Sen (1999: 75) describes as 'substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations'. In other words, agency within the approach pertains to the combinations of functionings an individual chooses to achieve. According to the approach, however, this agency is only possible provided opportunities and means are made available to individuals.

Scholars who have used the Capability Approach as a framework in their studies on work and employment have observed how the approach demands a wider conceptualisation of individual capabilities. Bryson and O'Neil (2010: 23) explain the resulting implications for analytical endeavours:

*If capability is defined largely around work processes, then development is largely concerned with questions related to training and skill formation. If alternatively the concept of capability is wider than work, then the focus of analysis becomes workers themselves, and their individual and collective aspirations, where work is but part of a broader capability to live and enhance personal well-being.*

If capabilities are more than individual being and doing, they clearly come from somewhere external to the individual per se. The Capability Approach affords importance to the role of institutions, namely the state and public policies in the development of individuals' capabilities. In addition to its conceptualisation of agency, the other assumption within the approach pertains to a concern for the role of the state and the need to embrace a vision of capabilities that goes beyond skills designed for work. In his study on work and education, Orton (2011) is critical of worker

individualisation in their learning and skill development as increasingly promoted by the UK government. The scholar views the Capability Approach as a ‘new thinking framework’ which allows a less restrictive conceptualisation of workers’ capabilities and therefore encourages that policies embrace the need to take a more holistic approach to work and skill development opportunities.

The present study lies within a combination of the conceptual assumptions under the historical institutionalist and capability approaches. Both approaches underpin my focus upon actors’ level of agency and the role of the institutions that surround them. However, the historical institutionalist approach remains my main conceptual and analytical framework. The historical institutionalist approach takes a more particular focus upon past events and patterns that have developed over time. Historical institutionalism also takes a more general view of the institutional context. I include assumptions originating from the capability approach to my framework in order to delve more closely to particular elements that I intend to discuss in my institutional analysis. For instance, the Capability approach may allow me to cast a closer lens upon the contemporary trends and policies in the realms of work and education and their effectiveness in enhancing workers’ skills and agency within the specific context of Mauritius. I argue that the capability approach enlarges the scope of the study due to its focus upon *real* opportunities that can be imagined in the contemporary context. While historical institutionalism helps link the past to the present, I argue that the capability approach may also help analyse the real problems that are now being experienced in the contemporary context with a view on the future of Mauritian institutions. Arguably, the approach inherently advocates the interdependence of economy and society, along lines germane to that of historical institutionalism (Streeck 2010). Within it lies the assumption

## ***5.4 Research design***

In this section, I describe my empirical investigation on the case of Mauritius. I argue that the case of Mauritius has the potential to highlight a set of pressures exerted by liberalised production regimes and contemporary globalisation on countries that are economically dependent on activities of the Global North. Although some of the issues

around its colonial legacies and post-colonial condition may echo with those of other former colonies, Mauritius remains a complex case. In chapters 3 and 4, I highlighted its colonial past under both the French and British administration. I also discussed its notable post-independence decade which set the tone for its economic success as it is acclaimed today.

I identified Mauritius as a potential terrain for the present study due to recent economic development achieved with the development of new labour-intensive industries. In the first period of the research, I also became aware of some of the announcements of the Mauritian government in regard to its endeavour to develop Mauritius into a knowledge economy. The government's knowledge economy discourse seemed to have developed in parallel with its rapidly growing ICT/BPO sector. This, along with the 2011 industrial disputes, has led to the identification of the BPO sector as a significant empirical terrain within the case. In addition, BPO has been argued to be a pertinent epitome of the contemporary shape of work and has recently received much scholarly attention (see chapter 4). Its presence in Mauritius and the significance it was being afforded by policy makers and the Mauritian press made it all the more relevant to the current research objective. In other words, selecting Mauritius and its BPO sector was well in line with current scholarly debates on economy, work and education.

Given the 'intellectual puzzle' (Mason 2002) I seek to construct, I adopt a qualitative approach in order to understand how institutions have evolved over time as well as how actors contribute to the shaping of institutions which concomitantly shape their behaviour. In line with my research questions, I seek to capture workers' experiences and how they view their situations as actors operating within the Business Process Outsourcing of Mauritius. In addition, I seek to understand BPO companies' experiences within the institutional context of Mauritius. As such, individual accounts of actors other than workers – namely foreign and managers – are captured although these are apprehended as collective accounts of the two companies involved in the study. As I seek to capture respective groups of actors' experiences, I adopt an interpretivist approach. In line with Blaikie's (2000) arguments, I espouse the ontological assumption that actors' interpretations of their activities and behaviour construct and constitute their social reality. A focus on both workers and companies is

an attempt to highlight individuals' understanding of the context within which they operate. I also seek to investigate how workers produce, or more specifically, reproduce certain patterns and behaviours based upon their subjective assumptions of their social reality at work and beyond.

However, research questions and the study's concern for the manner in which the past shapes the present demand a focus upon institutions and the context per se. While the case study approach was selected in order to focus on a complex case (Yin 2011), the approach was also selected in order to help capture the different processes that have taken place in the form of institutional evolution in this particular study. As Yin (2011) argues, the case study approach serves well the endeavour to undertake process evaluation while examining an entity in its real-world context. In the present study, the case study approach underpins my research objectives given that the historical institutionalist approach is equally applied to focus on real-world examples (Streeck and Thelen 2005) and examine issues that are specific to the context of Mauritius.

Later in this chapter, I explain my selection of two BPO companies within the case of Mauritius and of additional participants who are identified as educationists and experts in the study. I argue that justice can only be done to the importance of empirical investigation, which historical institutionalists, such as Streeck and Thelen (2005a) advocate, by interpreting organisational experiences from a vantage point external to these companies. Despite being at times external to BPO organisational settings, educationists and experts are added in the sample in order to enlarge the scope of investigation and to help understand the broad institutional context within which BPO workers operate. In what follows, I briefly justify my rationale for conducting semi-structured interviews to collect data prior to discussing my sampling strategy and introducing my sample.

#### **5.4.1 Semi-structured interviews**

In this study, data collection was undertaken through the use of semi-structured interviewing. In line with my ontological and epistemological assumptions, I endeavoured to obtain 'contextual, situational and interactional knowledge' (Mason 2002: 64) by interviewing my informants individually. Within an interpretivist

framework, people's individual and collective understandings, as well as enactments of social norms are captured. In order to do so, people's interpretations, perceptions and meanings act as primary sources of data. Given that in this study it is assumed that institutions shape actors' behaviour which can in turn shape institutions over time, I argue that the use of interviewing as a data collection method is relevant both for obtaining personal narratives about respondents' viewpoints and for understanding why actors hold particular viewpoints (King 2004).

In addition, the interactive nature of interviews is often emphasised in the literature. According to Burgess (1982: 107), interview as a data collection method is the opportunity for the researcher to 'probe deeply to uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, accurate inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience.' In a similar vein, Seale et al. (2004: 15) later argued that interviews are social encounters which involve collaboration between the researcher and the participants in 'producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past or future actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts.' Given the relevance of historical facts and my attempt to highlight issues that may later help envisage new institutional prospects and conceptualisations of workers' capacities, I advocate the relevance of the method for this empirical study.

It has also been argued that interviewing is appropriate for obtaining rich detailed answers and where applicable, thick descriptions (Bryman and Bell 2011). However, the form of interviews may vary. Interviews are often differentiated in the extent to which they are structured or unstructured. Where interviews are structured, an interview guide or protocol is used in order to direct the process. The importance of structure has been advocated in the literature. For instance, Bryman and Bell (2011: 466) contend that structure in an interview helps the researcher to remain close to her research questions.

In this study, I choose to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to attend to such needs, while allowing themes to emerge by maintaining a certain degree of flexibility. I attempt to avoid the risk of directing the respondent excessively by moderating the level of structure. Although this may prove a challenging endeavour, having a semi-structure to my interviews allows me to more or less manage my time



and the conversation. As Bryman and Bell (2011) argue, however, it is easy to depart from the guide during an interview. Due to the collaborative manner in which data is generated from the interaction between the researcher and the informant (Mason 2002), interviews are inherently characterised by flexibility. Yet this, I argue, also varies with the typologies represented in the sample and the consequent conversation that their knowledge as well as that of the researcher may trigger.

#### **5.4.2 Sampling strategy and sample**

The complexity attached to sampling in qualitative research traditions has been extensively documented in the literature (Coyne 1997; Mason 2002; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). While in quantitative studies sampling is defined as the ‘selection of the appropriate segment that is representative of a whole’ (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007: 105), it can be argued that in qualitative research, sampling procedures are designed for purposes beyond mere representation. Perhaps this explains why qualitative studies rarely rely upon a single sampling procedure but more often upon the overlapping of several sampling techniques (Marshall 1996; Coyne 1997). In this study my selection of informants started on the basis of purposive sampling.

It has been argued that purposeful or purposive sampling is analogous to selective sampling (for instance Coyne 1997). Schatzman and Strauss (1973: 39), for instance, define selective sampling as a ‘practical necessity that is shaped by the time the researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his starting and developing interests, and by any restrictions placed upon his observations by his hosts’. In line with this definition, I selected two BPO companies, here identified as companies A and B. To start with I aimed to attend to the theoretical context within which the study is positioned. As noted in previous chapters, Business Process Outsourcing is a contemporary epitome of new work configurations which have emerged due to technological advancements. While it is of notable relevance to the economic context of Mauritius, the 2011 industrial disputes also hinted at the implications which flexible employment legislation has tended to have for contemporary employment relationships.

The distinct characteristics of companies A and B illustrate the two main typologies of BPO companies which exist within the Business Process Outsourcing sector of

Mauritius. On the one hand, company A is predominantly a voice-based operation, although it also provides some back office services. Given its main activities consist in the provision of over-the-phone services, it is here described as a call centre operation. Company B is essentially a non-voice operation which provides back office and data processing services to its business partners. Both companies are predominantly Francophone and have been selected due to the prevalence of service provision to Francophone markets in the Mauritian BPO sector. Moreover, companies were selected on the condition that they help capture the reality of BPO work for which a significant number of young workers are usually recruited. In regard to the two companies, I therefore argue that my choice was premised upon the endeavour to select a sample that reflects the appropriateness of the relationship between the sample and the wider context with which it is related (Mason 2002).

In chapter 4, I explained how as at 2010, Mauritius became a recognised Francophone BPO destination. Taking into account time constraints, I chose to focus on this aspect, which I argue, was relevant to my purposive sampling strategy. During my 2011 pilot study, I travelled to Mauritius in search for access in Francophone companies. I also aimed to gain access in BPO companies which had expanded in the past decade. In chapter 4, I also noted that the BPO sector started developing rapidly from 2004. In my empirical study, I therefore aimed to interview workers and managers in companies which have experienced this development. Given that I base my description of the companies on my data, I describe them further in the following chapter. However, here it is instructive to note that the companies were also selected on the ground that they were both able to provide narratives that recount their experiences over the past decade. This decade, as findings in chapter 6 will indicate, is precisely the period within which the Mauritian BPO sector developed in a more structured manner. Companies A and B fulfilled these sampling criteria.

For the typology represented by company A, I was directed to a major Francophone call centre operation in Mauritius. Later, however, I did not obtain the access required for the empirical study. Nevertheless, the managing director of this company arranged for me to meet the person who at the time was the chief training manager at the actual company A. Company A had several features which were similar to the company where access had not been granted. At Company B, access was immediately obtained through

personal contacts while I was in search of a Francophone, non-voice operation which also matched the criteria mentioned earlier. The study also seeks to examine Mauritian Education and Training systems in concomitance with workers' educational background and skill levels within the specific context of Mauritius. Therefore, participants needed to have received at least primary and secondary education in Mauritian institutions. At the two companies, most workers fulfil these criteria. As a result, their collective profile addresses my endeavour to focus on such workers' experiences and skill levels, especially following the 2011 disputes which drew attention to a similar group of young, vulnerable BPO workers.

Having different categories of participants formed part of my purposive sampling strategy. To start with, I set to give voice to workers given that, in aggregate, the study aimed to capture their conditions and the challenges facing this group of actors. In order to obtain variegated views of young individuals, I requested to interview young Mauritian workers who would have reached different stages regarding their work experiences and skill levels. In both companies, however, workers were picked by the HR managers and line managers. At company A, workers were interviewed according to their availability during their working hours. I was able to interview workers who were assigned in a variety of teams.

At company A, I was informed that workers were picked according to their availability, so long as they fulfilled the criteria mentioned above. These criteria consisted mainly of their young age and their education in Mauritius. At company B, workers fulfilled the same criteria. The HR manager at company B also suggested participants based on their experiences and the HR manager's awareness of individuals' willingness to participate in the research. However, I am aware of the fact that the selection of workers by HR managers may have undermined the degree of representativeness afforded by my sample of workers from both companies. Given that obtaining access in BPO companies was not an easy task, I proceeded with the sample made available to me under these conditions. While I was not able to make a more precise selection of individual profiles, I argue that my sample of workers met the main criteria set for the requirements of the study.

Earlier I mentioned that managers were included in my sample in order to capture the organisational settings and conditions within which these workers operate. Managers were also able to provide critical appraisals of workers' performance and therefore help address the questions regarding my concern for workers' skill levels and agency. Despite my focus on workers' conditions and experiences, managers' responses provided the other side of workers' narratives. Given my research objective and a focus on context-specific information, managers were also included in order to share narratives about both generic and day-to-day practices of the respective companies. Managers were interviewed according to their availability. At times, this led to limitations in the empirical research. For instance, the French CEO of company A was not able to participate in the study and potentially share his perspective from a vantage point external to the Mauritian context. The French CEO at Company B was an informant.

Purposive sampling can also contain an element of expert sampling. As argued earlier, my sample was supplemented by the input of Mauritian educationists and experts in an attempt to capture a broader account of the context within which BPO companies and workers operate. According to Marshall (1996: 523), including a sample of experts in naturalistic studies informs the researcher about complex issues. It has also been argued that experts are also capable of contributing to a qualitative research by providing whole explanations based upon their expertise and views (Trotter et al. 2012). Trotter et al. (2012) observe how nominated expert sampling, a classical ethnographic approach allows the researcher to explore cultural and social meanings in various communities and groups. In order to obtain such accounts, informants external to the companies range from educationists, former government ministers, government officers, sectorial experts, trade unionists, activists and journalists in this study.

The variegated nature of this segment of my sample is also due to the theoretical concepts at issue. Educationists and experts were selected in accordance with their capacities to comment on both the historical background and the contemporary context as well as on issues, institutions and policies which concern economy, work and education. The first educationists and experts interviewed were selected based on information obtained during pilot studies and prior to the main data collection in 2012. Personal contacts helped for access. While the research started with a purposive

sampling strategy, this first group of educationists and experts recommended that I interview specific individuals to obtain data that they were not able to provide. In other words, additional educationists and experts were contacted on the basis of snowball sampling.

A major consideration in a qualitative study is to select information-rich cases precisely in order to reach the required level of quality (Coyne 1997; Mason 2002). It is the need to obtain quality data that legitimises the application of a strategic sample selection. According to Marshall (1996: 524), qualitative researchers do not prioritise the generalizability of results but the ‘understanding of more complex human issues.’ Other scholars have established a list of criteria which determine the quality of a sample. For instance, Curtis et al. (2000: 1003) contend that the ‘quality of a sample for more naturalistic studies needs to be believable, ethical and feasible’ (ibid.). Marshall (1996: 524) argues that qualitative research requires a pragmatic approach. As such, the scholar advocates the legitimacy of including sampling strategies such as opportunistic, snowball and criterion sampling in qualitative research projects. In order to ‘capitalise on opportunities during the data collection stage’ (Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007: 114), some of the experts were contacted upon recommendation and help from other selected informants during the main data collection period. Arguably, the degree of flexibility afforded in qualitative studies can be justified as long as the main objectives, namely attending to research questions and therefore quality assurance, are fulfilled.

Overall, educationists and experts were selected to supplement data obtained within companies and to obtain thick descriptions of the institutional context at issue. Given their respective expertise, their responses attended predominantly to the first two research questions, namely in regard to the institutional context and the extent to which E&T policies and relevant institutions have adequately adjusted to contemporary conditions. Educationists’ responses also contributed to research question 3, especially because they were able to specify the nature of the challenges now facing E&T institutions. Interviews with educationists and experts were also conducted according to respondents’ availability during the main data collection period. As a result, their responses contributed to the sharpening of interview protocols directed at workers and managers. At times, the phenomenon also occurred inversely. Some of workers and managers’ responses were cross-checked with those of educationists and experts if the

latter happened to be interviewed after a visit to one of the companies. Below I provide a list of my informants prior to describing my data collection process.

<b>COMPANY A</b>	<b>Number of Informants</b>
Workers and supervisors	20
Platform managers	2
Chief Operations Officers (senior)	2
HR manager	1
HR officer	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26</b>

**Table 1 List of Informants – Company A**

<b>COMPANY B</b>	<b>Number of Informants</b>
Workers and supervisors	20
Chief Operations Officers (senior)	2
Customer Account managers	5
CEO	1
Managing Director	1
Marketing Manager	1
Quality Assurance Manager	1
HR manager	1
HR officer	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>33</b>

**Table 2 List of Informants – Company B**

<b>EXPERTS</b> (Including Educationists)	<b>Number of Informants</b>
Industrial Relations Experts	2
Government officers <sup>7</sup>	2
BPO Expert	1
Trade unionists	3
Activists (including 1 journalist)	4
Educationists <sup>8</sup>	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>

**Table 3 List of Informants - Experts**

### **5.4.3 Procedures and interview guides**

As the tables above indicate, a total of 75 participants were interviewed in this empirical study. The main data collection period in Mauritius lasted for three months, namely during the months of June, July and August 2012. During the first month of the fieldwork, I finalised and confirmed access arrangements with the two companies and informed some of the first expert informants and educationists of my visit. In July and August, I visited the companies for one month each in order to conduct face-to-face individual interviews with workers and managers. Experts were interviewed throughout the period, subject to their availability.

However, the empirical study comprised several trips to the island of Mauritius prior to the main data collection period. My first trip took place in January 2011, during which the major industrial disputes in the BPO sector erupted. During the hunger strike, I was able to briefly discuss with a group of workers and activists and take preliminary notes. The disputes inherently called into question the institutional arrangements designed for the sector and workers' agency. As noted in chapter 4, the dispute which mainly involved workers at Infinity Ltd led to the eruption of similar disputes in other

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<sup>7</sup> The Board of Investment officer and The Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) officer

<sup>8</sup> Educationists in this research have been professional educators but have also been involved in national projects geared towards the enhancement of the education system. Some of the educationists have contributed to policy making.

BPO companies during the same period. In line with the events and the questions it raised, I was able to refine my focus and research questions in the early stages.

During a second trip to Mauritius in 2011, I researched some of the major historical facts on democracy, nationalism, economic diversification, unionism and education in Mauritius. I also negotiated access with my gate keepers, undertook a series of preliminary investigations, and took note of the existence of the two main types of operations within the BPO sector of Mauritius. During the preparatory visits to Mauritius, I began to identify and contact experts and educationists who, based on their expertise, I assumed would be able to inform the study on particular themes. As noted earlier, however, other experts were included in the study with the help of primary contacts through a snowball sampling process.

Arrangements made with companies A and B for data collection varied slightly from one company to the other. At company A, my gatekeeper, a training manager of French origin had left by the time of the formal data collection period was scheduled in the second quarter of 2012. Nevertheless, access was secured through the local Human Resource manager. Access to workers and other managers was arranged by the same person. Interviews were conducted depending upon participants' availability during their hours of work. Given the call-centre work configuration at company A, interviews were conducted on the platforms wherever free space and privacy were available. Some of the managers, however, suggested meeting in more private meeting rooms or closed offices. At times, arrangements at company A proved challenging due to the noisy atmosphere and the absence of privacy, which made some of the workers uncomfortable. At company B, arrangements were more formal. While workers operated in an open-plan office, a specific meeting room was booked by the HR manager during my one-month visit for interview purposes. Senior managers were interviewed in their private offices. For experts and educationists, interview locations varied significantly. While interviews were highly dependent upon experts' availability, some interviews had to be conducted in public places. However, most of the educationists' and experts' interviews took place in informants' private offices<sup>9</sup>. Trade unionists and activists were interviewed in their respective centres.

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<sup>9</sup> As I indicate later, one interview was conducted over the phone.



The length of interviews with workers and supervisors ranged from 30 minutes to one hour at both companies A and B. I adopted a common interview protocol for these two groups of participants. However, protocols for managers, educationists and experts varied depending respectively upon their specific duties at the companies and upon their area of expertise. On average, interviews with managers lasted for approximately 45 minutes, while interviews with experts varied greatly. Most of the encounters with educationists and other experts led to in-depth interviews, through which I obtained thick descriptions of the Mauritian institutional, historical and political context. No major issues can be reported in the data collection process, except for two interviews. One trade unionist demonstrated a condescending attitude toward my research that expressed his frustration as an experienced unionist in the context of Mauritius. The interview was interrupted after the unionist showed his lack of willingness to attend to my questions. During an interview with one activist, I was also warned of the possible arrival of police officers in the centre. During the data collection period, this activist and other members of his political movement were accused of having started an illegal strike with workers of the sugar industry. Nevertheless, this interview lasted three hours and took the form of a long conversation, while remaining semi-structured.

Interview guides varied among groups of workers or individuals. In regard to workers and supervisors at companies A and B, I set out to inquire about their educational background, previous work experience where applicable, awareness of their rights and protection possibilities and their analysis of their situation as a young BPO worker. I also sought to investigate whether workers could formulate their aspirations in relation to their training needs or agency enhancement. While additional questions emerged for supervisors due to their junior management role, supervisors were interviewed mainly as experienced workers who were able to comment more extensively on the organisation and the work environment it provides. Interviews for workers (and supervisors) were designed to identify challenges experienced by workers both as individuals and members of a specific group in the organisation. I noted the need for me to remain close to my interview schedule for an important number of workers given their lack of willingness to elaborate on their responses. Overall, interviews were designed to uncover the meanings which subjects bring to their life experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2008: 29).

As inferred above, interviews for managers varied. Platform managers at company A and customer account managers at company B were asked to comment upon their line management roles and their appraisal of workers' performance on the job. Managers at this level also provided data in regard to daily tasks and the activities both workers and managers are expected to perform. However, interview questions also required them to comment on in-company training provision and workers' skills levels. Senior managers, HR managers and HR officers at both companies responded to similar questions in addition to questions more specifically related to their field. Senior managers and the HR department also provided more data regarding the conditions within which the companies were set up. I discuss this in the first section of my findings chapters.

Interviews with educationists and other experts also varied according to their field. Educationists and the journalist, who was also an activist, were asked to provide supplementary information on the historical facts that could explain and confirm secondary data obtained prior to the data collection on the evolution and contemporary shape of Mauritian institutions. Some activists were also able to contribute to such themes. Educationists and Industrial Relations experts commented significantly on statutory policies and expressed their opinions and ideologies in this respect. Educationists were brought to comment on the current Mauritian education system and often provided recommendations for future prospects and institutional change in this sphere. Some of the prospects discussed in the conclusion chapter of the study are based on such recommendations. Trade unionists and activists commented on the shape of Work and Employment institutions and expressed their concerns in regard to workers' levels of agency and rights awareness within the contemporary context.

As a government officer, the Board of Investment (BOI) officer was requested to comment upon the institutional arrangements and facilities provided by the government for the setting up of niche activities such as Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). The Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) officer was approached upon recommendations of the BOI officer and was able to describe the role of the HRDC of Mauritius and its initiatives in the advent of new economic developments and training-related sectorial requirements. The BPO expert confirmed some of the figures I mentioned in chapter 4 in regard to the growth of the sector, while also highlighting

some of the challenges experienced by companies in the sector in general. Here it is also instructive to note the usefulness of adopting a high degree of structure in expert interviews, despite their length and variations. In line with Bryman and Bell's (2011: 466) recommendation, having a structure helped me encourage experts, and at times managers, not to 'go off at tangents.' In the 'appendices' section, I provide the interview protocol used for workers given its uniform character. Given the variegated nature of managers and expert interview protocols, I provide in the appendices a comprehensive list of some of the main themes discussed with the other participants and which I have selected from the interview guides.

### ***5.5 Ethical considerations***

Ethics in social research has been defined by Saunders et al. (2003: 129) as 'the appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work.' In this section I reflect both upon my role as a researcher and the ethical considerations required in different forms in accordance with respective groups of participants.

Prior to undertaking my interviews, the research project was examined by the relevant ethics committee at the University of Leicester. The fieldwork was ethically approved under this process. I have then sought to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents and of the organisations and entities to which they belong. While anonymity and confidentiality are closely linked to each other, there lies a slight distinction between them. As Wallace (2010) notes, anonymity can be defined as the 'protection of a research participant's or site's identity.' In turn, confidentiality refers to the 'safeguarding of information obtained in confidence during the course of the research study'. In this study, the identities of companies A and B have been preserved, although information obtained through data collection has been used for analytical purposes. However, information has not been used for any other purpose outside the scope of this research. Arguably, the fact that entities' anonymity is preserved may to some extent imply the automatic guarantee of confidentiality, assuming that information cannot be related to a specific entity's name. In regard to workers, I use fictitious names in my findings chapters when I report specific quotes.

In order to formalise my fieldwork and provide adequate guarantees of the preservation of anonymity and confidentiality, I offered to provide relevant and adequate information to individuals who were to be interviewed. At the companies, I proposed that participants mutually sign a consent form with the researcher. However, such formalities were more demanded by company B. At company A, I emailed my gatekeeper prior to the data collection period and during a preliminary face-to-face meeting I was asked to orally provide my guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality preservation. Workers were asked by the HR manager at company A to participate to my research. No further formalities were required and no individual consent forms were signed. At company B, however, the HR manager requested that I draft an invitation email to potential participants which the HR manager forwarded to individual workers and managers. In comparison with the scenario at company A, workers at company B were given more explicit choice regarding their participation in the research. Company B also demanded that two copies of the consent form were signed by the individual participant and me, while one copy had to be handed to individual participants. In other words, I received an informed consent from each participant in this company (Mason 2002).

While companies A and B may be recognised due to the size of Mauritius and that of the sector, risks are all the more present for educationists and experts' identities. With the exception of the two government officers included in the sample, most of the experts I was able to interview in this research are well known in the Mauritian context and are often followed by the national press. At times, educationists and experts guessed my intention to interview some of their counterparts or opponents and probed such questions during their own interviews. In addition, some of the highly relevant information provided by experts has not been used in this research due to the extent to which such information unveils the participants' identities. However, there are cases where this is unavoidable and findings in the next chapter may hint at participants' identities. At times, as Mason (2002) argues, it is difficult to separate facts from contexts. The choice of information can also be a consequence of the researcher's bias. For instance, I may not have selected data which I assumed provided too much information about the participants in question and such decisions may have been based upon my personal knowledge of the context. Once again I argue that such situations

may be inevitable. Nevertheless, educationists and experts are respectively identified with a number (Educationist 1, Industrial relations experts 1 or 2) in my findings chapter in order to preserve their anonymity.

It has also been argued that the researcher's bias is often present in social research. Given the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions, choice of data collection methods may lead to scenarios which inherently allow the researcher's opinion or ideology to find explicit or implicit expression. As such, Mason (2002) argues, however, bias in such projects cannot be totally eradicated. The scholar goes on to argue that when employing a qualitative approach, it is often challenging to separate the interview from the social interaction in which it was produced. Nevertheless, I remained aware of the high propensity of bias in this research given my personal connection with the context of Mauritius. From the start, my choice of the topic and of the sample may have been driven from a personal interest and concern for Mauritian workers due to my origins. It is also due to this fact that I endeavoured to maintain a standard format in my interview protocol for workers.

Questions, which, as mentioned above, were related to workers' educational background, knowledge of rights and protection as well and the conditions within which they operate and the amount of training received can only reflect my ideological position. However, it has been argued in the literature that social scientists choose what they choose on the basis of their values. With a Weberian perspective, some have argued that personal, cultural, moral or political values cannot be eliminated in a research approach that requires interaction and therefore contact between the researcher's and participants' subjectivities (Christians 2000: 136). While I am aware that this may have had repercussions upon my data analysis, I note here that I have allowed themes to emerge essentially from workers' voice and the narratives of other informants. I describe my data analysis below.

## ***5.6 Data Analysis***

In order to capture the data provided by informants, all interviews were digitally recorded, with the exception of one interview. This interview with an educationist was

conducted by phone after the main data collection period and on account of the informant's availability. Questions around confidentiality, especially in the case of the two companies, were also raised due to the use of the digital recorder. Upon completion of the data collection, I transcribed the interviews. Interviews were conducted in French, English or Mauritian Creole in accordance with informants' respective preferences. My proficiency in the three languages and my cultural proximity with my participants allowed me to read and develop an understanding of my informants' social construction without the need of translation. By leaving the data in their original languages, I aimed at maximising my capacity of grasping such realities. For instance, some of my informants' insights on the Mauritian context were best captured by Creole expressions with which I am also familiar. In some interviews all three languages were used by informants. This is a common characteristic proper to the Mauritian context. The choice of language for specific interview questions or at specific points, also acted as a guarantee to my informants' honesty, given that it often indicated Mauritian spontaneity.

I adopted a thematic approach to data analysis and data, in transcripts and additional documents such as newspaper cuts and reports, were manually coded. The thematic analysis in this study is inspired by Aronson's (1994) 'pragmatic view' of such analyses. As the scholar argues, an attempt to understand ideas that emerge, achieves more positive outcomes under the control of a thematic analysis (ibid). The scholar goes on to define the technique as one that helps focus upon identifiable themes and patterns of living and behaviour. Aronson (1994) advocates the thematic approach to data analysis as one which helps the researcher develop a story line once themes have been collected and literature studied. I argue that such an approach is well in line with the conceptual framework afforded in this study.

Overall, I also paid attention to the themes that emerged specifically from the data and which provided an account of how workers interpret and construct their realities, or in the case of managers, of how they interpret organisational realities. In the case of educationists and experts, the challenges they identified and the recommendations they provided emanated from their view of the Mauritian context as well as from their experiences and practice of their knowledge. By following these principles, I was able to develop sub-themes more systematically.

To start with, I set out to note where data related to ‘already classified themes or patterns’ (Aronson 1994). Therefore, I used as an analytical benchmark the themes that characterise the political economic debates reported in earlier chapters and the historical facts reported specifically in chapters 3 and 4. As a strategy to process my qualitative data (Langley 1999), I endeavoured to address my research questions in the order in which they are presented in the study especially because they emerged from my review of the literature and my conceptual framework in this order. I set out to first understand the broad institutional context and how institutions have evolved in order to understand the impact on the group of workers concerned here. Data obtained from educationists and experts’ responses were coded according to historical facts of relevance to the study, to changes in Work and Employment institutions, to the BPO sector and finally, to current Education and Training (E&T) policies.

From these codes, sub-themes emerged on the performance, behaviour and agency of young Mauritian workers as a group. At this point, transcripts on BPO workers’ and managers’ experiences at companies A and B were coded in order to cross-check their narratives with educationists and experts’ generalisations. Further sub-themes pertained more to workers’ performance and behaviour within the specific context of companies A and B. The interview with Educationist 1 included specific information on one of the companies (here named company X) with which the informant had worked. Educationist 1 used company X as an illustration and contextualised workers’ experiences in company X within institutional features of the Mauritian economy and society. This interview was used as a pivotal benchmark for further manual coding in the data from the two companies. Similarly, data from government officers who discussed current Education and Training policies were coded and analysed in relation to the themes mentioned by Educationist 1. Historical facts which helped explain the current level of workers’ agency was identified in responses of activists and trade unionists and compared to contemporary facts identified in workers’ responses. In chapters 6 and 7, I report my findings under the most common sub-themes which were eventually identified and which can all be identified as a set of contemporary challenges facing workers, companies and E&T institutions in Mauritius. Findings are reported in two separate chapters given that a number of sub-themes helped capture the challenges

facing E&T institutions in much detail. These are reported in chapter 7. Chapter 6 reports findings that concern workers more directly.

## ***5.7 Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have discussed the multiple assumptions which underpin the study. I have also discussed my methodological approach. While I advocate the importance of context specificity and of the explanatory power of real-case examples, I adopt a qualitative research design that help capture workers' (including supervisors or 'experienced workers') interpretation and construction of their realities. As I focus on the specific case of Mauritius, I also voice to educationists and experts in order to have a broader interpretation of the Mauritian institutional context as this study requires. Managers' responses were designed to contribute to understand these workers' realities within organisational settings of BPO operations.

Overall, I argue that the methodology adopted in this research helps address my research questions by underpinning my conceptual framework. By identifying Mauritius as my case, the study is able to focus on its complexity in the real world context. The cases of the two Francophone companies are selected purposively given that they capture major features of the Mauritian BPO sector. I argue that the sample and the procedures followed in my data analysis help address research questions: they are designed to capture both the context within which these workers operate and to give voice to these workers whose concerns are at the core of the study. The variety in my sample is designed to attend to my conceptual framework. Educationists and experts were selected based on their capacity to provide both historical insights on the one hand, and on providing detailed narratives on current facts occurring at both national and organisational level, on the other. Findings are reported in the next two chapters. Although much flexibility was afforded in my sampling strategy, I argue that the empirical study fulfilled the requirements set by the research questions it was to address.



## **CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS I: Challenges for Workers and Companies**

In Chapters 6 and 7, I report my findings. In Chapter 6, I focus mainly on the institutional context within which companies A and B operate. I first report my respondents' observations regarding the Mauritian government's efforts to adjust the employment legislation to the needs of multinational companies operating in emerging sectors such as Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). Furthermore, respondents, at times on behalf of workers, report the risks associated with increasing worker individualisation in the employment relationship in such a sector where workers are not unionised. Challenges reported here pertain to particularly to the lack of rights protection and awareness of young Mauritian workers employed in the BPO sector. Challenges indicate the extent to which these companies operate in a flexible institutional environment and call into question the role of the Mauritian government in protecting collective concerns.

I then report the significant challenges experienced by BPO workers at companies A and B. I discuss the socio-cultural challenges experienced by workers both in regard to their agency and to their performance at work. While this will be reported further in chapter 7, I report some of the findings which indicate employers' dissatisfaction regarding workers' skill capacities. Some of the tensions reported here pertain to socio-cultural aspects which may have required more attention and adjustments than has been given to the development of the sector. Findings indicate how assumptions made on the country's colonial legacies and therefore on workers' capacities to fully fulfil requirements set by BPO employers, have triggered further risks for these individualised and non-unionised workers.

### ***6.1 Context***

Mauritius embraced the twenty-first century with another economic diversification strategy made possible by increasing global demands for Business Process Outsourcing service provision. In the early 2000s, various multinational and local BPO companies had already started setting up in Mauritius although the phenomenon had yet to be

spread widely over the island. According to a Board of Investment (BOI) survey, approximately sixty BPO companies were already operating in Mauritius before the formal intervention of institutions such as the Mauritius Board of Investment in the sector [BOI Officer]. The first companies to settle were involved in low-end operations, namely, basic back office, data capture and call centre activities [BOI Officer]. Major development started in 2002. In addition to the incentives granted to foreign investors, the enhancement of information and communication technology facilities in the form of the fibre optic cable was followed by government investment in infrastructure well epitomised by the so-called ‘Cyber tower I’ (see also Chapter 4).

Company A emerged from a local call centre which existed prior to the major development of the Mauritian BPO sector. In 2000, the local call centre in question was set up to operate under a 24/7 system [Platform manager 1, company A]. At the time, both Francophone and Anglophone customer services were provided in the form of large telemarketing campaigns [Platform manager 1, company A]. In the advent of financial difficulties, the local call centre created a joint venture in 2005 with the French entity which bears the international name of company A. Further details were confirmed by the HR manager at company A:

*In 2005, an Indian Ocean subsidiary of company A had been created. It was only a small structure. This was a way for company A [French headquarter] to say: ‘we don’t want to lose the joint venture’. The joint venture still operates. However, from January 2011, they [French headquarter] also opened a proper Mauritian subsidiary which bears the company’s name. [Interview in French]*

The present research is based solely upon the Mauritian subsidiary which operated with approximately 400 employees in 2012.

The French group which owns company B was originally founded 20 years ago by experienced IT managers. In 2004, company B was set up in Mauritius in order to cater for a demand-driven opportunity brought by a specific French client request. As a software developer, the group also operated in Reunion Island. In addition to the geographical proximity, the main rationale for setting up a subsidiary in Mauritius was cost-effectiveness [CEO, company B]. In line with its on-going business expansion

since 2004, the Mauritian subsidiary's workforce grew from 8 employees to approximately 120 in 2012 [HR officer, company B]. While company A was set up on existing activities, company B had to undergo a completely new start in Mauritius. The local managing director at company B recounts:

*Just everything... [Laughs] We had to do everything. We were renting some offices at the time, and the office premises were furnished within a limited amount of time in order to cater for the first recruitment procedures. I found myself sweeping the carpet after it was laid out...that sort of thing. [Interview in French]*

In comparison with company A, company B started with an ill-defined organisational structure within which roles of the first recruits had yet to be determined. However, organisational structuring has since been an ongoing process and a recurrent objective alongside the company's growth. Consequently, a local HR manager was appointed in 2010 [HR officer, company B]. Despite the lack of structure, company B has maintained a steady growth rate. During the study, it was noted that company B had recorded an average annual growth rate of more than 20% for three consecutive years<sup>10</sup>.

In accordance with explanations provided by the BOI officer, company B's experience reflects the origins of most foreign-owned BPO Companies in Mauritius. It also demonstrates the favourable conditions that have facilitated the setting up of such companies in the sector [Interview in French]:

*Oh no...very easy (...) Our application didn't take long and once we had submitted it to the Board of Investment (BOI), they responded very rapidly. When I think about it, it was quite straightforward... As long as you explain your project, you have a business plan... even without it...well we also did what we were told to do. But yes, we developed more rapidly than we had envisaged. They asked us to make some predictions about our viability...perhaps it reassured them (smile), but I think that wasn't very pertinent. If things go wrong, we just disappear. I guess at the time, all they wanted was to fill their Cyber Tower. [CEO, company B].*

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the information reported has been obtained from the Company's website.

Government efforts were steadily geared toward the enhancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities while its investment in infrastructure is illustrated best through the so-called ‘Cyber Tower I’ [BOI officer]. However, government efforts to formalise the procedures to be followed for the setting up of BPO companies only came later given that the sector was allowed to develop informally and rapidly in the early stages. In 2004, the Mauritius Board of Investment (BOI) finally set up a *BPO secretariat*. The BOI went on to promote Mauritius overseas as a BPO destination to potential foreign investors. The BOI officer explains:

*At the BOI, we had identified this niche, it looked promising. It seemed that Mauritius could possibly position itself as a BPO destination in the global economy...a viable destination. All this [technological development and new infrastructure] was decisive. Well...the sector already existed although no one really knew about it* [Interview in French].

Shortly after, the mission of the Board of Investment was clarified. In overseas exhibitions and fairs, the BOI assumed the main challenge of promoting Mauritius as a ‘promising ICT/BPO destination’ amongst established destinations such as India, the Philippines and South Africa. The BOI officer reports the resulting success:

*...We went to tell them [potential foreign investors] that Mauritius exists too! It worked! To date, there are 500 BPO companies in Mauritius employing approximately 16 800 people!* [Interview in French]

*Investment certificates* were eagerly released to potential investors. A foreign company could settle in the Mauritian ICT/BPO sector without difficulty. As such, the BOI officer confirmed the possibilities of rapid settlement possibilities as experienced by Company B:

*Our mandate was to promote Mauritius at the global level and we did the ‘marketing’... We would be accompanied by various stakeholders on our ‘missions’ abroad, including some representatives of companies that were already operating in Mauritius. ...Any company willing to start a BPO operation in Mauritius needed to address its investment proposal to the Mauritian government if it wished to obtain fiscal*

*incentives. Our [BOI's] technical committee would need to approve their respective business plans for them to be granted an investment certificate. [Interview in French]*

Tax incentives were regarded as being 'initially an interesting offer' [CEO, Company B]. A company could choose between two options, either a 0% tax rate for a limited period of time or a 5% permanent tax rate. As the sector expanded more rapidly between 2004 and 2006, the Mauritian government reviewed some of its major pro-investment conditions, namely by amending its Investment Promotion Act. From October 2006, the tax rate imposed on foreign BPO companies was raised to 15% for all categories of BPO companies. In order to 'avoid instability' [BOI officer] companies which had settled before the 2006 arrangements were allowed to operate under the former conditions until 2012. Despite awareness of other BPO destinations' competitive institutional variations, Mauritius intended to attract viable companies which would be willing to 'settle seriously' in the country and therefore would not be discouraged by a 15% tax rate [BOI officer]. However, the CEO at company B comments:

*Well...They [the Mauritian government] did not really keep their promise on this... They tell you: you have something for life, then change it, it does not encourage trust...This is not good for the Mauritian legislation...I agree that rules can change, but here, it showed they lacked maturity when they proposed this incentive. [Interview in French]*

The CEO at company B and other respondents reported that further administrative procedures were outmoded and demonstrated government institutions' inefficiency. In 2012, for instance, it was noted in the local press how a foreign-owned call centre operation had to close given the Mauritius Data Protection Act under which it operated in Mauritius was not recognised by European Union legislation. In this particular case, 200 workers lost their jobs.

At the same time, other bureaucratic requirements which were previously established were made obsolete in order to encourage the rapid development of the sector. The BOI officer explains:

*There are no conditions...none...no fixed-term contract [between the companies and the government]. It's just... unregulated. Since 2006, the ICT/BPO industry is unregulated. This implies that they no longer need to come and see us, submit a business plan or wait for approval. They just need to set up the company, register its activity and they can start operating...it is so easy... This has been a great incentive for foreign investors. [Interview in French]*

The repercussions impacted on the BOI whose rapid adaptability to this development has proved inadequate in some aspects [Interview in French]:

*However, our job became more difficult: we needed to go and look for some of these small and medium enterprises. Sometimes we discovered new companies in the local press. I can't really tell you right now the exact number of these companies! Well, we do try to remain in contact, obtain some figures from them, but they are not obliged to provide us any information. [BOI officer]*

The Board of Investment witnessed the proliferation of very small companies as well as their vulnerability and short term prospects. As at 2012, the number of companies leaving very rapidly after a trial period in Mauritius was estimated to be below 5% [BOI officer]. The BOI officer also reported that the trial period of new companies has tended to be of only one or two years. Overall, the BOI officer's responses depicted the flexible environment within which BPO companies have been allowed to operate over the past decade. Findings in the following section indicate the government's intentions to accommodate companies further, this time by increasing the level of worker individualisation in the legal employment relationship. I explain this below.

## **6.2 Increasing worker individualisation in Mauritius**

In concomitance with the institutional flexibility that characterises the implantation process of multinational BPO companies, the Mauritian government adjusted its legal framework to contemporary business requirements. In regard to the BPO sector, the government has had to make sure that 'companies spend a bit less, are able to pay low salaries...in other words, they needed some legislative advantages' [BOI officer].

Industrial Relations Expert 1 explained how the need for law amendments resided in the arrangements required in both the BPO sector and other emerging sectors of Mauritius. There are no unions in the BPO sector even if the law does not prohibit union organisation. According to Industrial Relations Expert 1, the Mauritian economy found itself at a critical juncture whereby previous frameworks had become obsolete. The expert explains:

*The ministry at the time had to do it...we needed to be more competitive; the law hadn't been changed since 1975. Some of the clauses prevented the economy to grow... However, decisions were made only after consultation. Unions differed. Already in 2000-2005 we nearly came with some of these propositions, it didn't work out, unions opposed them because they were too 'pro-employer'. This time again, we had to fine-tune the two Acts, especially the Employment Rights Act<sup>11</sup>... [Interview in French]*

Mauritian unions and confederations in general were concerned when the Acts were finally established. A group of unionists expressed their disapproval shortly after the promulgation of the two Acts [Interview in Mauritian Creole]:

*This was like jumping from the frying pan into fire! On 28 February 2009, we protested, we managed to bring 10 000 people on the streets. We organised a second protest in March as risky as this was (...) However, the government listens to our concerns, but makes false promises. [Unionist 1]*

No amendments in favour of the unions' appeal were eventually made.

Among others, unionists and activists who participated in the study were mainly concerned with specific clauses. One major concern lay with the flexible conditions implemented in regard to the termination of employment. In 2012, a local newspaper examined the elements that were triggering unionists' disapproval four years after the Acts had been in force:

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<sup>11</sup> The ERA 2008 was discussed in Chapter 4.

*An employee's contract can be terminated on various grounds, such as economic, technical, structural or similar grounds affecting the enterprise, misconduct and poor performance. Once dismissed, the employee who joins the workfare programme is offered 'benefits' for one-year post-dismissal that is gradually lowered throughout the year....[quoting an anonymous HR manager:] 'the employees are not beneficiaries of these acts. It is easier to fire an employee today than it was before the Employment Rights Acts in 2008'... A simple letter stating that the company is being restructured is enough to have an employee fired. 'Is that normal?'*<sup>12</sup>

However, responses to these concerns typically referred to the workfare programme included in the new legal framework (see chapter 4). The workfare programme was mentioned by both Industrial Relations Experts 1 and 2 as an overriding justification for legitimising the flexible arrangements around dismissals and redundancies. Industrial Relations Expert 2 who is also an adviser at the Mauritius Employers Federation (MEF) explains [Interview in French]:

*I know that unions are going to say that the workfare programme is a good excuse for the employer. Let's say a company shuts down. Well the group of workers made redundant will be supported! Where possible, they are even deployed.*

In 2012, however, another local newspaper reported how the current Minister of Labour and Employment Relations acknowledged that the important number of dismissals recorded since 2009 may be depicting employer abuse of this flexibility.

In a similar vein, the lack of provision in the Acts for some traditional institutional arrangements was noted. The two Industrial Relations experts as well as Unionist 1 pointed to the absence of a remuneration order for the BPO sector and other emerging sectors. Unionist 1 remained highly critical of this failing and explained how some other remuneration orders were regularly amended. On the contrary, the Industrial Relations Experts were less unfavourable [Interview in French]:

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<sup>12</sup> The name of the newspaper and the relevant date of the article are not mentioned here in order to preserve some of my informants' anonymity. The informants concerned were interviewed for this article by the local newspaper.



*Some complain about the absence of a remuneration order for the ICT/BPO sector. It is true that employment legislation should be about protecting the weaker group. However, I believe that in some sectors, if an individual is good and can negotiate [his salary], why should the government interfere? [Industrial Relations Expert 1]*

In addition to the new Acts and institutional particularities, more recent government suggestions regarding the employment legislation concerned the BPO sector. Tendencies towards the individualisation of employment relationship were observed during the study. Further worker individualisation was proposed as a new legal development in May 2012. Exasperated, Unionist 1 explains:

*I am starting to think that we have a minister [of labour] who is clearly a comedian. We always believe in what he says, but then we realise that these are just false hopes. For example, he has recently announced further reforms [May 2012]. But this time, it's going to be catastrophic. This is what is said: '80% of workers are not unionised in Mauritius. It is preferable to remove worker representation by unions...' [Interview in Mauritian Creole]*

In regard to the proposed individualisation process, the *Confédération des Travailleurs du Secteur Privé* (CTSP), deplored the reformulation of several elements of the two 2008 Acts, in the local Press [L'Express Weekly 2012<sup>13</sup>]. Some of these elements concerned amendments that advocate the increasing individualisation of workers through proposed reforms of the Collective Agreement. One of the amendments suggests that 'if employees are not represented by a trade union, they will, 'be authorised' to represent a particular bargaining unit [by themselves] and sign a collective agreement on their behalf' (ibid).

In defence of the proposed reform, Industrial Relations Expert 2 explains that 'ILO conventions 135 and 154 were ratified by the Mauritian government. These state that the term 'workers' representatives' can be defined under national law or practice (C135) while this also determines the enactment of collective bargaining with these

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<sup>13</sup> As at November 2014, the newspaper was no longer available online and therefore is not indicated in the bibliography.

representatives (C154)<sup>14</sup>. Both the proposed reform and the absence of a remuneration order for the BPO sector are justified as an opportunity for workers to negotiate for themselves. However, unionists are concerned by workers' capacities to do so [Interview in Mauritian Creole]:

*He's [The minister] amending the law so that employers can negotiate directly with workers. You tell me, you saw what happened with the Infinity case; do you really think Mauritian workers can negotiate directly with employers?* [Unionist 1]

While referring to employers in general, Unionist 2 similarly expressed:

*Some of these employers finance national elections... do you really think workers will have any power? All is happening with the full connivance of the state!* [Interview in Mauritian Creole]

In the present study, there was no further evidence of any form of employer-government partnerships as described in the quote above. However, several respondents emphasised the path dependent and close public-private partnership that maintains the development of the Mauritian economy as introduced in chapter 3 and discussed in chapter 4.

Workers were typically more concerned with the shift in cultural norms as suggested by the new legislation. Company B was not operating on a shift system, although the possibility of such changes was mentioned in the employee contract 'just in case any changes in work patterns came to be needed' [HR manager, company B]. The HR manager at company B also explained that the company maintained a 24/7 discourse although there were no client requirements for such service provision in 2012. Workers were aware of the possibility to have to work unusual hours. However several workers acknowledged that this factor influenced their choice of applying for work at company B. Company B did not operate during weekend while, as a call centre operation, company A had always operated on a shift system. Workers were therefore directly

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<sup>14</sup> Definitions of ILO conventions C135 and C154, summarised here, can be found on the ILO website at <http://www.ilo.org>.

affected by the 24/7 economy culture underpinned by the 2009 employment legislation [Interview in French]:

*I'm Catholic. On Sundays, I used to go to mass... What am I supposed to do? Oh well, I just know I won't be working here all my life.* [Jane, company A]

The BPO Expert also commented on the topic, as a member of the Employers' association of the ICT/BPO sector:

*I myself work odd hours, I think our company is one of the rare ones that really operates 24/7 non-stop in Mauritius. Sometimes I go back to the office at 10pm to be with the workers. Here you are! That's how it is.* [Interview in French]

Clearly, the adaptation to a set of new cultural norms in Mauritius was due to the demands of newly implemented sectors and required workers' rapid adaptation. However, the fact that workers did not comment much on the level of insecurity with which they are confronted raises further concerns for their rights awareness and level of protection.

### **6.3 Workers' rights protection and awareness**

Government flexibility toward BPO employers was acknowledged by several respondents. The BPO Expert as well as one educationist confirmed the persistence of a strong public-private partnership in the Mauritian economy. The BPO sector is equally illustrative of this institutionalised phenomenon that has been fundamental to economic development since decolonisation. The BPO Expert, also a member of the sector's employers' association, noted the sustainable support granted to employers at various levels. At times, this may include overcoming potential risks of breaching ILO recommendations:

*I had a chat with him [Current Minister of Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment]. I went to see him and explained that the condition that every three working nights are to be followed by a day off was too much...I told him: you are going*

*to kill the sector! Initially he hesitated due to ILO recommendations. However, he finally accepted to compromise. Per ILO's recommendations, no one should do more than 3 nights without a day off, I said five, we finally agreed on 4. I'll fight again for 5 nights... However, they'll definitely add a useful phrase to the clause: 'subject to internal agreement between employer and employee.' He [minister] said, right, I give you 4, but I leave the door open! [Interview in French]*

In the same vein, respondents, mainly experts, were critical of government's support towards Infinity Ltd, the BPO Company responsible for the 2011 major industrial disputes (see Chapter 4). While supporting the current government's decision in this respect, Industrial Relations Expert 1 acknowledged:

*When Infinity came to Mauritius, it seemed that employees were more or less happy. Salaries were good; we didn't think things would go that bad. The company was flourishing! The employer<sup>15</sup> was the Golden Boy of Mauritius! ...However, we had to open our eyes... he had benefited from the government's Additional Stimulus Package<sup>16</sup>.... He had debts... I would say we had not been vigilant enough...we should have considered some of the indicators. [Interview in French]*

The Infinity case also touched on the degree of job security in the sector. Workers in both companies A and B did not extend their comments on the topic. The majority mentioned having no major feeling of job insecurity. In addition, managers of both companies explained that in the advent of loss of clients, workers were usually deployed in other teams, when possible. To a certain extent, employment if not job security was preserved. In 2012, however, the repatriation of French-owned companies to France was recommended by the newly elected French government. As a result, a potential lack of workers' awareness and understanding of the context in which they operate is suspected.

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<sup>15</sup> Based on a description provided in the press, the person in question was born in Mauritius and has settled in France prior to retuning to Mauritius and setting up Infinity Ltd which he co-owns with a French expatriate.

<sup>16</sup> The Additional Stimulus Package involves a range of measures announced by the Mauritius government in December 2008. These measures have been designed to support the private sector and help maintain the investment rate within the Mauritian economy (Makoond 2009).

Trade unionists and activists are for their part concerned with workers' rights protection. Their concerns are three-fold. They note how the employment legislation is disproportionately favourable to employers, they doubt workers' skills and confidence to negotiate for their own grievances and they finally question the level of rights awareness among young workers. Activist 1, for example, experienced the Infinity hunger strike with concerned workers:

*I went there, we stayed with them, then members of our political movement discussed aspects of the legislation with them...some were pregnant...they had remained silent for three months...The current minister of Labour made a deal with the strikers, he said he was going to pay, you probably know that the Infinity employer knows the Prime Minister well...I am not even sure if they [workers] finally got their money...but we had no power to pursue the strike when they decided to stop...Even the Press encouraged the strike, but Infinity workers said it was enough...[Interview in Mauritian Creole]*

In both companies A and B, managers confirmed that workers were ill-informed about their rights and in most cases 'did not care much' [Platform manager 1, Company A]. Most workers indicated how they signed their contract very quickly and without any careful reading of the conditions. When workers were asked to comment on their knowledge of their rights and content of their employment contracts, responses varied but converged towards highlighting workers' lack of rights awareness. In both companies, responses such as 'I just signed the contract quickly' and 'nothing, I don't know anything about my rights, they change all the time anyway!' were typical among workers. Activist 1 had a similar experience before becoming an activist. He resorts to his personal example to illustrate the phenomenon:

*From what I understood, many young people do not know their rights, nothing! And given the salary offered in industries like BPO, they close their eyes upon malpractices and agree... I worked in a BPO myself, I didn't even know how much my basic salary was, and I didn't have any other details. Perhaps they were stealing my money, I will never know... [Interview in Mauritian Creole]*

While workers had heard of the term *syndicat*<sup>17</sup>, a significant number of workers did not understand the implications and purpose of trade unions. One worker at company B, however, was more informed but expressed his pessimism [Interview in French]:

*Here it is too small to have a union. Out of a 100 individuals, 75 will tell you, 'I like it here, I love my job'. How can you have a union in such conditions? You need the mass. If you decide to act with a group of 15, they'll just sack us. Apparently we can be easily replaced. Many degree holders are jobless and will accept a job for Rs10 000 [£250 per month].*

Similarly, the lack of young workers' awareness of unionism was reported by several experts. Activist 2 recounted how two former BPO workers, now activists in his political movement, attempted to form unions in their respective workplaces. Their attempts were unsuccessful with one of them having faced what Activist 2 called a *coup d'état*. While the worker was on leave, the employer strategized against his initiative and received support from other workers without difficulty.

However, concerns do not lie with unionism per se. Trade unionists, activists and a few workers deplore a general lack of consciousness among the young workforce regarding rights and negotiation which would have been favourable to their capacity to ensure well-being at work. Several explanations for workers' lack of involvement in labour organisation were provided by unionists and activists. Activist 2 notes how the absence of past opportunities or needs to mobilise, a typical phenomenon in emerging sectors, is a plausible source of the problem. In comparison, he explains how unionism persists and is always transmitted to new employees in more traditional sectors in Mauritius. In other words, despite a generally low level of awareness and culture of labour organisation in Mauritius, unionism and negotiation with employers do exist and endure in some traditional sectors. As Activist 2 summarises:

*...Yes, yes, as soon as you start work there [traditional industries], either they punch you [laughs] or whatever... in any case; you will be brought to join it [the union] regardless of your education. You have a blend of the previous experience and fresh*

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<sup>17</sup> It stands for 'trade union' in French and also in Mauritian Creole.

*dynamism in the struggle. This is not a Mauritian phenomenon...* [Interview in Mauritian Creole]

However, other respondents commonly pointed to further rationales. While identified as a generational phenomenon, experts' concern unanimously lies with workers' monolithic focus on their financial gains. Attempts by Mauritian individuals to imitate Western lifestyles and consumption patterns have crippled their interest in ideology and moral values [Educationist 1]. In both Companies A and B, most managers confirmed that if ever workers complain, 'it's always about their salaries'. Illustratively, it was reported that while their knowledge of employment relationship and rights was limited, 'they all know their overtime rates!' [HR manager, company B].

The erosion of political concern among young generations was frequently deplored as another issue that affects work and spheres beyond work. The rationale for such concerns came from respondents of older generations who had known the immediate post-independence period. Trade unionist 3 implicitly expressed his nostalgia and pessimism through his negative attitude towards the study. Interview questions were not answered as expected and the unionist expressed his scepticism regarding the usefulness of my study for the Mauritian context. Activist 3, also a journalist provided more clarifications:

*There was no internet at the time, you were just thirsty for knowledge, you'd read more, it was a leisure! (...)We wanted to develop our capacity to understand... Today the young population call for change for the Mauritian society but they do not understand how it works, they do not understand which ideology is currently dominating the island. At the time we were creating a political culture and consciousness that they [young citizens] do not have today.* [Interview in French]

While Activist 2 explained that BPO is currently called the new *zone franche* (EPZ) of Mauritius, Activist 3 added:

*To me female workers' experience in the EPZ in the 70s is not the same as that of call centre workers. These call centre workers do not see what is going on; they just think all is great.*

However, at company A, Jane explains that her part-time studies in Law and Management at the University of Mauritius help her reflect upon her work situation. She believed that she was able to be critical of the working conditions because of what she has learned through Higher Education so far:

*I have many examples... let's take the salary, it's not enough, but many of my colleagues are unaware of this...I have my opinions about our team leaders [supervisors] here...also about how they negotiate with us for our shifts. I also know that we could have more team building activities, I've asked for them, but I know we won't get anything, it's a 24/7 system... [Interview in French]*

The majority of workers at company A were school leavers at the time of their recruitment. Responses such as Jane's were scarce at company A. Most unionists and activists reported how young workers generally come to seek support from local confederations and movements 'only after they've had an issue at work.' In this respect, Unionist 1 claims that 'it is time for [young workers] to organise by themselves.'

The same unionists and activists reported recent initiatives to increase young individuals' skills and confidence to understand and negotiate for their grievances. Their efforts entailed giving 'power to' individuals and increasing their capacities to act for their own causes as suggested by Lévesque and Murray (2010: 335). Unionist 1 explained how she is involved in providing training sessions to young workers in underprivileged regions. Similarly, Activists 1 and 2 mentioned the free courses provided to workers by their political movement. However, Activist 1 noted the small number of young workers attending these courses. Most workers are 'from the public sector, where unionists are already active and are not young' [Activist 1]. Activist 3 also commented on the age groups that are more receptive to such initiatives. According to this respondent, the problem is 'definitely one of a generational gap':

*At the time [1970s], political culture and critical thinking developed because we were the ones who knew the real neo-colonial Mauritius. When it comes to the development of civic competencies, however, there was no continuity afterwards. Some young people engage into struggles today, but they don't understand the actual*



*phenomenon. If we try to help them [potential young activists] develop now, it will only look paternalistic...* [Interview in Mauritian Creole]

Despite much pessimism, unionists and activists typically called for a drastic change in Mauritian mentality. Sharing this opinion, Activist 4 also explained his recent initiative:

*I am an activist but my approach is not to go in the streets...By working for NGOs, I encountered politics. I think there are many things that need to change in Mauritius; a massive mentality shift is needed! In 2010, we organised a workshop to create awareness of different values, but then you realise that a week after, all is forgotten. We need to change individuals. I call what we do 'social leadership.' The main idea though was to help individuals develop their capacity to think by themselves, to reflect, to develop their critical thinking and their capacity to take initiatives to change things...* [Interview in French]

According to Activist 4, the Mauritian context has not allowed such cultural-cognitive development for its citizens [Interview in French]:

*Here there is no critical thinking, you come out of University, you go back home in your mum's skirts, you're a baby again. There are no campuses...*<sup>18</sup>

In 2012, Activist 4's objective was to train approximately 800 young individuals, including mainly university graduates. The mind-set change concerns both work and citizenship aspects. Also a business entrepreneur, Activist 4 deplored graduates' attitude to work. In regard to the development of civic competencies, his objective is to help Mauritian individuals vote more carefully in 2015 general elections. Activist 4 explained that he combines his business entrepreneurial skills and concern for society in his intervention with young individuals. Finally, he summarises:

*We want to create political consciousness in Mauritius.* [Interview in French]

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<sup>18</sup> This has evolved slightly. However, the respondent tries to say that Mauritius is not there yet where they can rebuild the world through exchanges. Mauritians end up being frustrated and disappointed..

Recently, however, Activist 4 was less optimistic as he was formally informed of the government disapproval of his initiative. Activist 3, for his part, summarised the challenge to overcome both by calling into question the role of the Mauritian government and by pointing to young citizens' level of awareness:

*We are in a social democratic society, the state needs to play a more fundamental role. To date our civil society is weak, trade unionism as well, workers do not organise as much, collective bargaining is dead (...) the state gives everything to the private sector.... All economic decisions have social implications, and the young generation is missing the point!* [Interview in French]

Concerns about the Mauritian mentality were also expressed at the companies although not in regard to workers' rights awareness. Clearly, this lack of awareness appears to have contributed to the level of flexibility beneficial to employers who operate in the Mauritian BPO sector and are able to exploit the phenomenon as an institutional advantage. In both companies A and B, however, several managers and workers commented on tensions experienced at organisational level due to workers' social and soft skills or lack thereof. This point is taken up below.

## ***6.4 Non-technical skills and professionalism***

As discussed in chapter 2, an increasing employer concern at recruitment time pertains to the level of candidates' non-technical or soft skills. Earlier, such skills were identified as a broader range of skills than mere technical capacities. Non-technical skills which are more related to workers' personal abilities, and more transferable skills such as critical thinking, initiative and professionalism, have also been defined as additional skills that make a technically-apt worker more employable. In chapter 2, such skills have been discussed as personal skills that prove to be essentially valuable for the employer in contemporary work settings.

In chapter 2, I also discussed the extent to which professionalism has come to be redefined in contemporary conditions and to be distanced from the traditional notions it

used to assume. The concept of professionalism in its contemporary sense has come to be described as work ethic and a form of behaviour which employers judge acceptable and valuable within the organisational context. The deployment of professionalism as a discourse by employers and managers has also been called into question for being utilised as a control mechanism over individual workers (Fournier 1999, see also Evetts 2011). Findings reported in this section depict how the different sets of non-technical skills, which workers are expected to possess or develop once they have been selected, are considered as the level of professionalism expected of workers by employers in both companies. Findings indicate the challenges that employers encounter in fulfilling such expectations as well as the resulting frustrations experienced by workers. This section reports the challenges experienced by workers in relation to the level of non-technical skills and ‘professionalism’ expected of them.

Both companies A and B claim to encounter various challenges due to Mauritian workers’ behaviour and attitude at work. In addition to the tensions these may effect on a daily basis, another challenge for company A has pertained to the prejudice held about Mauritius by French colleagues based in Paris. At company A, there is a steady requirement to convince the French headquarters about the viability of Mauritius as a BPO destination [Interview in French]:

*For Paris [French partners], Mauritius is a bit... ‘Sun, Sand and Sea’... People do nothing, hang around, dipping their feet in the sea, heads in the clouds. It is not a serious destination for business. [HR manager, company A]*

However, Mauritius remains a strategic destination given its geographical position. Company A’s partners benefit from being present in a region with opportunities other than those in the Global North. As the HR manager observes [Interview in French]:

*Mauritius is a business platform for Africa and Asia. I think that settling in Mauritius makes sense for a long term strategy.*

Both companies A and B have expressed their eagerness for the sustainable development of their organisations in Mauritius. Among other reasons, Mauritian workers are considered manageable in the sense that they do not challenge employers

on legal matters. At company B, the comparison was drawn with the French context. As such, the native French CEO commented:

*I would not call them [Mauritian workers] docile; that would be pointlessly pejorative. However, it is clear that in France, we protest more. Then again, I can't see why this would happen in this sector, we're not competing locally but globally. This is mentioned several times: either the job is done by us or in South-East Asia that is in India, Vietnam, and China, or eventually in Latin America. [Interview in French]*

However, both workers and managers reported cross-cultural tensions within the two companies. Initially, the differences identified were not expected for instance by the French CEO at company B. The CEO's surprise on various cultural aspects indicates that the degree of cultural proximity expected between Mauritius and France was higher than experienced. As a result, misunderstandings arise at company B due to distinct practices and norms. For instance, the CEO observes [Interview in French]:

*We have a more abrupt way of managing in France, we're more direct, we are less polite, we say things as they are [laughs]... so, here we need to be more careful... in France, it does not have to be in regard to specific claims, it's about work organisation, in general things are said frankly, here it's different... [CEO, company B].*

Other cultural aspects weigh upon discipline at work. Several respondents have commented on the excessive influence of parents in the individual life of young workers. Consequences lie mostly with workers' failure to comply with the expected work ethic in both BPO companies. As a foreign employer on site, the CEO at company B comments [Interview in French]:

*There is some sort of weight that is...quite surprising. We feel that particularly in Mauritius, the family and close relatives weigh on individuals' lives. Too much, to my opinion... We have lost some good resources [workers] due to this... They worked well and enjoyed working here, but left the company due to family pressure. For many families in Mauritius, a successful career can only be achieved by working as civil servants. For us, business entrepreneurs, it is definitely not what I would call social success [sarcastic tone and laughs].*

Though local, the HR manager at company A shared similar observations. Excessive parental influence is said to impact upon the company's turnover and absenteeism rates. For instance, the HR manager explains:

*People think that in all call centres they can come and go whenever they want. If I don't like it, I go, I don't give any notice...this is also an issue with people in their first jobs. If it doesn't work for me, I can still go back to daddy's...and if it is your birthday today, your parents will say, 'stay! You haven't taken any sick leave so far.'... The reality is that here we have many projects where we are paid per call. If people do not pick up, we lose money...such mentalities disrupt the company...[Interview in French]*

Based upon her recent empirical research, Educationist 1 claims this phenomenon to be generalizable. A study conducted with adult women about young workers' work culture reveals the following [Interview in English]:

*The vocabulary surprised us. Women were talking about their 'children' having to be home at a certain time. They were talking about 26-27 year-olds. These workers may be adults but not in the mind-set of their families here [Mauritius]. It's across all ethnic groups in Mauritius [Educationist 1].*

Managers were mainly concerned with the consequences of this cultural factor upon discipline at work. An HR officer at company A explained that Mauritian parents' influence did not make responsible adults. As a common reference, comparisons were frequently drawn with European countries. Given the local HR manager at company A studied in Europe, he commented:

*You [addressed to the researcher] live in Europe; you must know it as much as I do... It's another mind-set, to me the best mind-set. If European countries are industrial countries and us from the third world, it is due to such differences! There might be other factors, but above all, mentality is a major one... How come Singapore became so successful? It's discipline! It's awareness creation, perhaps brainwashing, it's a school! [Interview in French]*

Further failings were reported by managers and at times equally by workers. Major issues were mainly noted at company A. One HR officer claims to have handled issues around broken toilets and human faeces placed on top of toilets out of worker frustration and revenge. Other issues concerned theft as well as alcohol and marijuana consumption at work. However, workers at company A had to be reprimanded for holding hands with their lovers in the office. At company B, workers' were disciplined within the perimeters of the open-plan office through a silence policy and limited conversations among workers. Some of these issues were also attributed to workers' age [Interview in French]:

*It's the first time they are confronted with authority other than that of their parents. They don't like it! ...it's like being in a big school yard!* [HR manager, company A]

Convergence between the two companies was noted on other aspects. Absenteeism, workers' punctuality and dress code were common issues. According to several managers in both companies, absenteeism from work is a cultural phenomenon in Mauritius. It is argued to be a legacy of the work culture developed in the local public administration that is transferred across generations. One platform manager at Company A explained [Interview in French]:

*...it is definitely cultural! I can say this based on my own case. My dad often tells me to take a sick leave. I tend to think differently, but I know it's been successfully passed to my brother [laughs]...and this is a problem here [in Mauritius].*

In regard to dress code requirements, workers' resistance was reported both by managers and co-workers. In both companies A and B, workers who are critical of their co-workers' behaviour typically reported having experienced living in European countries. Having adopted new cultural norms, they were able to provide much detail on the initial gap between Mauritian workers and foreign employers. In regard to the dress code, one worker who had lived in the UK explained [Interview in English]:

*I was overdressed for this place...this is how I thought I had to be dressed...we're in an office. They all looked at me like I was weird...I dressed down after that [Hash, company A].*

Similarly, a worker at company B deplored his co-workers' 'lack of professionalism' on further aspects. Having lived in France, he was critical of his co-workers' behaviour [Interview in French]:

*I don't know what is wrong with them here! I am in the health and safety committee at company B. People do not respect the facilities. We're adults, and we had to take pictures to have evidence of how they treat the toilets!! Work experience, academic background, pffft, these are not enough... we will never be able to put everyone on the same level... it is time for them to understand that they need to start adopting a 'professional attitude'!* [John, company B]

The term, 'professionalism' was commonly used by both employers and workers to discuss the level of work ethic and the right attitude to have at work, which were at times hindered by socio-cultural characteristics. Several managers and workers in both companies also employed the term to describe their work environment. While major cases of misconduct were mainly reported at company A, the company was depicted as a professional environment, 'more professional than other basic call centres' [Platform manager 2, company A]. Some cases of misconduct were not expected by employers and managers at Companies A and B. Grégoire (2011: 151) also notes that such lack of *conscience professionnelle* (professional consciousness) is equally deplored by other Mauritian call centre employers. Yet, both managers' and workers' attempts to professionalise their BPO workplace were observed in companies in A and B.

However, the CEO at company B emphasised the clear distinction between Mauritian voice operations and other BPO companies at this level. According to the CEO, the workers recruited at company B 'were not of the same type as call centre workers'. The CEO advocated the need for a clearer delineation between distinct BPO activities under the same sector. Call centre operations have assumed a harmful reputation although improvements are noted at this level [CEO, company B]. The overarching use of the 'knowledge economy' in the government's discourse may have limited efforts towards affording a clear definition of each BPO job category. It fails to capture the heterogeneity of the sector per se and of so-called knowledge work in Mauritius (Thompson et al. 2001). For instance, incidents reported at company B were

equally of technical and cultural order. In this case, the loss of a client following a ‘major figure error’ caused by a worker’s lack of attention during calculations was evoked. The staff member involved was dismissed immediately. Such incidents were not reported in company A.

Nevertheless, cultural clashes were strongly noted in both companies. At company A, a team leader explained [Interview in French]:

*Here, I have learned to be ‘schizophrenic’. I am double-faced. Not with clients, they are fine; it’s fun at the beginning when you learn how to put on their accent. It is more in the work place that I am double-faced.* [Mary, company A]

At Company B, clashes were also present among co-workers. With much cynicism, Kate expressed her resentment towards her colleagues’ attempts to ‘turn French’:

*...it is a Mauritian company [cynical smile]...here you are... you are in Mauritius... except that... [laughs-mocking], well, what is weird and what is very ‘Mauritian’ is that they all try to, well.... They all try to be French... given the CEO is French, they all pretend we’re abroad here. The girls are always well dressed, you feel like they watch what you wear, and you feel like you always have to do more to be up to that standard...* [Interview in French]

In addition, Kate reported that Mauritian Creole, the dialect, was not allowed in the open-plan office, also called ‘platform’, at company B. The same request was less explicitly made at company A. One worker at company A reported how short refresher courses are provided in the case workers are found to have ‘misbehaved, eaten on platforms or spoken Creole.’

At company B, resistance to adapt to both French cultural norms and contemporary work practices was mainly observed with workers having more distinct personalities. The co-habitation of the two nationalities at work blurs the distinction between work expectations and cultural expectations. While Mauritian workers’ adaptability to French cultural norms had been taken for granted, workers claim to be confused [Interview in French]:



*We all received an email about the dress code [smiles]...well, yeah we have to behave, but you also need to understand why you are asked to do this or that... I have always been against their system... they said to me 'you are technically good, but you lack soft skills'. I said: soft skills? This is what YOU think, for me 'soft skills' are more than greeting, dress properly, that's what it is for them... Sorry... But this is what I call boot-licking; they just want me to be 'soft!' [Playing on words]... [Bob, company B]*

While one informant at company A mentioned that the company is more favourable to having workers who can be 'easily formatted', managers and supervisors at company B were critical of workers' lack of initiative and creativity. In contradiction, another operations manager at company B claims to want to provide more autonomy to workers. This proves challenging because workers 'demand formatting' [Operations manager 1, company B] When BPO workers are moved to more value-added operations, operations manager 2 claimed to face workers' lack of adequate soft skills to operate independently in such work environment:

*It is not necessarily because our clients are foreigners. We have a young team. As soon as you move them to a value-added activity, it is a problem. For instance, here it is business support. It's been six months now, and those who've been moved here from BPO operations still compare what we do with BPO. They have not grasped the fact that the two activities are different. In the BPO operations, you have a Customer Account Manager, a supervisor and a BPO worker. The worker does not make any decision, the supervisor does not make many decisions either they always seek their managers' approval... So here they want to be formatted. They are not flexible! That's exactly what I said! [Interview in French]*

Paradoxically, the technical incident reported above was attributed to 'too much delegation and insufficient control' [HR manager, company B].

Operations manager 1 also explains how workers frequently 'go through someone else who can express himself/herself better.' Their incapacity to express themselves openly was also reported. The same observation was made by Joe, a worker at company B who noted how workers, try to find alternative ways to overcome their

individualisation in employment relationship to communicate their grievances. According to John, they do so by identifying a worker who appears to be more expressive than they are and who shows potential for voicing out their concerns. Instead of working developing solidarity and collective action as such, their strategy is to devolve the task of voicing out concerns on their co-workers. The phenomenon concerns school leavers and graduates alike. Once again, this incapacity is said to be a cultural trait. As operations manager 1 explains:

*Mauritian individuals tend to find it hard to express themselves openly. They complain behind you...but in front of you, they'd say: all is well! They are two-faced...*  
[Interview in French]

In addition, operations manager 2 observed [Interview in French]:

*...and they are very individualistic! They do not see the collective objectives...*

In both companies-though it was more visible in company B-both tensions and contradictions exist at organisational level. Workers like Kate and Bob reported having to face contradictions in employers' expectations. One manager explained how workers who attempt to voice their concerns 'are stopped early to prevent the initiative from spreading' [Operations manager 2, company B]. Similarly, Kate, who tended to voice out when challenged, recounts her manager's negative reaction to such initiative during her performance appraisal. In 2012, Kate planned to leave the company and appeared highly frustrated.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

Findings reported in this chapter point to the challenges and risks which workers face by operating in the BPO sector of Mauritius. It is clear that the Mauritian government has a pro-employer agenda which it intends to maintain as an economic development strategy. Findings demonstrate how BPO workers are automatically at risk due to the flexible institutional context within which they are brought to operate. In addition, workers' underdeveloped rights awareness and the cross-cultural tensions

reported in this chapter, indicate further challenges and risks for workers and their employment. The chapter demonstrates how the Mauritian post-colonial culture, both politically- and socially-speaking, is not necessarily favourable to the development of workers' agency at work today.

Furthermore, cross-cultural tensions identified in both companies A and B indicate that there may have been an over reliance on colonial legacies to determine workers' capacities to fulfil job requirements set by the two companies. It appears that the sector requires workers to possess sets of skills which may not have been required in other labour-intensive sectors that emerged from the government's typical economic diversification strategy in the past. Skill capacities discussed in this chapter pertain more to transferable or soft skills. Professionalism at work is measured in relation to the extent to which workers have adjusted to the companies' expectations and culture. Employers' surprise about these tensions indicates that these had not been anticipated. In the next chapter, I report further challenges experienced by companies A and B in the management of their human resources and in regard to workers' skill levels. Findings in chapter 7 also indicate the specific challenges facing national Education and Training (E&T) institutions in Mauritius.

## **CHAPTER 7 FINDINGS II: Challenges for Education and Training Institutions**

In chapter 7, I report my findings regarding contemporary challenges that have emerged for the Education and Training institutions in Mauritius. While I report respondents' concern for workers' education and issues in regard to further skills than those discussed in chapter 6, findings in this chapter also identify the measures-or lack thereof- taken to remedy identified skill inadequacies. I first report some of the main HRM challenges which the two companies claim to face. Challenges at recruitment and selection level were more prevalent at company B, given the nature of the business activity. Company B reported the difficulty to find an adequate number of employable candidates with the appropriate skills expected by employers. Companies A and B encountered similar difficulties regarding employee turnover and retention.

I then report issues identified in technical training delivery as well as linguistic and soft skill development. Respondents note how the delivery of technical training proves more challenging at company B due to workers' skill levels. Issues with regard to workers' linguistic proficiency are also more predominant at company B, given the language criterion is taken for granted at recruitment time. It is observed that only few potential candidates have the linguistic proficiency company B had expected when it settled in Mauritius. Finally, both companies have expressed their concerns for workers' inadequate transferable skills. In addition to the elements reported in chapter 6, responses reported here concern transferable, soft skills which are more likely to facilitate technical training delivery. Despite these significant concerns, the absence of training provision, and therefore of workers' development opportunities for such skills are identified.

Overall chapter 7 addresses more specifically the aim of this study to examine the extent to which E&T institutions have adjusted to contemporary pressures on the Mauritian economy and society. As such, educationists' and experts' responses help reflect on Mauritian E&T institutions which they contextualise both in relation to the country's history and to contemporary global trends. The last section of the chapter draws upon respondents' concerns regarding Mauritian Education and Training institutions. Findings point to the Mauritian government's lack of anticipation

concerning the issues that have emerged in the sector. As the role of the government is once again called into question, respondents reflect upon the young labour market's compulsory and post-compulsory education.

## **7.1 Companies' perspectives: HRM challenges**

### **7.1.1 Recruitment and Selection**

In line with Grégoire's (2011) observations of the BPO sector in Mauritius (see chapter 4), distinct recruitment criteria are prioritised within companies A and B. As a voice operation, company A seeks to recruit mainly young school leavers. Given the nature of the activity, little importance is afforded to qualifications. Various recruits at company A claim to have been recruited despite being only in possession of a School Certificate. The requirements mainly involve their capacity to 'speak very good French, [to be] extrovert and open, dynamic especially on the phone' [Platform manager 2, Company A].

Company B managers reported a particular focus on qualifications. According to the company's CEO, only graduates were recruited in the early stages. In 2012, the company also aimed to recruit more Higher School Certificate and university degree holders. The HR manager explains the importance afforded to qualifications:

*... we recruit independently of the profile, I mean by that of the academic disciplines, Mathematics, Agriculture, Biology, etc... well regarding the job itself, they will have to learn the techniques. However, we recruit them hoping to benefit from their analytical skills, for example that they can give their opinion on our software...* [Interview in French]

In addition to university qualifications, new criteria had been established:

*We aim to recruit individuals who theoretically are able to sit behind a screen with a high level of concentration. Not necessarily people who are too talkative, well... they won't spend their lives being dumb either, we hope they can participate in meetings and*

*share their opinion about the software, we need people who can express themselves to a minimum at least.* [HR manager, company B]

Company B claims to carefully assess potential candidates' employability in accordance to both qualifications and non-technical skills. However, the search for candidates with the 'right' attitude is intentional and is emphasised at recruitment and selection level as suggested in previous studies (for instance, Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Warhurst and Nickson 2007). At company A, requirements for technical and non-technical skills tend to overlap. While knowledge of basic software is required at company A, technical skills required can be considered non-technical or 'soft' in other occupations. In other words, call centre requirements at company A inherently involve more social skills and personal characteristics. Managers and HR officers at company A did not report difficulties in obtaining job applications from potential candidates. For company B, however, recruitment of potential workers proved more challenging.

First, the challenge was depicted as a labour shortage issue in Mauritius. The labour market was considered too limited in size especially when compared to that of India [CEO, company B]. In a similar comparison, Educationist 2, explains how the absence of a 'critical mass' prevents Mauritius from being a BPO Centre of Excellence in the sub-Saharan region. At company B, recruitment presents specific difficulties for the HR department [Interview in French]:

*Recently, we recruited 11 people. For 11 people, we had 400 CVs...in order to do our group interviews, we scrutinised everything, and it's like recruiting candidates for the NASA! Previously, we had profiles that were completely unsuitable; some of the skills we aimed for were inadequate. Well, we changed the process, but still, it's desperate... before I find a good CV, I spend an enormous amount of time, this is to recruit BPO workers! I don't know if other companies spend as much time as I do. Say 1 out of 12 CV will be fine, it's tough...* [HR manager, company B]

The problem assumes a more qualitative than quantitative character. In an attempt to prevent the emergence of further issues after recruitment, both companies A and B ensure that recruits are closely supervised or 'coached' by a co-worker. At company B, the HR manager claims that this facilitates their functional integration or acculturation

as argued by Casey (2011). Simultaneously, the exercise empowers experienced workers by giving them an opportunity to provide coaching [HR manager, company B]. The HR manager at company B advocates the benefits of this process of acculturation:

*We do not ill-treat them! We do not let them loose like in the early days when there was no structure!*

Despite such efforts, the capacity of companies to retain workers is reported to be problematic. As discussed below, both companies reported turnover as one of their major HRM challenges.

### **7.1.2 Retention and Turnover**

Turnover has been identified as a challenge that is typically encountered in BPO companies across the world (see Chapter 4). Managers at companies A and B suggest that the phenomenon lies in workers' lack of reference from past experience. Workers' age is also considered an issue for their commitment. At company A, where starting salaries do not vary among workers, remuneration was reported to be one of the factors responsible for turnover:

*Turnover is an issue, but our CEO and for all of us, we know it's a question of money. He already knows how it works: either you pay individuals Rs8000 [approximately £200] per month and deal with turnover or you pay them more. However, this is the amount of money allocated by the company to do what we have to do.* [HR manager, Company A]

The turnover issue has further consequences. Held accountable for the turnover rate at company A, the HR manager describes the dilemma he is to face vis-à-vis the parent company in Paris [Interview in French]:

*Yes...but we are a subsidiary of Parent company A. Well, we tell them, 'don't worry, and send us more business '. But when we tell them that this turnover rate is normal for*

*a call centre operation, their answer is: 'you are not a call centre; you are Company A' [the whole corporation].*

The HR manager, also general secretary for the Mauritian subsidiary, insisted on the challenge posed by various inconsistencies between parent company expectations and the subsidiary's context. The Parent company, he explains, 'expect global company A standards in terms of profit and statistics' but '[does] not want to deal with having to understand what [we] really do'. As a result, the subsidiary is 'not supposed to have a call centre mentality!' [HR manager, company A]

At company B, high turnover is said to stem from failings at recruitment level. According to the HR manager, high turnover was attributed to the recruitment of inappropriate candidates in the past:

*We no longer recruit individuals who have studied accounting. They leave us! We recruited an enormous amount of accountants but they eventually leave us. We knew that what we are doing is revenue accounting and not accounting. On the very first day and as soon as you work on the software you know it's not accounting... and also some left due to the salary. Finally, many ACCA<sup>19</sup> distance learners have left us... ACCA candidates, we definitely do not take them anymore. [Interview in French]*

Both companies' misjudgements and candidates' inadequate career guidance were noted. In addition, the HR manager shared her observations regarding some aspects of Mauritian education systems:

*For those doing ACCA, it depends... anyway ACCA in Mauritius is a fad. You're done with your Higher School Certificate, you have nothing to do, and you get onto an ACCA course. When you talk to them, you can see that they are doing it instead of doing nothing: that's how it works... [Interview in French]*

In regard to retention, Company B had a clearer retention policy. Once again, this was attributed to the nature of its operations. At company A, occasional mass

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<sup>19</sup> The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants certificate (also mentioned in Chapter 4).



redundancies have been reported. However, company A workers also explained how in the case of the loss of clients, workers are ‘moved across projects’ when possible. Although job security was not always guaranteed, there was more guarantee of employment security (see also chapter 6). One trainer explained how the company was attentive to experienced workers’ needs and rewarded their commitment with a chance to grow within company A.

At company B, the HR manager elaborated on the established retention policy:

*We have to... Together with the HR officer, we have established the goal of fulfilling a ‘retention strategy’ [term expressed in English]. Previously, when people were not good, we’d still keep them and take it as something we have to live with. I come from an organisational culture where we do not dismiss employees. But I was working for a large organisation, it was easier to put people ‘in the closet’, here, it’s not the case. This is why we now put more emphasis on the probation period, which is of 6 months. I ask for a report. If any little thing is not right, they are out from the beginning, I mean by that, bad performance, bad attitude. Experience showed us that it never improves.*  
[Interview in French]

For fear of losing ‘good’ workers, company B engages into negotiations with the individual worker on salary increase possibilities. The lack of talented workers has led to the choice of implementing strong recruitment and retention processes as often echoed in the literature (for instance, Robinson 2011: 71). This also appears to be a recurrent challenge in the BPO sector of Mauritius. Grégoire (2011: 148) notes how between 2003 and 2006, companies including call centre operations had to offer high salary bids in order to obtain candidates who would qualify best for the jobs in question. However, such initiatives were not observed at company A.

Retention in both companies also implied the logical progression of workers to supervisory or line management roles. Only a few experienced workers had not been promoted to higher positions. At company A, line managers are platform managers and are responsible for several projects per platform. Platforms are more or less physically delimited by the office floors. Supervisors are former workers and are called team leaders. At company B, BPO supervisors were also former workers in all cases and line

managers are called customer account managers. A chief operations manager [Operations manager 2, Company B] is responsible for the BPO operations. The software development section at company B has its own operations manager [Operations manager 1, Company B]. Both operations managers joined company B in its first stages. Line managers' performance will be discussed later in regard to non-technical skills.

In general, however, managers were critical of their workers' technical and non-technical performance. More informally, the CEO at company B explained that typical Mauritian workers who were recruited in BPO companies did not demonstrate their capacity to operate in a more value-added BPO environment. This echo with comments noted from other native French CEOs encountered during the pilot stage of the study. At company B, the CEO was concerned with the implications of the lack of competent workers both in terms of quantity and quality in the medium and long runs. Arguably, this implies risks for workers in terms of employment security as discussed in chapter 6. After workers are retained, further issues are encountered in terms of both workers' and line managers' education, linguistic proficiencies and other training-related aspects. These are discussed below.

## ***7.2 In-company Training***

### **7.2.1 Technical training delivery**

The views above indicate companies' efforts to recruit and retain candidates who possess specific sets of both technical and non-technical skills. However, the traditional approach of putting more emphasis upon technical needs persisted in both companies. At company A, several young trainers are responsible for delivering in-house technical training. Sessions on telemarketing and respective clients' products are a major part of company A's induction processes. Similarly, a lead trainer at company B delivers in-house technical training during the induction phase. The induction course at company B focuses on the manipulation of company B's software and on workers' technical role. Refresher courses are at times provided and are occasionally requested by workers

[Operations manager 2, company B]. Such courses are delivered on a highly irregular basis and are then provided on the job, by managers and supervisors themselves.

Trainers in both companies are mainly concerned with technical skill development during workers' early stages. At company A, this was observed during training delivered by one Francophone trainer and a simulated training session delivered to me by an Anglophone trainer. The training sessions were devoid of interaction between trainers and workers. It was noted that workers were expected to mechanically absorb a large amount of information in their early stages, hence confirming the trainer's comment in regard to the 'formatting' of new recruits (See Chapter 6). In line with call centre operation requirements, customer care competencies were the main technical skills developed at company A. As such, the promotion of some workers to a Quality Assurance officer role ensures that scripts are followed closely by workers and that Mauritian accents are neutralised.

Given training provision was more clearly delimited at company B, the HR manager explained:

*The lead trainer is responsible for the technical. I take care of the 'soft' side. I view my role more as a guide than anything else...*[Interview in French]

However, issues during refresher courses delivered by supervisors and line managers were reported. The HR manager at company B was concerned with line managers' insufficient presentation skills. Her concern pertained mainly to the problems that could arise during technical training delivery:

*We provided this training to two batches of employees. You realise that you need to start from scratch. You sit in their presentations; you do not understand a thing, not even of the technical aspect they present. We had to train them and teach them how to have a structure in their presentations, with a leading thread, an introduction. You wonder how people do not lose track in that thing! I could understand why people [workers] were confused in all the teams. There is no format or proper agenda in their presentations whatsoever. I don't sit as much in the training now, I assume managers*

*have improved. But in the beginning, it was really about TRAINING people...*  
[Interview in French]

The HR manager also explained that the company B spends ‘a lot of time explaining, because it doesn’t come naturally’. According to the HR manager, the company ‘is not there yet’ in regard to the expected workers’ and line managers’ capacities. The absence of a set of expected skills impede upon the delivery of technical training. Similar concerns were raised in regard to linguistic proficiencies.

### **7.2.2 Linguistic skills**

Despite being the primary pre-requisite for obtaining employment in the BPO sector, linguistic proficiency was frequently reported to pose challenges to companies. Once again, there is a distinction to be made between different types of BPO activities due to specific linguistic requirements.

Company A did not report the challenges experienced at company B. Given the nature of call centre work, Mauritian workers’ oral French skills and neutral accent tend to match linguistic expectations in the industry [Educationist 2]. The reading of scripts requires that workers possess written French to a much lesser extent. This aligns itself well with one of Mauritius’ cultural features. Young individuals with oral French proficiency tend to perform well in call centres, regardless of workers’ academic qualifications [BPO Expert]. The BPO expert, also a manager in one of the largest Francophone call centre operations in Mauritius speaks from his experience with young Mauritian workers. The expert recounted the example of a ‘success story’ about a young female worker who had not completed her school certificate. In addition, he explained how employing orally competent but unqualified individuals may be advantageous for employers:

*You’re better off training these people, they can’t go anywhere. With a H.S.C, they’ll be looking for other jobs all the time...get experience then move!* [Interview in French]

Back office activities, however, assume a different scenario. While they generally require fewer oral competencies, there can be variations in accordance to the requirements of respective activities. At company B, one HR officer explained how CEO is often disappointed with workers' level of French when he meets them individually:

*Language is for us a big issue. During the recruitment process, we have them do a 30-min group exercise, from there we can see who are the leaders, but also who can express himself/herself in French and English (...) we do not ask for perfect English or perfect French. But at least, (we ask) that they can communicate in these languages. But we have issues... for example the CEO, being French... well, there have been cases where workers would go in front of the CEO and the CEO would tell us: 'My God, what's going on here?' [Interview in French]*

At company B, workers perform routine tasks on the company software and communicate with the company's business partners via emails. At times, however, conference calls are organised with both Francophone and Anglophone partners, thus necessitating oral competencies. In such cases, workers are not included in calls. Managers' difficulties during such communications were also reported [Interview in French]:

*In conference calls, yes, there were issues, well... especially in the beginning. In English it was me who had to explain to the client. In French, it varied. Well, I guess they are learning now. However, we have issues with emails as well. You see quite a few errors, spelling, grammar, and you have to let them know. I find myself saying: Next time, please be careful [Operations manager 2, Company B].*

Operations manager 2 is a chief officer and therefore takes the lead in such calls. In regard to measures taken by the companies to handle the issue, the HR officer at company B replied:

*As far as possible, we tell them not to speak Creole. You need to be able to speak the client's languages. We're hoping this would help.*

The no-Creole policy was confirmed by Operations manager 2 as a measure to help develop proficiency in English and French. Nevertheless, the idea that French was a more professional vernacular than Creole in both companies was still evident. At times, top management's requests to avoid Creole prove challenging for both workers and line management [Interview in French]:

*We tend to speak Creole, but we're told not to, they (top-level and HR management) tell us we should be speaking French and English, but sometimes, while talking, it is difficult...sometimes explanations are better in Creole* [Customers account manager, Company B].

Companies are faced with issues that emerge from Mauritius's 'form of bilingualism' [Educationist 1]. While Grégoire (2011:147) observes a linguistic issue in call centre operations, evidence of the issue in back office operations is all the more noted in the case of company B.

Although issues with linguistic proficiencies were identified, no in-company linguistic training was provided at company B. However, one supervisor explained how her inadequacies were discussed in one of her performance appraisals. Concerns lie mainly with her competencies in written French. During the interview with the same supervisor, her difficulties in oral French were also noted. When such inadequacies are identified, workers are directed to a training course delivered by the *Institut Francais de Maurice*<sup>20</sup>. However, the supervisor described the course as 'too basic' and unhelpful for her individual needs.

In the same vein, Educationist 1 explains how 'between the selling discussion' – that is, the government's promise of an adequately competent workforce – and 'the actual reality, there is a huge gap'. The educationist confirmed that the level of linguistic proficiency might have been exaggerated when the government opened up the BPO sector (Grégoire 2011: 149). Educationist 1 shared her experience as a trainer with an Anglophone BPO company. In the case of English language, workers' inadequacies hinder the proper delivery of in-house technical training. Linguistic proficiency or the

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<sup>20</sup> French Institute of Mauritius.

lack thereof was an unexpected issue for the company concerned although being an essential criterion at recruitment level. Educationist 1 was faced with several issues while delivering her courses in English per the requirements of a well-known Anglophone company, here named Company X:

*I could not run my courses entirely in English... That's revealing, all our stuff is in English. I would mix French and Creole as needed. The main issue? Well, if I had to run the course entirely in English, I wouldn't have got any response from them...probably they would have said yes, yes, yes, no, no, no. [Interview in English]*

Educationist 1 was concerned with the possible repercussions on workers' performance on platforms. In exasperation, the educationist added:

*Now what does the guy at the end of the telephone expect from his back office when they've got somebody not competent? What Company X went through, I'm sure companies A and B have been through. Unfortunately, the stories are similar, well they are not stories. The assumption was that Mauritius is 'this', and actually it is not 'this' at all, full stop. [Interview in English]*

In addition, Educationist 1 deplores the inaccuracy of assuming that back office services did not require a sound level of linguistic proficiency. Based upon her experience as a trainer, companies expected Mauritian workers to possess some of the essential linguistic and soft skills upon which it would have been possible to build technical, industry-based competencies. According to Educationist 1, company X has had to adapt:

*Company X moved into getting more back up from the UK. Fortunately, they believed in Mauritius: they had an opportunity to move into a platform here, and thought they'll start again. They realised there was no point running topping-up courses. [Interview in English]*

At company B, the HR officer explained that technical training remained the priority. Linguistic proficiency in company B was mistakenly considered to be a 'soft skill' by the HR officer. As such, no linguistic training initiative was evident.

### 7.2.3 Non-technical skills development opportunities

In relation to workers' confusion regarding soft skills expectations, the HR manager at company B explained:

*We keep telling them about soft skills. It is a discourse that we have.... They tell you they've heard it a lot because they just don't have them!* [Interview in French]

While misconduct reported earlier (see chapter 6) may have posed manifest challenges to companies, the absence of other non-technical skills result in more latent issues namely for technical training delivery.

Educationist 1 recounts her experience at company X:

*My first experience was in 2003. I give you an example. I gave a basic customer care course, basic, what does care mean, what it is to be nice to clients, etc...nothing to rock the boat...They didn't understand and were explained certain things, but for goodness' sake, communicate with people and admit you can't understand!* [Interview in English]

In this quote, Educationist 1 deplores the lack of young individuals' capacity to express their concerns and interact with her as their educator during training sessions. Educationist 1 also attributed this incident to a general lack of confidence and initiative from Mauritian workers in such international settings, in regard to which she added:

*Mauritians are willing to learn, yes, most of them are literate in the full sense of the term, yes, but they lack entirely initiative, they'll say 'yes, yes, yes,' and 'no, no, no'.* [Interview in English]

While such issues affect the delivery of technical training, concerns also pertain to the fact that the groups of workers in question include both school leavers and graduates. At company X, some workers had graduated with a Master's degree from local higher education institutions:



*I wouldn't mind so much if we were talking about low-qualified people whom you would understand if they didn't grasp these things. But this is not the case... we're talking about the 24 year olds, MScs, coming out of the University of Mauritius and then University of Technology of Mauritius.*

Similarly, issues were identified at company B both with school leavers and university graduates. Supervisors and managers reported non-technical skills inadequacies of qualified workers. However, workers equally reported their supervisors' and managers' lack of such skills. For instance, John at company B was critical of one manager whose emails to clients were, according to him, inappropriately written. More generally, line management performance and approach were called into question at both companies A and B.

Poor line management performance was reported to be a recurrent phenomenon in Mauritius. Two experts observed how middle management was the 'weakest link', both in the Mauritian BPO sector and in other sectors in Mauritius. The BPO expert attributes such pitfalls to the manner in which the sector was allowed to emerge. As such, the lack of structure in Mauritian BPO companies is equally a common theme, for which the expert explains:

*With rapid growth, we're now paying for our success, we improvise, take people in, give them rapid promotion; they become supervisors after a year in some cases! For the past 5 years, the sector recorded double digit growth. It's the only sector with such performance. Now, we're running out of breath... [Interview in French]*

Similarly, other respondents reflected upon the inappropriate evolution of some workers to supervisory or managerial positions due to urgent organisational needs. At company A, platform manager 1 noted a lack of support to workers who are promoted as 'team leaders' (supervisors). The operations manager also attributed such inadequacies to general tendencies in BPO sectors. He explained:

*It is true that in the BPO sector, things move so fast, that it works like this: here's your gun, your flask, now off to the battle field! [Interview in French]*

Later in the interview, he also added:

*It is not because you were the best 'agent'<sup>21</sup> that you will definitely be a good team leader... When I moved from a coach position, they explained what the team leader role was about. But in terms of actual training, for example training about how to communicate with workers, well, sometimes it's innate in some people and it works on some specific roles. But no, there was no training. Of course if we were given training it would be better, the output itself would be better.* [Interview in English]

Management skills are here discussed in combination with other soft skills, given that they are considered to be non-technical and optional. Given the lack of regular training provision for addressing such inadequacies, team leaders and line managers at company A tend to improvise. They adopt the management style they believe is the most suitable to manage daily issues [Interview in French]:

*There are also some workers who are promoted as team leaders without the certainty that they have the adequate competencies for such responsibilities... when you arrive, you've just left school, you learn some stuff on-the-job...in terms of management, and to motivate your workers, you imitate what is done in the hotel industry...well, sometimes, our team leaders do not have time to apply the most humane method to reprimand a worker'* [Platform manager 2, Company A]

Time constraints and the need to prioritise deadlines were equally emphasised by Company B to justify the lack of soft skills development opportunities for line management. The HR manager also reflected upon the context within which workers and managers have operated since the setting up of company B in 2004:

*We shouldn't forget that most of the customer account managers came out of university and landed here. Some had a little amount of work experience, were catapulted here in supervisory and management roles, at ages where others are still workers. In other types of organisations, managers are not that young, people do not*

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<sup>21</sup> Term used in French for 'BPO worker'.

*become managers at 22, 23 years old...Perhaps we're expecting too much from these managers and supervisors. We shouldn't forget that they all came out of University and landed here, and became managers very quickly. They were still struggling between the technical and people management. Well... they had some training at the time, but this can't mean you now know how to do it. There were no models around them, only the directors; they are fulfilling deadlines for clients...* [Interview in French]

Several managers at company B deplored the lack of structure within the company as a major issue. The HR manager explained how her own responsibilities were not clearly defined when she joined company B. The same observations were made by other respondents at company B:

*At the company, we are implementing some structures, but they are not clearly defined, you don't really know your responsibilities, you end up walking on somebody else's territory; one is frustrated, and this triggers clashes. In terms of follow-up, you don't even know who is meant to be doing it...* [Interview in French]

Workers and line managers were strongly critical of the irregularity of training provision in general. In addition, top-level managers at company B expressed their scepticism regarding the company's attempts to address the issue with the provision of soft skills training such as leadership programmes. At company A, there were manifest changes in workers' cultural cognitive behaviour in terms of the appropriation of the French accent and other manifestations of the French body language. However, changes in regard to work-related cognitive behaviour are said to be more difficult to achieve despite training provision. At company B, the HR manager revealed her intention to include more workers in soft skills development programmes in order to create a 'real talent pool'. In this respect, managers suggest that this might cause further frustration [Interview in French]:

*You are given a leadership course, then so what? What's next? A leader must be this or that? This is theory! Being able to practise this is important. For example if workers are given such courses, will they be able to have the opportunity to put them in practice? And also...isn't something that should be in you before you come here, can we teach this now?* [Operations manager 2, Company B]

Several managers, including the HR manager at company B, confirmed that such skill development opportunities suffered from ‘a lack of follow-up’ and sustainability. At company A, platform manager 2 pointed to such training initiative as ‘one-off’ opportunities. Despite attributing the lack of soft skills training provision to financial constraints, the HR manager at company A claims to want to invest more into such provision in the future. It appeared that soft skills training can be more easily interwoven with technical training at company A given the nature of the activity.

Several team leaders and trainers mentioned the contribution of a former training manager in their development. As some of the workers interviewed described the content of his training sessions, it was understood that his contribution pertained essentially to soft skills development for team leaders and young trainers.\* In the same vein, the HR manager praised the former training manager’s performance and expressed his intention to adopt a less short term view of training needs which, in the existing literature is argued to be typical in contemporary conditions (Robinson 2011). He explained some of the company’s future plans:

*We have just appointed a training manager. A French person... well an expatriate but on a local salary. We are waiting...among his objectives, he is meant to set up a training centre for Company A. There might be other factors, but above all, there is the mentality... This is why I would like to launch a training centre here; it is one of our ambitions... [Interview in French]*

Similarly, Educationist 1 reported that Company X decided to open their training centre because, ‘fortunately, they [want] to make this work.’

Despite acknowledgements of some of the typical organisational issues weighing upon workers’ soft skills development, several respondents claimed that the source of the problem was elsewhere. There was a general belief that non-technical skills-related challenges could have been circumvented if the lack of basic skills had been addressed prior to workers taking employment. According to Educationist 1, this concerns both technical and non-technical skills. Workers are said to lack the pre-employment skills

expected by employers. First, Educationist 1 commented on technical skills based on her observations at company X:

*Somewhere along the lines, before they come in, they need to already know what it is to work on an IT platform, what are the basic tools they should know about, for instance, if they want to work in back up operations for insurance, what they should know about the insurance industry...[Interview in English]*

In more general terms, Educationist 1 added:

*In everything, it isn't just language, full stop...The assumptions were that Mauritians are bilingual, that they could walk in and sit on the platform and they would be operational straightaway; that they understood foreign culture and therefore everything would be seemingly fine! And they [Company X] found out very quickly it was quite the opposite...*

As such, several respondents from all categories of respondents were highly critical of the national education system. This point is elaborated below.

## **7.3 Education and Training: National Institutions**

### **7.3.1 Government training policies**

The Mauritian government is now conscious of the challenges encountered at organisational level in the BPO sector. According to the BPO expert, there is a close collaboration between the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) and the Outsourcing and Technology Association of Mauritius (OTAM). While companies A and B did not mention their affiliation to the latter employer association, several issues identified by the government echo with company A's and company B's experiences. Recently, these issues were identified in an HRDC study. A survey with 95 IT and BPO employers was conducted in 2011. In its report (HRDC 2012), entitled, *A study of labour shortage in the ICT/BPO sector in Mauritius*, the HRDC analyses the current

patterns of demand for skills in the ICT/BPO sector and assesses the changes that have occurred over the last decade. Through the compilation of the report, the HRDC aims to make recommendations as part of the government's action plan for the sector. Mainly, it aims at reducing the 'skill mismatch' through the device of new government training policies and strategies.

In line with company A and company B's experiences, the HRDC highlights the high rate of labour turnover in the sector in the executive summary of the report. Other challenges pertain to skill levels and development opportunities. 75% of the HRDC's respondents described the major issue as a shortage of workers with the right technical and soft skills. As a respondent to my study, the HRDC officer explained that the term 'labour shortage' was misleading given the 'real issue is a skill mismatch problem.' The HRDC confirmed that while human resources were available, their skill levels did not always satisfy employers' requirements. In 2012 the education commission of the current government's opponents additionally reported the alarming level of graduate unemployment after conducting a parallel study.

The HRDC report highlights employers' low provision of training budget and a lack of planning in this respect. Although the HRDC's respondents identified training as 'the most common means for skills development', the council noted the low number of organisations that provide training 'through a thorough needs assessment'. While the HRDC officer mentioned the provision of a levy grant scheme to ICT/BPO companies, the council's study reveals a limited utilisation of such scheme in the sector. During our interview, the HRDC officer explained the main features of the Levy grant scheme:

*The scheme was designed for both national companies and multinational companies with a Mauritian subsidiary. As long as companies contribute with a levy, they can benefit from it. Initial funding for the scheme is taken from the national training fund. Let's say you're contributing X amount of tax, well there is a ceiling depending on your contribution. We may train expats as well, as long as the company contributes...*  
[Interview in French]

In other words, the scheme allows the HRDC to support training initiatives which they first start to fund while expecting employers to contribute to the funding required

for training their employees through the amount of tax they pay. In addition, the HRDC officer explained how the council supports both in-company training and other generic training which are to be provided by national Education and Training institutions. In respective workshops organised by the council, problems identified in each sector are discussed with the actors concerned. According to the officer, these workshops are in line with the council's aims to foster tripartite relationships among work and employment institutions. Given the absence of unions in the ICT/BPO sector, the HRDC officer implicitly confirmed that this may not apply fully for the sector. The close collaboration between Work and Employment institutions mainly lies between private employers and the government for emerging sectors like ICT/BPO. Nevertheless, the HRDC intervenes primarily through financial provision for workers' skills development in many sectors of the Mauritian economy [Interview in French]:

*If the Mauritius Institute of Training Development (MITD) wishes to give a specific training, let's say IT, we finance the projects. Several institutions approach us, they say 'we want to train X or Y', we refund them, there are several schemes and this depends upon the schemes that are relevant to them. We are a funding body, a training facilitator for HR development at national level. We are also a policy maker, we advise the ministers, and we tell them: we need to go ahead with such or such programme... we'll validate training programmes as long as they are MQA<sup>22</sup> approved and this is what we did with the ICT [ICT/BPO] sector. [HRDC officer]*

In order to achieve its objective of reducing the skill mismatch in various sectors, a few projects under this collaboration were announced. In July 2012, the HRDC launched a sponsored pre-job training programme. 500 unemployed individuals between 16 and 30 were to participate in the programme which involves employers operating in the hospitality, constructions and ICT sectors. Employers were to identify potential candidates who would then be sent on training courses which were to last up to six months. The HRDC was to cover 60% of the training costs. In addition, trainees were to receive an allowance of Rs6000 (approximately £150) per month from the employer. However, the agreement included a 50% refund from the HRDC for these allowances. Upon completion of the training course, individuals were to be offered a

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<sup>22</sup> Programmes have to be approved by the Mauritius Qualifications Authority

minimum of one year's employment [ibid]. In a local newspaper article, the HRDC explained how 'the main advantage of the programme is that enterprises will be able to employ persons who satisfy their specific skills requirements'.

The HRDC report also indicates that the main skills required by employers include educational qualifications, past experience, work attitude, ICT, communication and decision-making. Among the measures proposed to address the skills issue for the whole ICT/BPO sector, the HRDC advocated the development of soft skills and of global skills for the young generation (HRDC 2012).

Experts acknowledge the government's efforts to meet employers' skills requirements through entirely employer-driven strategies. However, a general lack of faith in government initiatives was evident. Despite being involved in such national projects, the BPO expert questioned the effectiveness of the government's approach:

*What the government does is something very generic. It is trying to expand the 'pool'. The main objective has always been to have individuals who are ready to work more quickly so unemployment is reduced. However, to date, the private sector has had to take the lead. We are institutionalising in-company training in the sector. If the government proposes that individuals can be trained in 6 weeks, I propose 2, we'll all be winners. We've [Mauritius] missed the train somewhere... We're not going to wait for programmes like the pre-job training programme etc... [Interview in French]*

Government training programmes were not envisaged at companies A and B. At company B, the HR manager confessed her lack of knowledge on such initiatives and asked me to provide further information during the interview. A lack of communication across the sector was implied. In addition, there was a general scepticism about the unrealistic character of government initiatives. One major example involves the setting up of an ICT academy. The Mauritian government presented the project as one which could be implemented very rapidly. However, such predictions were not achieved in 2012 [Interview in English]:

*If you've seen the newspaper, the ICT academy is dead as a dodo. It doesn't surprise me by the way, and anything coming from the government is going to be one size fits*



*all. They had to go down that point to try to sort it out. The point is... they haven't promised the figures and how much this is adding to the operations. [Educationist 1]*

Similarly, Educationist 3 also commented on the topic:

*I must admit that I don't know much about the ICT academy. However, in the sector, the government's role was questioned because it didn't do what it had promised, that is, train the maximum number of individuals. We are meant to be more developed than Madagascar, in the more sophisticated branches, Madagascan workers are filling the lack of qualified Mauritians. .. The government of which I was a member at the time had planned to anticipate the future and be more proactive in terms of training... The ICT academy! Yes, of course! But is there a real commitment of the government? A real partnership with the private sector... [Interview in French]*

In 2013, no significant progress on the ICT academy was evident. The government had set the ambitious objective to train 2500 individuals by the end of the 2012. In July 2012, Educationist 2 who was involved in the project confessed that 'the target was unrealistic'. Previous attempts to launch similar projects have failed. According to Educationist 1, the failure to achieve these objectives in 2009-2010 can be attributed to the lack of collaboration from employers. New resolutions have been taken since, as Educationist 2 explains:

*It will have to be demand-driven. Before launching the programme I went to India to see how it works there. Indian industrial training institutes (ITI) had a supply-driven approach. At the end, young individuals were not employed; companies would not know these individuals...in other words they do not find work. For the training programme to be effective, individuals need to be directly employable. Otherwise, it's a financial loss. The sector moves so fast... [Interview in French]*

However, experts, educationists and managers call into question government's intervention in in-company training. Comments such as 'we've missed the train somewhere' were frequent among experts' responses. While the lack of governmental anticipation of the challenges encountered at organisational level was reported, both the BPO expert and one educationist employed the term 'palliative' to depict recent

government training policies. Issues are argued to have a much deeper character than the one envisaged by the Mauritian government. Respondents' observations converge towards national education. For instance, Educationist 3 claims that the problem may lie with compulsory or post-compulsory education:

*What employers tell us is this: give us young individuals with a solid basic education. Young individuals with elementary competencies essential for the work environment and we'll do the rest... We'll train them for a specific job we'll be giving them. Unfortunately, our education system's understanding is all upside-down!*  
[Interview in French]

### **7.3.2 The national education system**

In sharp contrast with responses reported above, the minister of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) claimed in an interview that 'it is not the role of employers to train potential ICT/BPO workers (Mauritius Business Magazine 2012: 24). The minister asserts the importance of a national training institution that could be modelled on the Hotel School of Mauritius. It is, according to the minister, the role of the Mauritian government to 'cater for specific needs' in the sector. However, when probed on the question of education, the minister's view indicated more effort in turning Mauritius into 'the most connected country in the world'. Another concern for education lies with the endeavour to 'revolutionise teaching methods' through technological devices.

Instead, respondents were more concerned with issues distinct from those of the ICT ministry. First respondents reported the absence of some subjects which would have contributed to the open-mindedness of young individuals, hence making a difference at work [Interview in English]:

*If you've got an education system where you don't do Geography, you don't do History, OK Geography and History, full stop. In educational terms, Geography teaches you space and History teaches time and the link between the two is absolutely crucial. Now I don't understand how the kids can study commerce or economics*

*without having done geography and history... and they'll recite the theories by heart and wonderfully...when you ask them why they think Mauritius is of great interest to people, historically, they'll look at you blank, why is Mauritius the star and key of the Indian Ocean, it isn't a joke completely. You just forget it...so people haven't got the spatial or chronological dimensions to understand how interdependent we are...*  
[Educationist 1]

Here the educationist refers to the absence of adequate teaching of international geography and history. The educationist pointed to the absence of an 'international gaze' from Mauritian BPO workers. One BPO manager made a similar comment in the Press (Mauritius Business Magazine 2012). Similarly, the French CEO at Company B suggested that Mauritius should 'internationalise its curriculum and approach.' The CEO proposed that Mauritius utilise its international connections to develop a potential teaching exchange programme with international education institutions. As discussed in Chapter 4, Mauritius has successfully developed its international relations predominantly in regard to economic transactions.

According to Educationist 1, the 'bottleneck' no longer lies with basic education provision in Mauritius. Concerns need to be geared towards 'whether Mauritian education is providing the right type of skills'. As such, issues are reported to pertain more to the content of the national curriculum and to pedagogical requirements [Interview in English]:

*We have a hugely academic education, the HSC<sup>23</sup> is a top level education...the thing is...how useful is the syllabus done now for the world of work afterwards...the answer is, not very. The programme has not been updated for a long time* [Educationist 1]

As an illustration, Educationist 1 added:

*Let's take languages for example. We're still doing set books. In other countries, they do themes, and you're supposed to read much more. Then you ask yourself why.*

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<sup>23</sup> The Higher School Certificate, the HSC, is obtained at the last stage of secondary schooling.

*That's because it is easier to do private tuitions on set books than on themes.* [Interview in English]

As such, Educationist 1 confirms that some of the traditional institutions such as private tuition impede upon the development of the system and its adjustment to contemporary requirements. Similarly the HR manager at company A was critical of the Mauritian education system based upon his personal experience.

*In Mauritius, everyone fits in the mould. To succeed, you need to become a HSC laureate, which is not true! Name me a laureate who is CEO in the private sector with a success story? In other countries, they foster invention, talents, how you can improve other people's lives, etc. In Mauritius, either you are a doctor, a lawyer or an architect; otherwise, you've failed...* [Interview in French]

The HR manager at company A was himself trained as a lawyer. He noted how the national education system did not foster entrepreneurial skills and creativity. According to the HR manager, the effects of such approach have percolated the national mind-set:

*Go and tell your mum you need some time to invent something! Go and tell your mum you want to open a snack bar because you think people will never stop eating. It's not prestigious enough, it's cultural! My son needs to be a doctor, she'll say!* [Interview in French]

The consequences of the lack of institutional change in education were reported both in the spheres of work and education. In regard to work, the HR manager at company A commented:

*Here people need to be spoon-fed., we're back to education again...initially we ask our workers to be inventive, creative at some levels, of course not at all levels.. I think Mauritius does not give individuals the adequate tools for them to discover themselves, in order for them to say... 'I'm better in this field or that one'. There's no such thing here!* [Interview in French]

In relation to education, issues with young individuals' performance at school and the relevant repercussions were equally noted [Interview in English]:

*If you see the Cambridge reports, where Mauritius misses out on creativeness, the inability to produce more nuanced answers, (they produce) ready-made sentences in their essays. In assessments where expression is a valued skill, rather than a content paper, asking them to analyse and comment on something they've never seen before...you should see this...it impacts on an environment like a BPO which requires fast thinking, out of the box, not necessarily looking at the right answer, but 'what can I do to calm things down', which of course has to do with problem-solving...*  
[Educationist 1]

Educationist 2 claims that the skill mismatch in the BPO sector starts with the pitfalls of compulsory education. According to the educationist, the consequences involve the absence of a work culture, the lack of workers' understanding of requirements and resulting frustrations. Similarly, various respondents drew a drastic comparison among government schools, Catholic schools and private institutions. While government and Catholic schools are free and share the same curriculum, managers from both companies noted cultural-cognitive differences among workers coming from the two types of institutions. Workers coming from government schools were identified as the group with lower soft skill levels and sense of commitment. Another comparison lies between national and private schools. Workers from private schools were described as being 'open-minded', capable of 'expressing themselves better' and of having 'more confidence' at work. In this case, one rationale given was the absence of philosophy within the national curriculum [Educationist 2].

As a result, workers' lack of open-mindedness is said to contribute to their naiveté at work and to their incapacity of visualising the bigger picture [Interview in English]:

*Now I can ask how much do you know about your customers? Then you find that they are not curious. Not in the good sense. They won't even think of checking who they are talking about, Etc... They just see numbers; they just look at the figures. I am talking about graduates here... And we're talking about financial advice and wealth*

*management? I just showed them adverts of their banks and of other banks in The Economist and asked them: where is the competitive edge, people?* [Educationist 1]

The government's attempts to address some of these issues were also evoked. In 2012, various projects were envisaged. For instance, the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) planned to finance a campaign that would create awareness of the BPO sector in national schools [HRDC officer]. Talks of enhancing career guidance for young individuals were also evident. Based on the 2012 HRDC report, however, career guidance strategies appeared to be designed more for promoting the ICT/BPO industry than helping future workers in their choices (HRDC 2012).

Another major project concerned the proposition of a *Higher School Certificate (HSC) Pro*. In an attempt to adopt a more vocational approach to education and meet industry requirements, the certificate is to be modelled upon the French professional A-level certificate. According to Educationist 4, who is directly involved in the project, the latter was proposed in 2011 and was still in progress at the time of data collection. Despite such government efforts towards employers, current statutory for industrial training is argued to be the incorrect approach to the real problem. At company B, the French CEO explained:

*...As far as I am concerned, I doubt when entrepreneurs and private employers are involved in education. We have to be cautious. It is a challenge that goes beyond the economic challenge. Education for me goes beyond the mere framework of economic efficiency. The government needs to hear all the parties of society in general, not just the economic world...It is not about training 'little soldiers' for its industry or services. It is not the objective. We need individuals who are adequately trained in several domains, well, indeed it is important to foster plurality, to have quality teaching but diversified... [Interview in French]*

Likewise, the HR manager at company A noted that companies cannot ask the Mauritian government to change the education system for call centres'. The government's particular focus on catering essentially for employers of the ICT/BPO sector is viewed as an issue that is not addressing the real problem. The national education system's failure to contribute to the development of a certain number of skills

is more apparent. The array of skills to which various respondents referred, concerned the individual beyond work. However, these are to date considered equally essential in the realms of work. Some of these skills pertain more closely to values. According to Industrial Relations Expert 1, some of these values which need to be nurtured are of high relevance to Work and Employment institutions. For instance, the expert advocates the diffusion of new subjects in the national curriculum designed to create young individuals' awareness of their employment rights and obligations prior to employment. He explains:

*In secondary schools...universities...I go even further... They may be core subjects, though non assessable, but these could be introduced in school: human rights, employment rights... These individuals will be employees later. They need to know the type of protection they are entitled to, the obligations they have towards their organisation. It is through such campaigns that we will have a more informed nation...individuals who can say: 'Hey! Stop! I know my rights!' And not wait till they are already in employment... [Interview in French]*

Educationist 3, for his part, attributes these issues to the failure to draw a clear connection between education and work in Mauritius:

*First we need to re-think education in Mauritius... It's always about exams, certificates and status. We forget that all this needs to lead toward an end... generally speaking, we should endeavour to build good citizens, with a vast general knowledge...with capability to find their place in society, to be happy...The other fundamental side is that education should help individuals earn a living and have aspirations for the future, regardless of the post-secondary training undertaken. It is important that the Ministry of Education and our educationists start considering this. We need to define the type of people we want to produce from schooling...*

Industrial Relations Expert 1 also deplored the lack of financial resources allocated to non-economic initiatives. The expert explained how, at times, this leads to politicians, government officers and other concerned actors 'ending up doing some DIY.' However, the extent to which some of the national institutions can change as rapidly as economic institutions adjust to new diversification strategies is called into

question [Educationist 1]. Nevertheless, Educationist 1 argues that Mauritius could build more upon some of its institutional strengths in order to achieve ‘real’ stability and continuity in its performance as an economy and society.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, challenges to Education and Training (E&T) institutions in Mauritius have been identified. In regard to the HRM challenges reported by companies A and B, both companies identified turnover as a major concern. Difficulties in recruiting the right candidates were more prevalent in company B given that the nature of their activity required more specific skills from workers. Company A, a call centre operation, had a thinner set of criteria. Oral French proficiency was the main skill required at company A and therefore matched Mauritian workers’ capacities more effectively. Challenges and concerns emerged more at line management level for both companies when further skills, often non-technical, were required. However, findings indicate employers’ reticence to invest in workers’ non-technical skills development. Both companies expressed their desire to do so, but evidence refers to the lack of ‘follow-up’ or the ‘one-off’ character in regard to such skills training provision. The chapter highlights the challenges that affect workers, companies and national Education and Training institutions in regard to actors’ different expectations and to who is to provide which form of training.

In addition, the role of the government is called into question in regard to its recent efforts in Education and Training for the sector. Its intervention was identified as a ‘palliative’ initiative to compensate a lack of anticipation. Moreover, the problem is depicted as one with a deeper source than the issues identified through the BPO sector. Respondents observe how some of the challenges encountered at organisational level needed to be addressed at compulsory schooling level. Respondents call into question the extent to which the Mauritian education system, bequeathed from the country’s colonial past, has evolved in parallel with development that has taken place over time within the Mauritian economy and society. Challenges encountered in the BPO sector highlight the possible lacunas which remain to be addressed at national level. Respondents advocate a re-thinking of Mauritian education so that young Mauritian



individuals develop into open-minded, adequately educated, and more assertive workers and citizens in contemporary conditions. In chapter 8, I elaborate on the findings reported in chapters 6 and 7.

## **CHAPTER 8 Developing workers' skills and agency: Tensions and Contradictions**

In this chapter, I elaborate on the challenges that have recently emerged in Mauritius with the development of its Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector. Challenges reported in chapters 6 and 7 highlight several tensions and contradictions which concern workers' skill capacities and level of agency. As a result, they draw attention to national Education and Training (E&T) policies. As noted in earlier chapters, the Mauritian government has recently endeavoured to espouse political economic discourses which advocate the need for national economies to ensure their workers' employability, and skill development in a global knowledge economy. I also noted the percolation of the discourses regarding lifelong learning and the development of a learning society in the context of Mauritius, in line with current discursive trends across the world. In this chapter, however, I discuss how some of these tensions and contradictions may have been poorly anticipated by the Mauritian government.

Informants' responses point to workers' capabilities in the form of technical proficiencies, non-technical abilities, as well as multiple forms of agency. While the study takes issue with the Mauritian government's endeavour to turn Mauritius into a high-skill economy, it concomitantly raises a series of questions in regard to young Mauritian citizens' level of political agency. Challenges reported in chapters 6 and 7 are both specific to the context of Mauritius and resonate more generally with the literature discussed in earlier chapters. Based on the findings, I argue that their implications in the particular case of Mauritius can be discussed through the concepts of knowledge work, employability and professionalism (see chapter 2). In chapter 2, I indicated how professionalism is a discourse that is commonly deployed by managers in the workplace in order to obtain an expected conduct from workers. I also indicated how employability has come to have a similar use while its deployment is more often associated with national policies. In this chapter, I discuss these concepts in order to advocate the importance of considering context specificity in regard to respective industries, activities within the same industry and national institutional features.

Allegedly, the turn of the new century has marked what Grégoire et al. (2011: 338) identify as a significant break from previously institutionalised economic conditions for Mauritius. The logic that underlies Mauritian economic diversification strategies can be traced back to the initial institutional steps taken by the Mauritian government after decolonisation. However, loss of preferential access as experienced predominantly by the Mauritian textile industry has entailed a reduction of the post-colonial support from which Mauritius had benefited since 1968. The impressively rapid emergence of the ICT/BPO sector as one of the major pillars of the economy has once again highlighted the Mauritian resilience already extolled by international organisations (see Zafar (2011) for IMF's account) and prominent economists such as Stiglitz (2011). The sector has also contributed to Mauritian policy makers' endeavour to attend to the need for employment creation. As noted in chapter 4, BPO contributed in a similar manner in other BPO destinations, such as India (Ramesh 2004).

Moreover, by opting for further economic diversification strategies, the Mauritian government has remained faithful to the strategy selection process (Crouch 2005) responsible for its economic development and success after decolonisation. Clearly, the BPO sector is another major expression of the Mauritian economic path dependency. It can be argued that the path that Mauritius 'took for economic development has remained and the path has developed under its own logic' (Crouch 2005: 76). With the setting up of an ICT/BPO sector, Mauritius has additionally demonstrated its capacity to seize opportunities of 'niche' activities (Grégoire et al 2011) that have been well in line with contemporary developments in the realms of work across the globe. The alignment of its path dependency with changing global and economic conditions, as demonstrated above, is notable.

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector is one more economic endeavour that highlights Mauritius' capacity to build upon its past legacies in order to maintain its resilience in contemporary conditions. As has been the case for most BPO destinations across the world, factors such as cultural proximity and linguistic proficiency lie within Mauritius' colonial heritage and have attracted foreign investment into the BPO sector. However, I also argue that a more distinct feature remains the strong public-private sector partnership that has persisted since the post-independence decade and has become an inherent feature of the economic context of the small island developing state

(SIDS). Developed over time as an institution in its own right, public-private partnership has remained a fundamental asset for the Mauritian government. Mauritius appears to have retained options that it has known best (Crouch 2005), while being en route to independence.

The form of public-private partnership which entails strong government support to local and foreign entrepreneurs and investors appears to have developed as a form of expertise. This expertise is cautiously practised by the Mauritian government and has contributed to its economy's heralded resilience. As it fixatedly pursues its pro-employer agenda, the Mauritian government's behaviour has effectively aligned itself with the liberalised regimes that currently dominate global activities and multinational employment relationships. While Mauritius has straightforwardly adjusted to the new conditions dictated by the prevalence of neoliberal doctrines in the Global North, its post-colonial and welfare state initiatives have continued to nurture the capitalist drive inherent in Mauritius' existence. As discussed in earlier chapters, Mauritius was essentially built due to trade endeavours. It can be argued that its post-colonial survival and resilience has been ensured under similar principles.

Formal institutional change, which more recently found expression in the significant amendments to its employment legislation in 2008, has been fundamental to the Mauritian government's pro-employer agenda. This institutional reconfiguration can be argued to have been logical in the replication of economic decisions and strategies. Instead of assuming a disruptive character, these amendments contribute to the path dependent decisions that led once again to economic diversification. In chapter 4, I discussed how the Mauritian government guaranteed more flexible employment regulation in the textile industry up until the mid to late 1980s (see also Subramanian 2001). In line with Streeck and Thelen's (2005) observations of continuity and change, the case of Mauritius demonstrates that significant institutional change, such as the legal amendments, does not automatically entail major historical discontinuities. Institutional change as depicted here followed the path's logic; flexible regulations were designed to be merely part of the government's measures for developing emerging sectors along an already known economic path.

However, findings reported in chapters 6 and 7 indicate that challenges may have been poorly anticipated by the Mauritian government as it pursued its path-dependent strategy. The fact that the government only attended to the mindful deployment of employment policies as it embarked onto this new diversification strategy has now become equally problematic for workers with whom associated risks are likely to reverberate. As the BPO sector of Mauritius evolves in a highly competitive and flexibly regulated environment, the appropriate arrangements that will ensure the development of workers' skills and competencies are crucial for these workers to remain in employment. I elaborate below.

### ***8.1 Education and Training: tensions and contradictions***

As a host country to multinational companies' outsourcing strategies, Mauritius overall has demonstrated its ability to institutionally cater for foreign employers' requirements. Although findings indicate a few bureaucratic shortcomings and duplication of work in the government's approach, both companies A and B have depicted the easy settlement process in terms of administrative requirements. Findings reported above confirm how the economy has also benefited from this new business activity by registering double-digit growth figures in very early stages. However, the economic growth rate achieved by the sector is said to be slowing down. Limitations in the capacity of the young labour market to satisfy the Mauritian BPO sector have been identified as a potential challenge by companies. The comparatively limited work pool and workers' skill insufficiencies are factors inherently unfavourable to the future development of more value-added activities as envisaged for instance by company B.

Although several workers point to the developmental benefits gained by taking employment in the BPO sector of Mauritius, findings also indicate frustrations which at times were implied rather than clearly expressed. In addition, some of the workers who demanded skill development opportunities were not able to identify their 'real' needs in this respect. Frustrations seem to have emerged in both companies A and B in relation to employer expectations in respective psychological contracts. Findings point to inadequacies in regard to more than one set of skills. First, companies A and B commonly report tensions caused by unmet cultural assumptions. Workers were often

said to lack professionalism in the common sense of the term. Based upon the findings, professionalism appears to be synonymous with the type of work ethics and culture expected by organisations operating at global level. Workers' attitude and behaviour at both companies A and B are claimed to impact upon the social demands of the job per se as well as upon managerially induced organisational culture.

Equally, expectations regarding transferable skills, which vary in accordance with the type of activities and distinct organisational typologies, present challenges. Another notable issue lies with limited assessment undertaken by the government regarding the level of linguistic proficiency required in non-voice operations, here illustrated by company B. Difficulties encountered by company B during recruitment and selection processes also point to issues with young Mauritian workers' level of employability. Often, non-technical skills that have been argued to make an individual more employable today appear to have to do with young Mauritian workers' levels of agency at work. Here I refer to transferable skills such as critical thinking, initiative, confidence and professional behaviour as discussed in chapter 2. I elaborate below.

### **8.1.1 Employability of young Mauritian workers**

The Mauritian government appears to have raised foreign employers' expectations to a level that is not fully met by the young Mauritian workforce being employed in the sector. Skills expected from potential candidates range from technical skills, such as linguistic proficiency, a set of social and transferable skills, to basic IT skills considered to be pre-employment skills for the sector. In regard to non-technical skills, cultural proximity between French and Mauritian norms appear to have been overestimated and may have been premised on mere assumptions regarding previous colonial ties. Findings do not provide precise evidence of whether there has been any expressed exaggeration from the government in the 'selling discussion' (term used by Educationist 1) of the Mauritian labour market to potential European investors. However, they highlight employers' surprise and disappointment given the form of work embodied by BPO and employers' expectations in respect of workers' capacities and general education in contemporary organisations (see also Brown and Lauder 2006, for instance). As a result, findings also confirm Grégoire's (2011) observation of the

difficulties encountered by BPO companies in Mauritius in recruiting candidates who satisfy their requirements.

It appears that skills required in low-end service work epitomised here by BPO have led to the assumption that these workers were directly employable after compulsory or in some cases, higher, education. As a result, there has been little or no urge to adopt a more pro-active approach to the enhancement of potential candidates' employability. Reliance of both employers and the government upon the utility of cultural remnants of colonisation is also apparent. The challenges that have been identified above infer that more attention was needed toward skills capacities, despite ostensible cultural proximity and low-skill requirements. Here, findings corroborate Ramesh's (2004, cited in chapter 4) observation in regard to employers' expectations of having little to do in terms of training when basic operations are relocated in Global South destinations.

Findings also corroborate previous literature that highlights the pressures suffered by workers in regard to the assessment of their level of employability. As illustrated by HRM practices at company B, more emphasis is put on recruitment level than on sustainable skill development opportunities. While HR managers in both companies A and B claim to envisage an increase in training provision beyond the induction phase, there have only been irregular or little organisational intervention in this respect. Findings also add weight to literature on Business Process Outsourcing and confirm the volatile character of the sector. For instance, they confirm the existence of HRM challenges such as turnover and absenteeism that typically characterise such jobs and work arrangements as noted in chapter 4. As observed in earlier chapters, contemporary organisations tend to take a short-term approach to training. However, as Vaidyanathan (2012) observes in the Indian BPO sector, volatility equally pertains to workers' short-term approach to BPO work. The fact this type of job is often considered as a transitory phase by young workers, adds to the rationale provided by employers for the lack of in-firm training provision. This was confessed by the HR manager at company B.

Another issue lies with the inadequate acknowledgement of the varieties that exist across BPO companies operating within the same sector. In addition to the voice or non-voice character of BPO operations, companies provide services to clients operating in variegated industries. In the study, this is illustrated by distinct employer

expectations in regard to workers' levels of Information Technology (IT) skills. IT skills are considered to be elementary pre-employment skills for back-office operations such as company B and the company mentioned by Educationist 1 (company X). At company A, however, workers expressed their satisfaction for being given the opportunity to develop IT skills as a competency while being in employment. While workers at company A represent the group of BPO workers who are more likely to perceive the acquisition of these skills as developmental, the same skills are expected to have been acquired prior to workers taking employment in companies such as company B. Given the low-skilled nature of voice-based work at company A, the perception of such skills as competencies that can only be developed at work and not before (Lévy-Leboyer 2009), appears to be justified. Experts and educationists' responses indicate the scope for clarifying these variegated needs more accurately in order to avoid tensions.

Findings point to further inconsistencies. To start with, employer expectations may in some cases seem unrealistic. While company B has expressed its aim to recruit more graduates, the current staff group remains significantly mixed. In the absence of a critical mass of employable youth as is the case for India (Ramesh 2004, cited in chapter 4), both companies A and B recruit a significant number of school leavers who, at times, may not have obtained their higher school certificate qualification. In the case of advanced economies, many of the skills increasingly identified as employability or transferable skills are expected to be acquired through higher education institutions' programmes. These non-core skills are said to be required to ensure individuals' 'graduate employability' (see chapter 2). However, findings indicate that such skills are expected from the segment of the labour market that has not necessarily been through post-compulsory education. In other words, they point to the disproportionate character of some of the employers' expectations identified in the study.

Furthermore, responses, namely those of the CEO at company B and several educationists corroborate previous observations documented in the literature. A tentative definition of employability according to employers does not entail a specific and exhaustive set of skills. The argument I make is that it pertains more to workers' level of adaptability to what is required in a specific job chosen along their career path, at a specific point in time. Brown et al. (2003) explain how the concept of graduate employability, for instance, is meant to reflect a more generic capability that captures



‘the increasing importance of knowledge, skills and commitment of employees as a source of efficiency’. Clearly, the gap between general education and skills requirements as observed in this study, does not allow young Mauritian workers’ to develop this level of adaptability. However, by attending to employers’ dissatisfaction with palliative and narrowly-focused measures, the Mauritian government does not necessarily foster the mind-set necessary for workers to apprehend work and their employability in this perspective.

In line with existing scholarly debates, attempts to conceptualise employability and to define the employable worker in the case of the BPO sector of Mauritius may prove challenging (Crouch et al. 2004; Cremin 2010, see also chapter 2). However, while tensions and contradictions are bound to emerge due to the extensiveness of the concept, findings indicate scope for a more careful approach to training needs. They also call for more attention to the varieties of needs within the sector as well as the discrepancies between employer expectations and workers’ level of education. As Crouch et al. (2004) observe, employers will inevitably have distinct expectations due to their managerial attempts to acculturate workers. Efforts to address these disparities will not originate from the firm.

The rapid settlement of companies in the Mauritian BPO sector as well as the lack of a clear demarcation of distinct expectations did not help develop a full acknowledgement of skill requirements that were likely to emerge at organisational level. In the light of employers’ dissatisfaction, there appears to have been poor anticipation of the extent to which possible qualitative shortcomings in the Mauritian education system would be of significant relevance for the sector. In a context where heightened employer efforts toward acculturation cannot necessarily be interpreted as a guarantee for employment security (Crouch et al 2004), the fact that employers may have been misinformed, potentially generates additional risks for Mauritian BPO workers. Given the critical appraisal of the role of the state provided by respondents, I elaborate on some of the contradictions reported earlier in respect of government policies and discuss their implications below.

### **8.1.2 E&T policies and systems: further contradictions**

In chapter 4, I also discussed how Mauritius has embraced the concept of the knowledge-based economy model with recent educational policies geared toward the expansion of higher education. The government's high skills agenda announced in its 2008-2020 Education and Human Resources Strategic Plan (EHRSP 2007), has focused more upon quantitative expansion at Higher Education level. I described how this endeavour has led to the opening of further higher education institutions at national level, in addition to the settlement of branches of various European universities across the island. While Mauritius has espoused the principles heralded by advocates of the knowledge-based economy model in advanced countries, the qualitative improvements that the BPO sector currently needs have not received simultaneous attention.

Issues reported in this study call into question the extent to which some of the immediate and 'real' problems that have emerged with the recent development of service sectors such as BPO are adequately taken into account. Discourses borrowed from advanced economies distort the Mauritian government's attendance to more context-specific needs in education and training. BPO requires that workers possess a series of skills that cannot necessarily be addressed with the mere expansion of technical qualification opportunities. Findings add weight to observations made by educationists such as Brown and Lauder (2006) who have argued that the pursuit of a high-skill or knowledge economy cannot stand on its own.

In addition, quantitative expansion of higher education is not always followed by significant demands for high-skilled workers and may result in the creation of a pool of overqualified workers (Brown and Lauder 2006; Casey 2011, also cited in chapter 2). As Casey (2011) notes, in the case of advanced countries, the knowledge-based economy and the discourses that underpin the model contain various contradictions and disparities. Besides, attention to the development of non-technical skills given the contemporary shape of work is equally required. As the present study demonstrates, tertiary education expansion in the case of Mauritius does not necessarily address the 'real' problem facing BPO companies, although these jobs and their relocation have been made possible by technological evolution. Generic or linear assumptions regarding the shift towards a knowledge economy or toward quantitative expansion in education

may be problematic in relation to specific contexts. In the context of Mauritius, where one of the pillars of the economy involves low-skilled BPO work, the supremacy of its fixated pursuit of a high skill economy can be argued to be inherently problematic.

Findings point to disparities identified or implied by various respondents in regard to Mauritian workers' education both at compulsory and post-compulsory level. A notable phenomenon involves the skill mismatch equally identified by respondents in this study and the Mauritius Human Resource Development Council (HRDC). Findings also point to recent efforts made by the Mauritian government as it has become aware of some of the weaknesses and challenges also reported in this study. However, further contradictions are noted in respect of statutory intervention under the aegis of its Human Resource Development Council (HRDC). To date, the measures initiated by the HRDC and reported above have not been convincing according to various respondents.

Responses provided by the HRDC officer interviewed in this study indicate statutory intervention in an attempt to find strategic but contingent remedies to the situation. Various newspaper articles published during and after the 2012 data collection period have confirmed these initiatives. The setting up of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) academy and the more recent launching of several pre-employment training programmes as announced in the local press are clear expressions of the intentions of the Mauritian government to attend to some of the employer needs identified over time. However, findings also indicate respondents' lack of faith in such government initiatives in which a vocational approach is taken to BPO-related work. The ICT academy initiative did not increase employers' faith in the government's vocational and generic approach to training.

In chapter 2, I explained how Crouch et al. (2004: 219) provide potential rationales for this lack of faith in government intervention at training level. Recalling their analysis here, I discussed how the scholars argue that there is an inevitable gulf between education providers and firms when the public education system is the main provider of vocational education. Defining this phenomenon as an emerging 'major handicap' in a fast-changing environment, the scholars go on to explain that 'it is extremely difficult for systems of this kind to respond quickly to market opportunities for making new and better uses of work skills' (ibid). Alternatively, initiatives such as the provision of levy-

grant schemes as launched by the Mauritian Human Resource development Council (HRDC) may have beneficial effects (Crouch et al. 2004). However, the lack of awareness regarding these schemes, as reported in this study, calls into question the effectiveness of such statutory initiatives. Their effectiveness depends upon the extent to which companies are adequately informed about such interference by public agencies and are willing to take advantage of these new possibilities. A clear demarcation between the role and duties of each group of actors in the sector has yet to be defined. That the HR manager at company B was unaware of the opportunities which the HRDC has set for BPO employers in terms of worker skill development also reveals a potential lack of effective diffusion of information and synergy across the sector. Since the rapid emergence of the sector, there may not have been adequate efforts to ensure this synergy.

Another paradox, which concerns higher skills and the wider ICT/BPO sector of Mauritius, has also been observed in this study. Educationist 3 provided an extensive explanation in which the participant described graduate unemployment in Mauritius as a significant and contemporary phenomenon. However, the respondent equally mentioned how the failure of the Mauritian labour market to meet employer demands has had to be compensated through the recruitment of workers from Madagascar to fill IT-related and positions. It has been noted earlier how the Mauritian work pool is limited in size in comparison with various other countries of the Global South. However, the fact that graduate unemployment is as relevant as the recruitment of Madagascan expatriates for jobs of contemporary forms is non-negligible and depicts a skill mismatch that may have been poorly envisaged. Arguably, the phenomenon indicates that the Mauritian government's focus on high skill development has yet to trigger positive outcomes. It also calls into question the extent to which specific skill requirements are being addressed strategically.

Overall, the extent to which government intervention and its so-called 'palliative' measures have been effective remains highly debatable. In the case depicted by this study, it appears that employers' short-term approach to training is merely being compensated by further short term or inadequately structured statutory contributions. Whether these government-training initiatives are designed to support young workers' school-to-work transition is not clearly identifiable in this study. Instead, responses

reported in previous chapters indicate explicit intentions to support employer endeavours in order to make the sector work. However, such endeavours are in turn implicitly depicted by employers and educationists as a mere replica of in-firm training provision without the company-specific content that would make such training relevant and effective.

The dilemmas described here may be indicative of two main factors which affect the BPO sector of Mauritius as developed to date. First, the institutionalised public-private partnership that has characterised other economic diversification strategies across the Mauritian economic path appears to be equally present in the case of the BPO sector. Among various aspects, this has been demonstrated by the adjustments made by the Mauritian government in order to cater for institutional features that would be of great appeal to the firm. Based on the responses provided by the BPO expert in this study, this partnership is also relevant in regard to training policies and measures for the sector. As a member of the HRDC, the expert mentioned his involvement in the design of the ICT academy.

From a managerial perspective, however, the BPO expert was equally critical of its inherently generic approach and potential incapacity to keep pace with the real and changing needs of companies. While this has been noted as a typical feature of government's vocational approach to training and skill creation (Crouch et al. 2004), poorly anticipated challenges now encountered by BPO companies and expressed by employers of Companies A and B indicate that the operationalization of this partnership in relation to training is occurring at an inconsistent pace. In other words, training needs may have been afforded less importance during the development phase of the sector, thus indicating excessive reliance upon existing conditions, institutions and skill levels to meet required standards.

Second, pillars of the economy that have emerged within diversification strategies – namely the textile and hospitality industries – may not have raised fundamental questions regarding general education. While the textile industry did not require workers to possess a specific set of skills to operate, training was institutionalised in the Hotel and Tourism Industry through the setting up of a hotel school in 1971 (see chapter 4). As findings indicate, the Tourism industry is often used as a benchmark both for policy

formulation and by managers in call centre operations. However, the nature of work within the industry did not necessarily present education-related challenges, as is the case for the BPO sector. Ramesh (2004), for instance, argues that Business Process Outsourcing has been responsible for the development of a new working class, with distinct identities. While it is common knowledge that the tourist industry also relies upon personal aptitudes and social skills in order to provide adequate customer care, the study demonstrates that skills needed in the BPO sector are more diverse. I argue that it is not adequate to rely upon these past experiences to attend to the needs that eventually emerged within the BPO sector. New requirements would have called for institutional change and more manifest innovative approaches to education and training, just as the Mauritian government initiated in the realms of work.

## ***8.2 Developing workers' agency: contradictions and limitations***

Further to highlighting issues concerning the education and training of young workers, findings reported in earlier chapters, call into question young individuals' level of agency as workers and citizens of Mauritius. In the study, the notion of agency has emerged in three forms. Within the type of employability skills required from workers in contemporary organisations, there lies an underlying expectation of individual agency in the form of autonomy and initiative at work despite an equal and contradictory requirement of workers' obedience. For instance, the list of non-technical skills mentioned by Educationist 1 can be associated with a notion that workers need to have the 'capability to act' at work. Learner agency has also been mentioned in this study given that the Mauritian government now intends to foster its development among young job seekers as reported by Human Resource Development Council (HRDC). Finally, the study also highlights critical observations regarding young workers' political agency and citizenship notions. As defined in chapters 1 and 2, social citizenship pertains to the exercise of solidarity and membership of a particular political order while the individual's agency involves his or her quest for self-reproduction while developing a will to live together. In this study, social citizenship is understood to include the development of a person's individuality and political ideology as well as his or her conscience for the community to which he or she belongs.

In regard to agency at work and within employment relationships, findings respectively indicate contradictions in employers' expectations and workers' lack of awareness and agential reflexes. Workers' learner agency appears to be significantly low, while the context within which they operate increasingly expects them to make sound individual career and education-related decisions. More specifically, young Mauritian workers operate in a context where they are required to develop their employability and learning capacities while facing individualisation in their respective employment relationships. Below I discuss these contradictions and limitations further.

### **8.2.1 Worker individualisation, agency and professionalism**

Based on responses and recent literature on the economic development of Mauritius (mainly Grégoire et al. 2011), it appears that the BPO sector employs a young workforce that equally includes school leavers and university graduates. While findings indicate that backgrounds and previous experiences vary, workers at companies A and B more commonly reported their limited work experience – if any – prior to taking employment within the BPO sector. In other words, the BPO sector employs a workforce for whom, work is often new. Findings confirm other scholars' observations of the normalised erosion of collectivism at work in contemporary organisations which are well epitomised by Business Process Outsourcing (see for instance Ramesh 2004, Vaidyanathan 2012). Similarly, educationists' and Industrial Relations experts' recommendations in this study infer that there is still room within national education to put in place pedagogical mechanisms and curriculum innovation that would allow young people to develop their citizenship skills. Findings indicate that such initiatives have yet to be developed consciously. Clear dispositions to raise young individuals' rights awareness within the national education system are currently not in place. Such awareness, and the unionist culture present in more traditional industries, would have had to come from elsewhere in the case of these young Mauritian workers.

Importantly, findings indicate policy intentions formulated by the Mauritian Government in 2012 to increase worker individualisation within the employment relationship (see chapter 6). As noted in the literature (for instance Noronha and D'Cruz 2006), the weakening or absence of unions in contemporary organisations such as those

operating in the ICT/BPO sector is no uncommon phenomenon. As hinted by the 2011 industrial disputes (see Chapter 4) and this study, young Mauritian workers do not possess the level of agency that would allow them to face the implications of such institutional arrangements. Trade unionists and activists' concerns regarding young workers' capacities to organise themselves and to face increasing worker individualisation in the employment relationship is a prominent theme that emerged from the empirical study. The typical absence of a unionist legacy and past in new organisations indicates that the conceptualisation of workers' awareness of their rights protection is a project that requires a new mind-set and form. The low propensity of young Mauritian workers' to embrace these new contemporary challenges is apparent. There is evidence that this phenomenon may have been an implicit institutional opportunity for foreign companies and for the Mauritian government. It is a factor that appears to have facilitated easy and ostensibly non-conflictual relationships between employers and workers in the sector.

As activists reported, attempts by some workers to resort to traditional collective endeavours towards rights protection in the BPO sector have failed not only due to possible employers' repression but also to other workers' willingness to associate themselves with corporate efforts to individualise workers. From the responses reported above, it is not clear whether this is due to workers' perception of unionism as an 'industrial relic' for which there is no longer a place in contemporary conditions as observed elsewhere (see chapter 2). However, the lack of knowledge on unionism and the absence of awareness of the significance of knowing their rights have appeared to be more relevant factors. For instance, unawareness of potential employment insecurity was frequently observed.

In addition, the limited size of Mauritius-based BPO companies was mentioned as a hindrance to the contemplation of mobilisation potential. The size of companies has been argued to be unfavourable to the shaping of a critical mass, which would have proved instrumental to workers' collective strength at organisational level. Therefore, questions can be raised in regard to claims that would advocate the development of workers' agency in the employment relationship in Mauritius. However, such claims may prove challenging and are at the risk of being left unconsidered in the contemporary context. Given the current mind-set and low agency potential, assuming



that workers will be able to face increasing individualisation in itself is arguably inconsistent.

Findings therefore confirm that Mauritian workers are also faced with the pressures brought by the normalisation of employment insecurity in BPO sectors in general and in other types of organisations in global economic conditions (Brown et al. 2003; Noronha and D'Cruz 2006). However, in an environment where the government's pro-business agenda has led to a deliberate intention to increase worker individualisation in their employment relationships, Mauritian workers' low level of agency appears to be doubly problematic. Some respondents argued that the flexicurity programme, which has been included in the new employment legislation in Mauritius, acts as an expression of government support to workers amid the high level of individualisation and insecurity. However, the extent to which the flexicurity programme compensates for workers' lack of rights protection and awareness can be called into question.

In addition, more latent forms of control at organisational level can be argued to contribute to worker individualisation. An example that has emerged from the data pertains to the discourse of professionalism and its deployment by employers and workers alike. A major control mechanism discussed in the literature and apparent in this study pertains to the deployment of professionalism as a discourse. As noted in earlier chapters, the deployment of the discourse of professionalism is facilitated in contemporary organisations by workers' appeal to the aspired status it implies (Noronha and D'Cruz 2006). In line with the literature, findings demonstrate how the discourse is used by managers in order to secure desired behaviour and attitudes from workers and legitimise their expectations. Although the main virtues of professionalism as a synonymous to work ethic have received popular acceptance across the world, it can be argued that professionalism in this sense appears to be a function of the respective organisational acculturation processes and cannot entail specific conduct on workers' part.

In addition to varieties of employer expectations, Crouch et al. (2004) explain how expectations of workers' behaviour are inherently characterised by contradictions and disparities. For instance, autonomy, a feature conceptually derived from professionalism, is coveted by employers in contemporary organisations. However, it is

also accompanied by the requirement of obedience which is equally perceived as a valuable non-technical skill at times within organisations assuming similar typologies as those where autonomy is purportedly required (ibid). In such circumstances, the extent to which the deployment of professionalism contributes to the shaping of individual agency can be called into question. Both managers' contradictory expectations regarding 'professional behaviour' and workers related confusion is captured in this study (see Chapter 6). In one particular instance, expected professional behaviour was defined by a BPO worker as the act of 'bootlicking' vis-à-vis managers rather than as a developmental opportunity for workers.

The institutionalisation of professionalism has percolated through the BPO world due to the shape of work it affords. The office-based character of BPO work leads workers and managers alike to agree upon the fact that BPO operations consist of professional environments. The routine and basic tasks that BPO work involves are camouflaged and overlooked due to the infrastructure and configurations within which such work is performed. Findings confirm insights from BPO literature, which highlights workers' efforts to professionalise their jobs. The argument I make is that workers willingly sacrifice their agential capacities to be illusively considered as professionals. Also, due to the individualising dimension afforded by the discourse of professionalism (Vaidyanathan 2012), potential for the development of agency and social citizenship at work are relatively low.

### **8.2.2 Workers' capabilities and agency: contemporary implications**

In the report compiled upon completion of its 2012 survey, the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) of Mauritius stated its endeavour to devolve the onus of skills development upon the individual worker (see chapter 7). The Mauritian government appears to be gradually espousing the idea that the individual worker ought to be responsible for his or her level of employability by developing his or her learner agency. In the literature, the concept of employability has also been discussed in terms of the level of agency increasingly expected from workers in relation to both work and education. In chapter 2, I discussed how the concept of employability has more likely implied a shift of the onus on the individual of his or her personal skills development

(see also Boreham 2004; Crouch et al. 2004; Orton 2011). In this respect, the role of the state pertains to expansion in education provision (Boreham 2004; Casey 2011).

While expansion in higher education has equally been noted as a current phenomenon in Mauritius (see Chapter 4), the onus placed upon the individual has been identified as problematic in the 2012 HRDC report. There is acknowledgement of the need to develop young Mauritian individuals' learner agency much further in order for them to embrace this mind-set shift. As reported in chapter 7, the HRDC of Mauritius also launched a career guidance programme in 2012. More recently, one of the prominent national newspapers reported a new HRDC campaign, which involves HRDC intervention in secondary schools in order to deliver talks regarding work culture and job application. A course on the writing of individual curriculum vitae was also part of the programme. However, the career guidance campaign as depicted by the HRDC officer in this study appeared more as a recruitment project for the sector rather than a delivery of career guidance to young individuals per se.

While the HRDC career campaign may be designed to direct young individuals towards future job opportunities, the extent to which it operates in favour of young workers' aspirations can be called into question. For instance, the French CEO of company B identified the risk that lies with the tendency of the Mauritian education system to foster the phenomenon of developing individuals into sector-specific 'soldiers'. If such pro-employment strategies are to be followed and institutionalised in the future, a pattern of narrowly catering for each emerging sector may remain. As a result, a departure from the acknowledgement of workers' diverse aspirations can be anticipated. Hart (2013) for instance warns against this narrow focus in her analysis of the UK education policies (see chapter 2). This empirical study calls for similar acknowledgements and is critical of the failure to acknowledge a more comprehensive range of aspirations in policy development.

Furthermore, the need for a holistic approach to statutory policies has been extensively claimed by advocates of the Capability Approach, including Hart (2013) and others (for example, Sen 1999; Bryson and O'Neil 2009, 2010; Orton 2011). The main concepts pertaining to this approach have been discussed in previous chapters (see chapters 2 and 5). Recalling its overarching argument, advocates argue for the need to

envisage individual capabilities beyond work. As an alternative to more neoliberal and instrumental conceptualisations of capability, the approach takes into account workers' aspirations and endeavours towards both work and the lives they have reason to value. The development of work competencies is envisaged as being part of human development rather than human development *par excellence*. Given the array of statutory discourses within which education policies have been strictly related to economic imperatives in recent years, advocates have been critical of the merely instrumental approach afforded to individuals' skills and capabilities at work underpinned by firms and policy makers alike.

A more holistic approach here implies a broader perspective from the government so that policies are synchronised across E&T policies and systems as well as with other relevant institutions. However, the Mauritian government's palliative measures taken in the case of the BPO sector indicate poor anticipation and coordination. It is clear that employment policy has been explicitly designed to foster an institutional environment favourable to employers in contemporary business operations. As a result, it can be argued that policy endeavours have so far aimed solely at improving the employability of job seekers (Orton 2011). However, attempts to remedy its poor anticipation of training needs has equally led the Mauritian government to resort to more contingent, narrow and potentially short-term measures in regard to education and training. It is understood that its recruitment campaign has been ill-defined as a career guidance initiative and therefore does not reflect an approach that would be more likely to allow individuals to develop and cultivate their agency both as a worker and learner. The case of Mauritius adds weight to Crouch et al.'s (2004:viii) observation that the government tends to depart from its capacity to cater for public and collective concerns due to an uneven focus upon the private sector's priorities.

One further contradiction can be observed in regard to the lack of workers' opportunities to develop their individual agency. In section 7.1.2, I discussed respondents' critical appraisal of the national education system. In activities such as Business Process Outsourcing, the so-called employability skills can be argued to be of basic human character and therefore cannot be considered as being related to work only. Failure to adopt measures that will allow individuals to develop such skills because of their seemingly non-economic character appears contradictory and counter-productive

to the skill requirements formulated by contemporary organisations. In the contemporary conditions experienced by Mauritian workers, it appears that agency both at organisational level and beyond is both desired and precluded.

The extent to which such a narrow policy approach to education and training is conducive to both lifelong learning and to individual life achievements can be called into question. In addition to the lack of young individuals' agency as observed in the study, government provision of capabilities in the sense of opportunities and choices of pathways as discussed in chapter 2 appears to require more attention. Findings indicate a misconception of career guidance, which, in the case of the Business Process Outsourcing sector, has taken the form of a pro-employer recruitment campaign rather than the diffusion of adequate information that would trigger mindful career and life choices for individuals. As a result, the extent to which young Mauritian citizens are given the opportunity to formulate and actualise their own 'functionings' or the things they may value doing or being may have yet to be more carefully addressed. To date, it can be argued that individuals' levels of agency as workers, learners and citizens, have not been fostered adequately for them to face their individualisation and the level of insecurity with which they are confronted in contemporary conditions.

Moreover, the overarching paradox inferred in chapter 7 rests with the lack of dispositions favourable for the development of a set of non-technical skills that would make Mauritian workers more employable. It appears that they may not have been granted with more mindful consideration by the national education system due to their non-economic character. Issues reported in previous chapters also pertain to the institutionalised but increasingly obsolescent mind-set afforded to the national education that originates from the colonial past. In chapter 3, I mentioned the various criticisms expressed by several Mauritian scholars regarding the excessively exam-oriented education system that has persisted in the Mauritian context at compulsory level. In chapters 6 and 7, I also reported my participants' responses regarding the lack of adaptation of the system to more contemporary requirements. Arguably, skills such as critical thinking, creative reflection and initiative would have contributed to the development of both Mauritian workers' level of agency and employability. However, such a level of agency equally appears to present a potential threat to the advantage that is implicitly enjoyed by foreign employers as its absence to date may have facilitated

the management of young Mauritian workers at organisational level. As reported in chapter 6, young Mauritian workers working for European companies are depicted as a 'manageable' workforce. Some of the culture-cognitive features shared by Mauritian workers as a labour pool have naturally facilitated preclusion of individual agency.

As noted earlier, the conditions within which independent Mauritius has been built have not necessarily included the formation of a nationalist sentiment and identity that would have been favourable to the *real* construction of the nation with a culturally driven awareness of ideological implications and specificities. Respondents have also deplored the absence of provision for the development of rights awareness in the compulsory education programme. As Casey (2004) argues, education and skill formation are required to be 'directed towards goals of self and community development needed for living and working in a participatory democracy.' In another project, the scholar points to the importance of developing 'critical and creative reflection as well as decision-making at all levels' (Casey 2011: 175). As an intrinsic feature of education, the development of citizenship skills has attributes that would benefit both the economy and society. While young Mauritian individuals are described as having no voice, no unionist culture, a low sense of participatory democracy and low awareness and recognition of ideology, increasing worker individualisation in the contemporary context and the absence of a mind-set in favour of the development of individual agency arguably implies the deepening of agency lacunas that already required attention at an earlier time.

In other words, while the narrow policy focus on economic imperatives and distorted views of the purpose of education may be thought to be necessary and adequate to sustain economic resilience, challenges reported in this study indicate risks that may equally concern Mauritian workers and the Mauritian economy. The nature of activities within which Mauritius is involved in contemporary conditions demonstrates that such an approach to education may paradoxically be a disservice to absolute economic success. Equally, the persistence of certain colonial remnants which may have dwarfed awareness of the need to attend to non-economic spheres such individuals' agency are no longer helpful for the Mauritian economy and society. I discuss this below as I turn to the challenges that these contradictions imply from a more general perspective for the post-colonial institutions of Mauritius.

### **8.3 Colonial and Post-colonial institutions: contemporary challenges**

As discussed in chapter 1, there is no intention in this study to reproduce the scholarly debates to which social forms of colonialism and post-colonialism have been subjected. Nevertheless, the study is in no denial of the persistent presence of colonial bearing upon former colonies such as Mauritius. While colonialism's cultural logics and persisting effects (Gandhi 1998) are not denied in this study, they are more precisely considered a given. As discussed in chapter 3, Mauritius still struggles with some of its colonial legacies. In addition, there still exists the ambivalence between independence and dependence in the case of Mauritius. Although Mauritius has followed its own institutional path in order to ensure economic development and sustainability, it is clear that economic dependence intrinsically related to former colonial ties has been an inherent feature of Mauritian path-dependency since the first decade of the post-colonial era. In other words, falling into *historical amnesia*<sup>24</sup> would be unrealistic and potentially counter-productive.

Despite its economic success, it can be argued that Mauritius remains geographically and perhaps economically limited to attempt to operate without the remnants of these institutional connections and dynamics. Although Mauritius has been heralded for its economic success and resilience, the study points to lacunas that are today affecting a major pillar of the Mauritian economy and are therefore non negligible for further economic development. Given that the empirical study calls for a new outlook upon skills and agency development among Mauritian citizens, I discuss the extent to which contemporary conditions have brought new implications for post-colonial Mauritius.

#### **8.3.1 Education in Mauritius: beyond the post-colonial condition**

As illustrated in this study, Mauritius has now set to open up its economy and to operate even more decisively at a global level. Arguably, the lack of dynamism afforded by some of its institutions requires attention. It appears that the possibility of bringing more mindful institutional change to E&T policies was not equally prioritised.

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<sup>24</sup> Term used by Gandhi (1998: 7).

For instance, issues pertaining to the level of young Mauritian workers' employability, and employers' eventual dissatisfaction, are indicative of this potential lack of coordination or, for want of a better term, institutional disconnection. As findings indicate, attending to manifest institutional change in the realms of employment legislation without the parallel attention to other connected institutions such as education and training has proved inadequate.

Contemporary recommendations of international organisations, such as UNESCO, are reminders of current requirements to be fulfilled by national Education and Training institutions. As discussed in earlier chapters, UNESCO has recently called for the reconsideration of the dynamism to be afforded by national education systems. In addition to institutional change, a concern for constant renewal and adaptability is clearly recommended by international organisations. As Mauritius appears to have now set to work at an international level that goes beyond post-colonial trade agreements, concepts such as lifelong learning and the need to develop learner agency can no longer be overlooked by its national Education and Training institutions.

As Casey (2011) also notes, lifelong learning scholarship has advocated the importance of considering how 'quality of education and learning during the formative years are of crucial importance for the ability and motivation to engage in further learning later in life.' Qualitative lacunas identified by several respondents call for an urge to remedy the situation from compulsory level onwards. Findings also point to the lack of global acumen among young Mauritian workers who join dynamic sectors such as Business Process Outsourcing. As a must in contemporary conditions (Robinson 2011) and an intrinsic element recommended by UNESCO, a different approach is needed. Arguably, issues reported by my respondents are significantly concerned with a lack of attention afforded to contemporary principles promoted by UNESCO despite their relevance for the context of Mauritius.

### **8.3.2 Political Agency and Citizenship in Contemporary Mauritius**

In chapter 3, the high level of participation and tripartite dialogue among domestic work and employment institutions was noted. However, as Subramanian (2001: 5) pertinently underlined, the phenomenon mainly concerns servants of the Mauritian



public sector. In this study, the same was observed for workers operating in more traditional industries. One activist reported that in such companies, the unionist culture has persisted over time, especially with experienced workers' strong attempts to pass the legacy onto younger recruits. While the demise of these institutions has been highly documented in the literature, findings point to context-specific elements that may have affected the development of political agency across generations in post-colonial Mauritius.

On the one hand, experts suggest that there has been an apparent failure to institutionalise the cultivation of political agency and ideological notions among the generations that followed the tumultuous decade of the 1970s. Socio-cultural legacies of a colonial past and repression developed by the government in office in the 1970s have not been conducive to the development of such agency (see Chapter 3). In addition, contemporary conditions not only present inherent risks for Mauritian workers operating in the global arena but consist in work environments that are poorly conducive to the development of participatory democracy and citizenship at work. Based on the accounts provided by various experts and educationists, it appears that neither the social context of Mauritius nor contemporary work arrangements within which young Mauritian workers are brought to operate, have been favourable to the development of youth individual agency.

Moreover, with the liberalisation of markets and production regimes as described in chapter 1, national labour markets such as that of Mauritius are to suffer the underlying pressures triggered by international competition. This is due to the significance afforded by governments of the Global South to business partnerships with multinational companies, in order to fulfil their economic development strategies. As discussed earlier, young workers operating in sectors such as Business Process Outsourcing are, as an aggregate, automatically at risk when it comes to employment security. The supremacy enjoyed by private enterprises has led to the legitimisation of firms' demands that national and cultural institutions provide a disciplined and skilled workforce while these same firms erode socio-cultural institutions (Casey 2011). In the case of Mauritius, employability or non-technical skills lacunas identified as being related to some of the Mauritian workers' culture-cognitive features present additional underlying

risks that may result from foreign employers' dissatisfaction and indirectly add onto the level of employment insecurity.

Clearly, the Business Process Outsourcing sector of Mauritius is far from embodying a 'potential [site] and workshop of citizen practice and sovereignty' as more traditional workplaces may have been (Casey 2011). The urge for workers to mobilise therefore remains rather weak. Casey (2011) also distinguishes social industrial citizenship from the more liberal notion of individual rights and freedoms. As the scholar notes, social (industrial) citizenship inherently involve a sense of community and solidarity (ibid). In studies conducted on the BPO sectors of other cheap labour destinations, it has been highlighted how the nature of the job and work arrangements such as shift systems do not provide workers with opportunities to practice and develop solidarity at work (see for instance, Ramesh 2004; Vaidyanathan 2012). In a similar vein, it has been noted how BPO work is also considered by individuals to be inherently temporary along their career path. Workers' short-term approach to BPO work therefore affects both skills and agency development in the contemporary work environment.

While being a potential institutional advantage for private firms, the low level of political agency that followed the tumultuous decade of the 1970s also raises questions regarding Mauritius' post-independence re-invention. The lack of agency amid populations of former colonies has been extensively discussed as an inherent feature of the postcolonial condition (for instance Spivak 1985 in Gandhi 1998; Said 1989). For instance, Gayatri Spivak's (1985) prominent interrogation: '[c]an the subaltern speak?' has led to further debates regrouped under the scholarly label of subaltern studies. The institutionalisation of subordination to former European empires, whose reproduction in contemporary conditions has often been identified as neo-colonialism (Loomba 2005), has been deplored. Spivak's (1985)<sup>25</sup> rhetorical question infers a concern for the lack of voice afforded to members of populations from former colonies.

Other scholars have also analysed the institutional power of colonialist mechanisms and their persistence after decolonisation. Prominent sociologist Bourdieu, for instance, has developed several of his concepts from his analysis of the social mechanisms that

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<sup>25</sup> Spivak (1985) as cited in Gandhi (1998: 2)

have emerged from colonial domination. Through a pessimistic account of the phenomenon, Bourdieu and collaborators (for instance Bourdieu and Passeron 1964) note how these mechanisms of domination and social reproduction have been effective and well maintained by a certain group to the detriment of another. An overall analysis of Bourdieu's work helps detect how he extends this pessimism to education, which, according to the sociologist has not necessarily been successful in dismantling such cognitive mechanisms despite its empowering attribute in general.

Although contemporary conditions differ, the BPO experience is a reminder of some colonial legacies, especially with Mauritian workers operating under the authority of European employers. The nature of call centre work, here represented by company A, inherently requires workers to assimilate their employers' cultural features as processes of accent neutralisation strongly illustrates. Other attempts to 'turn French' as well as a certain level of docility – though criticised by some workers – have been identified in this study. Clearly, the post-colonial condition of various countries of the Global South has served Business Process Outsourcing both in relation to a certain degree of cultural proximity and knowledge as well as a lack of agency discussed in this study as a form of 'docility'. Regardless of union affiliation or political concerns, such neo-colonial configurations are clearly non-propitious for the development of agency germane to that required for social citizenship.

However, the present study highlights a paradox. Workers' post-colonial condition and cultural features now appear as both an impediment and a facility for European employers. Arguably, the post-colonial mindset now bears a paradox in contemporary conditions. On the one hand, post-colonial cognitive features such as obedience, passivity and a form of 'docility' may facilitate foreign employers' management of the Mauritian workforce to the detriment of workers' agency. On the other hand, skills discussed in section 7.3, namely initiative, critical thinking and decision-making are now required from workers employed in multinational organisations while being equally necessary for the real development of a participatory democracy. The challenge lies with the contradictions that these skills trigger. Employers in contemporary organisations such as BPO companies seem to expect such skills from workers while they may not necessarily promote the development of these skills. In the contemplation of how Mauritius can move forward, responses have similarly pointed to more

consideration to the development at compulsory education level of neglected aspects, such as rights awareness among the youth. The study indicates that this remains a concern that has yet to be more mindfully addressed by Mauritian policy makers and institutions.

## **8.4 Conclusion**

Amid the institutionalised pursuit of economic resilience, the lack of attention afforded to some institutional factors in favour of those believed to be more directly related to economic imperatives is noted in the case of Mauritius. Clearly, Mauritius demonstrates both its capacity to cater for the Global North and a high degree of flexibility in fulfilling this endeavour. Economically speaking, Mauritius has addressed the economic challenge that emerged with the loss of preferential access to European markets for its exports. In contrast, other institutions bequeathed from its colonial past, have been more rigid and therefore more resistant to change. The obtuse perspective that all that has to be done lies with providing European investors with institutional advantages is no longer helpful. Other aspects that a priori seem less directly related to its economic imperatives but which, this study argues, are equally important now deserve attention. Ironically, attending to the need for embracing institutional change and a mind-set shift in regard to education in Mauritius will not be beneficial only to social concerns. While the study underpins the assumption that ‘economic action is always embedded in a society’ (Streeck 2009: 7), the case of the Business Process Outsourcing sector demonstrates how some of the skills required at work may equally benefit the economy despite their more social character.

The critical juncture at which Mauritius had arrived at the start of the new century was not only of economic order. A mind-set change at government level did not accompany the new economic projects that Mauritius embraced as it followed its path dependent strategies. As Crouch (2005: 77) argues, ‘path dependence does not characterise all institutions.’ Clearly, the problematic character associated with workers’ lack of adequate skills and agency can only come from a deeper source. Questions can be raised in regard to the role of domestic institutions in regard to the development of individuals’ capacities and agency. As Hart (2013) argues, the

significant complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements cannot be ignored.

Other scholars have pointed to the fact that actors' power resources depend on the institutional arrangements that both constrain and facilitate their behaviour. For instance, Godard (2004: 236) contends that institutions have the power to provide the 'cognitive and normative templates for interpretation and ultimately for strategic interaction.' The discussion above points to the failure of the Mauritian government to take a holistic approach as it embarked onto the BPO experience. It also indicates how previous assumptions have been challenged by the requirements of the sector and contemporary conditions. Tensions and contradictions reported in chapters 6 and 7 have emerged due to assumptions made regarding the extent to which the colonial legacy would casually fit with recent requirements placed by BPO activities. Although the study focuses on the case of young workers operating in this sector, findings point to challenges which bear more general implications for institutions at national level. They suggest a need for national institutions to envisage the development of skills that are related to both workers' current employment situations and spheres beyond. While these assumptions mainly concern Mauritian Education and Training institutions, the study raises issues that contribute to demonstrating the importance of considering the critical connections between economy, work and education. Assumptions and actions, which appear inconsistent with the real needs highlighted by the study, are argued to require policy attention. It also highlights the implications of envisaging individuals' capabilities beyond work. In chapter 9, I conclude the study and discuss prospects that have emerged from the empirical research in terms of potential institutional development and building.

## CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I outline the main prospects raised by the challenges discussed in previous chapters. Recalling my research objectives, I have set to contextualise the island-nation of Mauritius, which has recently endeavoured to participate actively in the so-called global knowledge economy. The study has identified some of the challenges facing Mauritian workers operating in the Business Process Outsourcing sector. Overall, challenges pertain mainly to lacunas in terms of workers' skill capacities and agency. As such, I argue that the challenges have implications for national Education and Training systems in Mauritius. Throughout the study, I have focused on the institutions of work and education and have endeavoured to highlight some of the major contemporary connections between the two realms. While I have aimed to contribute to political economic discourses which have found expression in the past decades across the world, findings highlight a series of challenges facing policy makers due to poorly anticipated contradictions that remain context-specific.

In a concern for context-specificity, this study has been framed by theoretical perspectives that draw on historical institutionalist scholarship. In Thelen's (2002) terms, I have acknowledged the 'explanatory power' of the approach. While laying significant emphasis on how institutions evolve over time, the study takes account of historical events, which might have triggered institutional change or allowed continuity. As I have set to understand rationales that have underpinned policy-making in Mauritius, I focused on the role of history in the shaping of institutions and of the behaviour of distinct groups of actors. In line with my first research question, I examined the institutional context within which young Mauritian workers operate. In order to do so, I first sought to understand the path taken by successive Mauritian governments, especially since decolonisation in 1968. The study acknowledges socio-cultural and institutional features that have started to shape since the very beginning of the existence of Mauritius as a geographical and colonised location. As I critically explored the challenges facing young Mauritian individuals and national policy makers, some of the predominant institutional patterns as well as socio-cultural and normative forces were identified and discussed. Finally, findings also report more recent facts which depict the institutional context as it is today. They highlight its flexible

character, which is favourable to multinational companies, and the risks that this implies for young Mauritian workers.

In addition, I argue that the current study offers further insights to observations made by a group of Mauritian and French scholars in a collaborative study based on the economic development experienced in Mauritius from 1968 onwards (Grégoire et al.'s 2011). The overarching argument, which echoes through the series of articles compiled by editors Grégoire et al. (2011), pertains to the scope for mindful institutional change, given that Mauritius has reached a critical juncture which requires new attention. As noted in earlier chapters, the scholars advocated more policy consideration regarding the new demands upon its labour market and its Education and Training (E&T) institutions. The scholars also took a particular focus on the Mauritian government's aims to embrace the knowledge-based economy model. Although Grégoire et al.'s (2011) series of analyses attended to relevant topics, including both the historical and contemporary overview of the Mauritian education system, their concluding note called for further research and more specific analysis of reform needs. While the present study is equally exploratory, I have sought to focus on more particular aspects which are discussed in this study as challenges that impact directly or indirectly on young Mauritian workers.

More specifically, I have demonstrated how changing Work and Employment institutions in Mauritius would have required more attention to Education and Training systems by the Mauritian government. In respect of my second research question, I argue that changing economic conditions in Mauritius equally called for institutional adjustment in the realm of Education and Training, while there seems to have been a more explicit focus on employment legislation. In other words, it can be argued Education and Training (E&T) policies have not evolved as much as other institutions which are relevant to economic development.

In this study, I have explored the case of Mauritius by focusing on the development of its Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector. In addition to being an epitome of the contemporary shape of work, my other rationale lies with the fact that the BPO sector has gained prominence in Mauritius during the past decade. As a new pillar of the Mauritian economy and an employment creation strategy, the BPO sector is given

much importance by the Mauritian government, which has eagerly adjusted to new institutional requirements triggered by the development of the sector. As noted earlier, adjustments have mainly involved the establishment of more flexible employment legislation as well as various incentives to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from countries of the Global North. The major industrial disputes which erupted in 2011 in a major BPO company have implicitly indicated out some of the risks and challenges facing Mauritian workers operating in such configurations.

The challenges identified in this study indicate that the poor anticipation of the Mauritian government lies more with adjustment needs within its E&T systems and policies. They also indicate that the skills which needed to be developed are more transferable and social skills which could contribute both to economic and social progress within the Mauritian context. In the light of the Capability Approach (CA), which also underpins the analysis of Mauritian institutions here, findings point to the possibility of developing new ways of considering young workers' skills. I argue that there is much scope to envisage young workers' skills as capabilities that concern both work and spheres beyond on the one hand, and the opportunities made available to young individuals by the Mauritian government, on the other.

In the next two sections, I specifically discuss the theoretical and practical insights that have emerged from the data and the discussion as a whole. In section 1, I explain how new economic conditions facing Mauritius requires renewed attention to Education and Training institutions, especially in terms of policy and system reforms. In section 2, I take a broader perspective in my analysis of Mauritian institutions. I link the aspects presented in section 1 to those that concern Mauritian individuals beyond the sphere of work. In chapter 8, I took a look back at Mauritian post-colonial institutions in regard to how they have shaped behaviour over time and how historically grounded mechanisms consequently triggered the challenges identified in this study. Here I tentatively highlight some prospects in regard to new avenues that will allow Mauritian workers and citizens to develop their agency amid the contemporary institutional context at the heart of which is the individualisation process.



## ***9.1 Re-thinking Education and Training in Mauritius***

Considering Mauritius' recurring diversification strategy and development of a form of 'economic nationalism' (Bunwaree 2002) over time, there is ground to suggest that Mauritius will be open to forthcoming trends and economic development opportunities in new sectors. Given its openness to contemporary globalisation and its active participation in international trade, Mauritius is henceforth immersed in the global revolution which educationist Robinson (2011: 5) argues is inherently characterised by a notion of change 'occurring at an unprecedented rate and scale'. As discussed in chapter 1, skill development is now envisaged by governments as an intrinsic prerequisite to achieving economic advantage in the fiercely competitive and globalised world. Due to the critical connections relating national economies more closely than ever to their respective institutions of education, the requirement to adjust national education policies and systems to new global requirements has become self-evident.

As Robinson (2011) observes, most countries have now recognised the need to reform their education systems. Arguably, the Mauritian government has been attentive to such requirements which, in the developed world, have often accompanied the popular acceptance of the knowledge-based economy model and discourse. The model has also reached the shores of Mauritius and has led to policy aspirations towards the development of a knowledge economy and learning society. The 2008-2020 economic and human resource strategic plan (EHRSP), designed in 2007, set the tone for the national response to such global pressures. In other words, the Mauritian government has become aware of the new challenges facing its E&T systems as Mauritius operates in the global economy.

By 2011, however, the need to reform the Mauritian education and training system still needed to be strongly advocated (Grégoire et al. 2011). The extent to which Educational and Training (E&T) policies have evolved adequately to match economic and societal development in Mauritius, is called into question in this study. Clearly, the degree of dynamism that has long characterised economic institutions has not been adequately underpinned over time with equal attention to educational policies. In a similar vein, the present study has highlighted a series of challenges which concern young Mauritian workers' skill capacities and agency and which have been poorly

anticipated by the Mauritian government in its recent economic diversification strategy. The Mauritian government's aspirations to turn Mauritius into a high-skill economy can be legitimated by its institutionalised economic dependence upon business activities initiated in the Global North. However, this study sheds light upon various contradictions and disparities that the face-value absorption of a Western discourse has triggered. In the contemporary context of Mauritius, I argue that there is much to learn at national level from the BPO experience. I discuss this below.

While it holds true that 'immensely influential international discourses' such as that of the knowledge economy have the power to shape the context of a number of national economies and societies (Casey 2006), the study demonstrates that mere allegiance to such discourses does not always match the approach required to address prevailing and immediate challenges in a specific context. Quantitative education expansion, may be fully in line with the high-skill economy aspiration, but does not necessarily attend to the challenges facing lower-skilled workers in contemporary economic conditions. As discussed in chapter 2, the extent to which BPO and more specifically call centre work can be called 'knowledge work' per se, is highly debatable. While I have highlighted their low-skill character in this study, it is clear that the Mauritian government's high-skill economy aspiration cannot effectively address challenges which directly concern work and skill capacities in such configurations. In this particular case, the lack of a clear demarcation between the different levels of skill requirements is highly problematic.

It appears that the Mauritian government relied heavily upon the assumption that cultural proximity and other colonial legacies were adequate for workers to match employers' expectations. In the case of Mauritius, it was assumed that lower-skilled work such as Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) activities did not require any particular attention to skill development. Palliative measures were equally assumed to be sufficient to compensate for the shortcomings that have emerged over time at organisational level in the BPO sector. For instance, the setting up of the so-called ICT academy appears as an attempt to attend to newly identified vocational education and training (VET) needs. Recently formulated statutory aspirations needed to include two separate national strategies for skill development (Crouch 2004). Rather than overlooking this distinction and allowing discursive overlapping, the Mauritian

government faces the need to afford equal attention to high-skill and low-skill work requirements given the dual character of its ICT/BPO sector.

Clearly, provision of vocational training, here illustrated by the urgent setting up of the so-called ICT academy, has been traditionally associated with governments' employment creation strategies and therefore with the 'task of helping the unemployed find work' (Crouch et al. 2004: viii), often within the school-to-work transition phase. Although it has been noted that the humanistic connotation traditionally enshrined in Vocational Education Training (VET) policy is now polluted by neoliberalism-driven high skills aspirations (Crouch et al. 2004), consideration for both high-skill development and vocational education training provision is for Mauritius an economic necessity. On the one hand, the Mauritian government has announced its clear intention to pursue a high-skill development agenda, while on the other, Business Process Outsourcing, a sector requiring lower-skilled workers is being turned into one of the pillars of the economy. In other words, the BPO sector requires significant attention regardless of the peripheral character such a form of work is afforded in economies of the Global North. The challenges raised need to be addressed by the Mauritian government with full acknowledgement of context specificity.

In addition, it appears that rethinking education in Mauritius requires the (re)definition of the role of distinct clusters of institutions relevant to the field. Findings have pointed to government efforts to compensate for the lack of skills by providing training which, according to several participants, should be provided at organisational level. In addition, the absence of some of the non-technical or soft skills expected of workers has raised much concern regarding compulsory education. Rather than being provided during the school-to-work transition, participants have argued that these skills should have been developed earlier. Vocational training provision through the setting up of the ICT academy has itself proven problematic. The study highlights companies' and educationists' pessimism vis-à-vis national training provision of generic character.

The Mauritian government has attempted to compensate for the lacunas observed in workers' skill levels by filling gaps through short-term and emergency initiatives. I argue that such initiatives blur the role of different clusters of institutions within the field of education. As this study and previous studies on skill formation highlight (for

instance, Crouch et al. 2004), skill development is concerned with compulsory schooling or general education, in-company training and vocational education and training provided to school leavers by the state. I argue that different sets of institutions can only attend to specific training needs. The government's efforts to compensate for loopholes in its compulsory education pedagogy and content through a vocational education approach developed as an emergency initiative highlight the inadequate evaluation of training needs. While it is possible that the assumed low-skill character of BPO work is responsible for the poor anticipation of skill needs in the sector, drawbacks and skill mismatch now identified both in this study and by the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) of Mauritius call for a more structured approach to training in order to avoid each cluster of institutions impeding upon the role of one another.

To be sure there lies within the neoliberal orthodoxy a tendency for employers to be averse to government intervention. As Crouch et al. (2004) argue, firms tend to view government generic initiatives as being contrary to innovation. In an environment where unpredictability and constant change are established norms, employers are more likely to argue that government initiatives become rapidly out-dated if there is a lack of coordination between on-going change and national Education and Training provision. Given its experience with international trade as well as its drive and openness towards globalisation, I argue that the Mauritian government has an opportunity to develop a habit of acting more proactively towards skill development in its future economic diversification strategies. As Crouch et al. (2004: 30) would suggest, there is a need for the Mauritian government to aim for the right balance in its policy making and planning for education and training.

Throughout the study, I noted how when it especially concerns export-led activities, the strong partnership between the government and the private sector has developed as a norm in the context of Mauritius. While signs of such collaboration have been reported, challenges and the lack of anticipation identified in the study call for enhanced coordination in regard to education and training between employers and the government. Here I do not suggest a full acceptance of firms' agendas by the government. Such acceptance would distance the government from its role to serve the public and would incapacitate public policy (Crouch et al. 2004). However,

coordination may come in the form of enhanced diffusion of information regarding government training-oriented initiatives, and therefore of a more pro-active approach to education and training. For instance, findings indicate the lack of awareness of statutory provision such as the levy system proposed by the Mauritius HRDC, when such systems may have beneficial effects for workers' work-related skill development if utilised adequately (Crouch et al. 2004). While in the empirical study specific participants have recommended an observatory mechanism in order for the government to ensure workers' employability, more coordination can also be operationalized through the setting up of smaller, flexible public agencies whose overarching task would be to remain attuned to on-going trends and training-related adjustment needs, as Crouch et al. (2004) suggest. While the HRDC as a government agency currently assumes this monitoring role, which can be argued to be difficult (Crouch et al. 2004), findings indicate that the Mauritian workforce could benefit from the HRDC's task being more decentralised.

New economic conditions require that companies' short term approach to training be compensated by governments' long term approach and vision. With the absence of a more proactive and mindful approach to training, Mauritius faces the risk of constantly producing sectorial 'soldiers', to use the term employed by one of the CEOs interviewed in this study. In an environment where perhaps workers will never be employable enough and where originally virtuous notions such as professionalism are distorted by the firm's ideology, a short term approach to skill development appears fully contradictory to sustainable development and lifelong learning endeavours.

Contemporary challenges highlighted in the study therefore call for renewed attention to the concept of learning within the Mauritian context. The phenomenon depicted here impedes upon the concept of the learning society which has recently gained prominence with the promotion of the knowledge-based economy model. In this respect, the study calls for an approach to learning in which provision is made for workers' skills development opportunities to be spread across a career and training path that goes beyond their current and potentially volatile jobs. As exemplified mainly by company A, workers performing such low-skilled work consider the BPO experience to be part of their lifelong learning curve even if there may not be much intention to stay within the same company or domain. While this may not be unique to the case of

Mauritius, the present study highlights the scope that exists for the Mauritian government to adopt a longer term vision for training and learning despite the volatile nature of emerging sectors such as BPO.

However, the vision of developing a learning society has been distorted by new political economic discourses that promote high-skill endeavours. As Casey (2006) observes, the promotion of the learning society has been brought to strictly articulate with economic imperatives. This in itself is problematic for having biased the originally humanistic agenda afforded by the concept of education. Moreover, the extent to which an increase in technical and degree-level qualifications can be pursued without consideration of non-technical skill needs can be called into question. As the study demonstrates, there has been a conceptual shift in the notion of skills per se in the past decades. Employability skills expected in contemporary work configurations are no longer only of technical character and now include individuals' personal abilities due to the requirements of contemporary service work. A conceptualisation of skills according to the mere technicalities of the job is no longer helpful (Brown and Lauder 2006). Based on the findings reported in this study, I argue that contemporary work configurations such as Business Process Outsourcing provide a rationale for such questioning.

Given contemporary work requires individuals' softer and more social skills, the development of non-technical skills can no longer be viewed merely as a non-economic and secondary imperative. In an effort to adjust policies internal to the education system to economic-oriented trends, it is no longer helpful to overlook the social attributes provided through education with the assumption that they do not serve the economy as much as higher, more technical skills. While the pedagogical and curriculum lacunas noted at compulsory and higher education level are, in the context of Mauritius, more related to individuals' values and common knowledge, I argue that such aspects of human development are today beneficial as much to the economy as to society. In other words, prioritising technical qualifications and high skills endeavours over the lacunas observed at more foundational levels in the Mauritian education system would appear significantly paradoxical.

Re-imagining compulsory and higher education in Mauritius will require a consistent re-evaluation of pedagogy and content in order for these to take account of skills which in the industrial era did not appear as imperative as technical proficiencies. Findings show that Mauritius can no longer rely upon the education tradition bequeathed from its colonial past to match skill requirements in contemporary conditions. Change will have to be systemic. While there have been reforms in the realms of education in the past decades (see chapter 4), the study suggests that qualitative improvement needs to supplement quantitative expansion more strategically. In fact, Mauritius already possesses opportunities which could allow it to do so. The Mauritian education system could benefit more from the country's openness to globalisation which has tended to be more extensively capitalised by economic institutions. Its association with various international networks and associations, as suggested by respondents, could be mobilised further in order to expand the current vision that characterises the system.

The Mauritian sustainable development agenda, *Maurice Ile Durable*, has also been argued to require more attention<sup>26</sup>. In line with such objectives, a focus on education can both relate to the needs of the programme and to the needs identified in this study for the economy. Here I refer more specifically to the concept of Education for Sustainable development (ESD), explicitly promoted by UNESCO in its United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) project (2005-2014). As discussed in chapter 4, ESD as a set of principles advocates a focus on sustainability, on a holistic concern for the environment, society and the economy and attention to locally and culturally appropriate measures. As a result, the focus on the individual learner as prescribed by UNESCO implies sustainability in this endeavour, and lifelong learning. It also implies the development of reflection upon the content of curricula and pedagogical techniques that will help develop transferable aptitudes such as thinking skills. The holistic approach also bears the interdisciplinary characteristic of ESD which, it is understood, implies a blend of specific attention to each discipline taught during schooling and a wider vision that acknowledges potential connections among these disciplines. In addition, a focus on context-specific needs aims at enhancing community-based actions without dismissing attention to global issues and trends.

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<sup>26</sup> This has been introduced in chapter 4.

In a similar vein, the study is highly critical of the type of career guidance currently afforded by national institutions in Mauritius. Findings have indicated how career guidance provision has been mainly geared towards fulfilling employers' expectations in regard to recruitment endeavours. Findings have also indicated how young individuals undertake post-compulsory courses without a clear idea of the use of such qualifications in their academic path. While the phenomenon may not be specific to the case of Mauritius, I argue that Mauritius has the opportunity to provide more consistent support to its citizens given its experience and capacity to adapt to new requirements. I argue that due to the critical connections between the realms of economy, work and education, as strongly advocated by Casey (2011) among others, a lack of institutional coordination can no longer be overlooked by the Mauritian government.

Within an economic environment henceforth characterised by risk and uncertainty, sustainable development and lifelong learning cannot be tied only to current employment. On the one hand, employability is too loose a concept for it to prescribe clear skill requirements in a context where lifelong employment is no more. In addition, the individualisation of workers and their need to imagine the lives they have reason to value is another rationale for governments to provide their citizens with the tools that will achieve human flourishing. As argued in this study, the instrumental perspective afforded to skills and the departure from more humanistic agendas in the realms of education needs to be counteracted by an alternative discourse. While work remains an important aspect in human lives, its volatile character undermines its primary contribution to human flourishing.

In this study, the Capability Approach (CA), which was discussed in more detail in chapters 2 and 5, is suggested as this alternative discourse. Findings on the case of Mauritius equally suggest the scope for the Mauritian government to adopt an approach to skill development that allows for a broader conceptualisation of skills, which extend beyond employment. I argue that it is only through such an approach that the Mauritian worker and citizen will be provided the opportunities to choose among pathways which may contribute to his or her career path beyond current employment and to the lives he or she has reason to value.



## ***9.2 Re-thinking Institutions in Mauritius***

In order to advocate the importance of affording attention to the critical connections between work and education, the study examines the main institutional features which have shaped the Mauritian economy and society over time. Institutional theory has emerged from a Western scholarly tradition and has often tended to focus on economies located in the so-called Global North. In such debates, economic activities conducted by countries of the Global South for the West are often mentioned as being a relevant but minor phenomenon. This study has attempted to demonstrate the importance of context-specificity and of the equal need for attention to national needs in Mauritius regardless of its position in the global economy. As such, the study advocates a need to envisage Mauritius as a global player and not merely as a former colony whose post-colonial institutions have allowed the country to cater for the West. I elaborate on this below.

As the study demonstrates, young Mauritian BPO workers are brought to operate within a highly flexible environment characterised with employment insecurity. Recalling the discussion in chapter 4, the BPO phenomenon can be described as a set of activities that has emerged from the needs of the flexible firm which tends to adopt cost-effective strategies that involve the subcontracting of basic and therefore non-core activities. The case of Mauritius and its relation with Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) illustrates how activities which are considered peripheral and are relocated in cheap labour destinations often assume a more 'core' character in economies of the Global South. In Mauritius, BPO is a significant section of an economic sector which is brought to develop as a major pillar of the economy. In other words, as long as Global South economies engage in activities that are peripheral to multinational companies, employment insecurity which workers of the Global South face as peripheral workers are somehow inevitable.

As highlighted in this study, constant government efforts to satisfy multinational companies have nurtured, constrained and distorted assumptions of employability and professionalism both in regard to skill levels and behaviour expected of workers in employment relationships. As a result, workers' skill capacities and level of agency are assessed mainly in relation to what is deemed appropriate in order for Mauritius to remain in line with foreign employers' expectations and, concomitantly, with the

government's macroeconomic objectives. The study highlights how workers' capacities are apprehended according to the extent to which workers' strictly fulfil foreign employers' expectations. The capabilities of Mauritian workers representing this 'new genre of working class', to use the term proposed by Ramesh (2004) for Indian call centre workers, are envisaged in accordance with the extent to which they fulfil the requirements that allows the Mauritian economy to cater for the West.

Furthermore, Mauritius has relied upon past successes in export-led activities to evaluate its capacity for BPO. However, the development of the BPO sector needed to be accompanied by a more structured policy application in the realms of education and training in Mauritius. Despite the potential to achieve increasing returns through experience (Pierson 2000b), path dependence inevitably comes with parallel contingent requirements. Although there may be temptations to compare BPO workers with the cluster of workers who once joined the Textile and Tourism industry in their booming phases, the study demonstrates that different sets of skills needed to be anticipated due to the varieties of activities that exist in the sector and contemporary skill and agency requirements at work and beyond. In other words, the study suggests that having BPO workers operate in an institutional environment that has not been adequately adapted to new realities is now proving problematic.

In other words, the development of the BPO sector needed the Mauritian government to acknowledge that path dependence in some institutions may still require various kinds of adjustment for other relevant institutions. The study also argues that acknowledgements of the critical and contemporary connections between economy, work and education do not have to be only in the form implied by the widespread Western discourses which call for a policy focus on high skills (Casey 2011). The case of Mauritius demonstrates that such acknowledgements can also concern lower-skilled workers and distinct school-to-work transition scenarios.

In regard to path dependence, the manner in which Mauritius has embraced multinational business activities in contemporary conditions remains historically grounded. As demonstrated in chapters 3 and 4, Mauritius is an economic and institutional entity premised mainly on trade. In its post-colonial era, its economic resilience has rested upon advantages profoundly consequential of its colonial ties. The

fact that unprecedented technological advancements allowed Business Process Outsourcing to develop into a contemporary and global trend in the realms of work organisation has been serendipitous for Mauritius given its post-colonial ties and legacies such as assumed linguistic proficiency and cultural proximity. Yet, the sector appears to be equally the product of institutional logic. As the study also demonstrates, confidence in institutional patterns and past experience gained for instance in the development of the Textile and Tourism industries may have led Mauritian policy makers to be institutionally locked in apprehending the BPO experience with a replicated approach to export-led activities bequeathed from its adaptive efforts in the immediate post-independence era.

To be sure, Mauritius has delved into the development of the new sector with its post-colonial assumptions. Despite its more contemporary economic ties with increasingly significant partners such as India and China (see chapter 4), there appears to be a persistent reliance on the institutionalised economic dependence upon former ‘mother countries’. However, I argue that it is no longer useful for Mauritius to replicate its post-colonial behaviour in contemporary economic conditions. Notwithstanding its limited size and geographical isolation, Mauritius has demonstrated its capacity to be a pertinent global player that is required to face international competition regardless of its colonial past. Amid inherently exploitative and yet highly normalised liberal production configurations, this study points to the potentiality that exists in regard to skill development opportunities for Mauritian workers and in regard to how its national institutions and identity can henceforth be imagined.

The overarching lesson gained from the BPO experience and captured in this study pertains to the need for a mind-set change at a national level. A mind-shift can only occur incrementally and can only be operationalized in a latent manner. Despite the risk of institutions being closely bound to the past (Crouch 2005), the challenge will be to initiate institutional change, though gradually, with the scope of short and wide-ranging micro changes leading to ‘much longer periods in which change continues’ (Crouch 2005: 74). In the case of Mauritius, acknowledgement of the critical connections between economy, work and education requires the gradual institutionalisation of dynamism. In this respect, the study shows that Mauritian institutions such as education and training systems have been left static despite new global requirements.

Historical institutionalist Streeck (2009) argues how a dynamic perspective can no longer be separated from the conceptualisation and enactment of change if progress is to be achieved. As the scholar argues, ‘progress will require a return from a static to a dynamic perspective in which change is no longer a special case but a universal condition of any social order’ (ibid: 30). In a preoccupation for the historicity of social facts, the scholar also points to the need in (historical) institutionalist analysis to depart from mere historical determinism (ibid). Streeck (2009) acknowledges the unprecedented pace at which history changes due to a number of factors. As a result, the act of embracing development requires attention to external factors that equally impact upon institutions and define the form of institutional change experienced by a specific entity. In reference to theories of evolution, the scholar’s contemporary conceptualisation of change envisages it as ‘an interaction between spontaneous variation within a historically inherited repertoire of possibilities and a set of external conditions that are themselves in constant flux.’ (Streeck 2009: 30).

Based on Streeck’s (2009) perspective of dynamism, the challenge for Mauritian post-colonial institutions does not pertain solely to embracing systemic change for instance at educational level. As a player in the global arena, Mauritius is confronted with external factors which trigger the need to embrace dynamism as a new and sustainable mind-set for its institutions. At this critical juncture, there is much urge for Mauritius to attend to less manifest and deeper institutional components which are equally relevant to how its economy and society operate. Given that its mind-set can be said to have been mainly premised upon its colonial past and post-colonial condition so far, it can be argued that new critical junctures hint at a need to envisage Mauritius with a new lens. For want of a better term, the study hints at the fact that Mauritius may have now reached a post-post-colonial era.

While in the first section I concluded that Mauritian individuals’ capabilities can no longer be envisaged in strict relation to their instrumentality to economic endeavours, I here seek to elaborate more on the relevance of this argument in relation to the Mauritian post-colonial condition. Given legacies bequeathed from its context-specific colonial past, the embracing of its post-colonial subordination as well as the institutionalisation of the nation’s original purpose (that is, trade) defines the

instrumentality of lower-skilled workers involved in sectors which inherently cater for the West. Similarly, the level of agency is relatively low among these workers.

One cannot speak of dictatorship or chaos per se for the case of Mauritius. However, the latently legitimised lack of political agency, and the underlying malaise implied in this study, may be indicative of the fact that absolute enactment of democracy has not taken place. The mere design of institutions is not adequate to produce positive outcomes. If the worker-citizen is groomed to embrace his or her individualisation, he or she becomes the institution upon which he will rely. As such I argue that agency enhancement first has to be oriented towards producing a (new) type of individual which will be empowered enough to be the future producers of innovation, or *meta-innovation* as Crouch (2005: 3) calls it. The idea is not to empower individuals in order to produce happily individualised workers or citizens. In addition, I here equally refer to the Capability Approach whose theorists advocate the need to consider individuals' 'functionings' – choices, the acts of doing and being – amid the collective capabilities made available by the national institutions that surround them. The extent to which institutions encourage or discourage, or simply, shape individuals' behaviour remain crucial.

In other words, institutional change needs to assume a more organic form. An incremental mind-set change that will allow individuals to go beyond colonial and post-colonial preconceptions and to make the most of new opportunities that are made available over time is required alongside any institutional (re)-arrangements. In re-thinking its education system and its post-colonial institutions as encouraged by current global developments, Mauritius has reached a critical juncture where it is given the opportunity to develop sustainable human development among its citizens at work and beyond and to empower individuals in order for them to perform well both at work and as potential institutional entrepreneurs. Given its context and the challenges it is brought to face, a more classical but decisively mindful approach that encompasses both economic and social progress (Brown et al 2001) can prove promising. The study suggests that national Education and Training (E&T) institutions, most of which were bequeathed from a colonial or immediate post-colonial past, have not necessarily contributed to the development of such agency and non-technical skills among Mauritian citizens.

### ***9.3 Limitations and research prospects***

While prospects for institution-building are envisaged, it is true that the study remains exploratory. Although I expand on Grégoire et al.'s (2011) analysis of the contemporary context of Mauritius, the study does not delve into the specific areas where change is required. However, as I take into account the ideological perspective enshrined within the capability approach (CA), I have endeavoured in this study to provide more of a roadmap to policy in a vein similar to that of the CA scholar, Orton (2011). Respondents, especially managers, experts and educationists, have expressed some of their discontent and criticisms in the form of suggestions to the Mauritian government. While I reported some of their main suggestions in the second half of the thesis, I also argue that the series of implications, inferred by the challenges identified, are potential terrains for future research on the case of Mauritius.

Systemic change to the education system will require attention to specific aspects that can help improve pedagogy and content with respect to new requirements. The same can be said for the potential establishment of new and more viable institutions which will contribute to the development of lifelong learning. Illustratively, I refer much to the provision of career guidance and possible future studies which can help establish the most appropriate forms in which may be delivered and 'pathways' (Raffe 2003) designed.

In line with the contemporary connections advocated in this study between economy, work and education, the study is arguably a stepping stone for further research in industries other than ICT/BPO. A closer look at skill development needs concerns the aggregate of industries in Mauritius. While the study has indicated how the Human Resource development Council (HRDC) of Mauritius has recently taken such initiatives, it has also demonstrated that there still remains scope for improvement. Future studies can assist in this respect, not only by determining employers' needs but also, as the study suggests, by determining the opportunities which the Mauritian government may provide to workers and citizens. Time constraints and the scope set for this study would not have allowed for insights of this character. However, the study equally points to such analytical and action-based needs.

Finally, the study calls for change in the form of a mind-set shift and a vision beyond the post-colonial condition. This was mainly expressed by educationists, trade unionists and activists in the study. As mentioned in the previous section, there is room for empowering individuals both as workers and citizens. Although findings point to activists and unionists' frustrations in regard to possibilities of new avenues in this respect, they also point to various initiatives taken by the same group of participants in creating awareness and helping young individuals develop their agency. In other words, actors in the Mauritian context have not abandoned their hope for institutional innovation. Despite the persistence of socio-cultural features which may impact on such endeavours, I argue that change is possible. For instance, activist 4's proposition of following young individuals' ability to vote mindfully can be taken into account in regard to the importance they may afford to national policies that concern both work and education. As Crouch's (2005: 3) argues, neo-institutionalism bears the potential of both acknowledging the 'constrained nature of human action while also being able to account for innovation'. Further research on the case of Mauritius may take a similar conceptual approach to help imagine new pathways for young *institutional entrepreneurs* and for the operationalization of *meta-innovation*.

## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1- Access Email- Companies A and B (translation from French)**

To the HR Manager

**Re: Access request: Fieldwork for doctoral research**

Dear Sir/ Madam,

This is in regard to a request to have access to your company for my fieldwork. I am a doctoral researcher at the school of Management of the University of Leicester, UK. While I was born in Mauritius, I have lived in Europe for 9 years now. When I thought of undertaking the PhD, I had set to examine the case of my own country and the recent developments that have taken place. This explains my interest in looking at the ICT\BPO sector of Mauritius.

In this research I intend to contextualise Mauritius in relation to current trends in new sector. In addition to describing the contemporary context within which workers and companies such as your company operate, I seek to examine BPO employees' skill levels and educational background. The idea is to explore how the education system of Mauritius can improve and contribute more to the development of these young individuals. The research will not be based only on your company. I am currently seeking access in another company. I also hope to include other participants such as educationists, government officers and experts in my study in order to have a broader account of the context.

#### **The Company's contribution**

The study is anonymous and I committing to ensure confidentiality. I shall be grateful if you would allow me to access your company for the month of (July: Company A/ August: Company B) in order to conduct individual and face-to-face interviews with members of staff. I would like to interview both workers and managers in order to obtain an objective account of the company's experience within the BPO sector of Mauritius. I understand that your operations cover both Francophone and Anglophone activities. Although I will tend to focus on the Francophone side of operations, I shall be glad to speak to any employee who would volunteer to contribute to my study. Ideally, I would like to be able to visit your company for a month in order to spend adequate time within your organisational environment and get to know your company and staff members.

Upon completion of my PhD, I shall be glad to provide you with a copy of my thesis.

I thank you in advance for your support. Please feel free to request any additional information if needed.

Best regards,

Blandine Emilien



## **Appendix 2- Invitation email forwarded to potential participants: Company B**

**(Translated from French)**

**Re: Doctoral study, fieldwork: Participation Invitation to staff members**

Dear Participant,

I shall be grateful if you would volunteer to be a participant in my research project. The present study is part of my research project as a PhD student at the school of management of the University of Leicester. In regard to the topic of the study, I am currently examining workers' experiences in the BPO sector of Mauritius and inquiring about their respective jobs and work environment. Although I live and study in the UK, I was myself born in Mauritius. Perhaps this may explain my research interests.

As a participant, you will be asked to share your individual experience in a face-to-face interview of approximately 40 minutes. Please note that interviews will be recorded in order to facilitate my collection of data. However, I shall commit to preserve your anonymity and keep your information confidential. A consent form will be signed by both of us prior to the interview and you will be given a copy of the consent form. More information regarding the study will be provided prior to starting the interview.

In the meantime, please feel free to contact me for additional information via email at [xxxx@le.ac.uk](mailto:xxxx@le.ac.uk).

I thank you in advance for your participation.

Best regards,  
Blandine Emilien  
PhD candidate  
University of Leicester School of Management  
University Rd, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK

*Contact details*

Email: [xxxx@le.ac.uk](mailto:xxxx@le.ac.uk)

Tel UK: +44xxxxxxxxxx

Tel (Mauritius): +230xxxxxxxxxx

### **Appendix 3-Consent form: Company B (Translated from French)**

Blandine Emilien  
PhD Candidate  
School of Management  
University of Leicester  
University Road, Leicester  
LE1 7RH  
Email: [xxxx@le.ac.uk](mailto:xxxx@le.ac.uk)

*COPY: Researcher or Participant*

#### **RE: Anonymity and confidentiality guarantee- Fieldwork: Blandine Emilien**

I, Blandine Emilien, commit to preserve my participant's anonymity and confidentiality and not to use information provided for purposes other than for the analysis required for my PhD project.

I have provided extensive details regarding the purpose of my research.

I,....., agree to be a respondent in Ms Blandine Emilien's fieldwork. I have been informed in respect of the purpose of the study and have no objection regarding the use of the information I will provide for the purpose of Ms Emilien's data analysis. I authorise Ms Emilien to record our interview.

Researcher:.....  
Date:.....

Participant:.....  
Date:.....

*Participant's copy:*

Should you require more information regarding Ms Emilien's identity, please contact Mrs xxxxxxxxx from the school of management of the university of Leicester at [xxxx@le.ac.uk](mailto:xxxx@le.ac.uk).

#### **Appendix 4- Interview with worker/ supervisor (Companies A and B)**

##### **1. Bio Data**

##### **2. Experience within the company**

1. How long have you been with the company?
2. What did you do before working for Company A/B? **[Implicitly inquiring about the level of education and/or work experience]**
3. Do you enjoy working here and doing this particular job? Why?
4. What does your job consist of? Have you always done this or it is new [this applies especially to supervisors.]?

##### **3. Reasons for choosing the job and awareness of work environment**

1. Is there any particular reason that would have motivated you into this job?
2. Are you happy with it?
3. How do you feel about your daily tasks? How do you find them?
4. Is this what you had planned to do after schooling/education?
5. Are you planning to stay here for long? Can you please elaborate your main reasons?

##### **4. Skills Development opportunities**

1. Tell me about what you have learned so far by working here.
2. Do you feel that the company provides enough training?
3. What type of training does it provide and how frequently? Is it enough?
4. Does the training you receive (if any) add to your education and development?
5. Is there any other skill that you have expected to acquire?
6. Have you had a chance to express your training needs? What happens then if you have?

## **5. Rights' awareness, level of solidarity, agency**

1. Do your colleagues ask for training as well?
2. Could you say that there is a sense of solidarity among you?
3. I guess there are no unions here.... [**Inquiring about their awareness of what a trade union is and implies**].
4. Had there been a union within the company, would you have joined it? Why?
5. Why do you think there is no union in the company?
6. How do you express your concerns then?
7. Do you feel you have any concerns to express to your managers? [**Elaborate**]
8. Have there been major issues here in the company?
9. When you signed the contract, were you aware of your rights as an employee?
10. And now, are you more familiar with your rights?
11. Are they (rights) important for you? [**Informant is asked to elaborate**]
12. Tell me about how you feel within the company? [**question repeated purposively**]

## **6. Participant's vision and aspirations**

1. How do you think your job, skills and your work environment can be improved?
2. What are your aspirations, both in regard to your career and your life?

## **Appendix 5-Example of one of my interview guides for managers (translated from French)**

### **1. Personal experience**

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to work as a manager for the company....
2. As such, is what you have undertaken before (work, education) helping you in your current job?
3. Were you appointed as a manager here or did you eventually become a manager ?
4. How manager people fall under your management?

### **2. The company**

1. Tell me about the company, its activities and main features
2. What brought the company to Mauritius? And when (historical overview) ?
3. Which language is crucial for the company and what are the other aspects that may have motivated the company to settle in Mauritius ?
4. Do you have an idea of whether senior managers are satisfied?
5. (If not) Why? What is lacking?
6. Is there anything being done to improve workers' competencies and performance?
7. Yes/no/ why/ why not
8. And still, is the company operating well?
9. How safe are employees in terms of employment security (asked especially to HR officers/ HR managers)?
10. Do you encounter further challenges that often disrupt your daily routines?
11. Is it more in terms of workers' behaviour or technical performance?
12. Why? What were actually the company's expectations?
13. Describe the typical Company B employee in terms of age, educational background and perhaps aspirations?
14. Are their profiles problematic?
15. How come the company struggles to find suitable candidates then?
16. Is there anything being done by the company to handle issues you mention above (if any)?

17. Does this imply more training? (why/why not?)
18. Tell me more about training provision in the company..
19. And are there any sources of training, the government for example?
20. Does your company make use of any of statutory provision if any? (why/why not).

### **3. The near future**

1. Given the current situation, how do you see the company in a few years' time?
2. What can be done to improve the situation at organisational level and beyond?

## **Appendix 6- List of main themes discussed with educationists and experts**

### **Educationists**

1. Historical facts
2. The education system: a critical appraisal (pedagogy and content)
3. Education and Training: Existing reforms and outcomes
4. BPO: new requirements (ICT academy, Professional path at secondary school)
5. Personal experience and knowledge on BPO workers (where relevant)
6. Vision/ recommendations (Policy/ the role of the state)

### **Sectorial experts/ government officers**

1. Development of the BPO sector and implications
2. Confirmation of facts from local literature
3. BPO sector: context and assessment of current performance
4. Generic challenges (institutional, statutory level)
5. Vision for the sector and the Mauritian economy

### **Industrial Relations Experts/ Trade Unionists/Activists**

1. The current political context
2. Some historical facts and historically-shaped features of the institutional context
3. The Employment Rights Act and the Employment Relations Act (2008) and implications
4. The impact on workers
5. Workers' agency and rights awareness
6. Initiatives taken in favour of workers
7. Vision/recommendations (Policy/ Role of the state/ workers' agency potential)

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