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Delivering distance education for modern government: the F4Gov programme at the University of Chester

(2006) UVAC, York, 30th November

SUMMARY

The Foundation for Government (F4Gov) programme developed for the Civil Service is an innovative low cost accredited programme of distance learning using a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) designed to improve individual and hence organisational performance. It is flexible in terms of design and delivery and enables individuals and organisations to devise learning which meets their needs. The emphasis upon integrating theory and practice is designed to reflective practice as well as embed deeper learning associated with higher education. The content of the programme is designed to equip participants with the skills necessary to deliver modern government.

Progress with F4Gov is ongoing as new departments participate for the first time and additional HE providers are identified.

CONTEXT FOR FOUNDATION FOR GOVERNMENT: MODERNISING THE UK CIVIL SERVICE

Although the British Civil Service is well regarded internationally it has been subject to the same criticisms of large Government bureaucracies the world over. Traditional criticisms, such as amateurishness and an aversion to innovation and efficiency have been supplemented by a concern that public services in general are not sufficiently focussed on the needs of their customers.

Critics of public services, traditionally drawn from the right, have been joined from those on the left who see the major global shift to customers from producers will result in the loss of all notion of public service unless there is reform. (Cherney 2002)

The immediate predecessor to the present UK Government introduced a series of reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s with the following effects (Massey and Pyper 2005)

- Reduction in the overall number of Civil Servants
- Contracting out services to the private sector
- Devolved budgeting
- Introduction of performance indicators
- Replacing senior Civil Servants with professional managers and business people
- Separation of the policy and delivery function, the latter being carried out by publicly owned Executive Agencies, focussed on the needs of customers

The successor New Labour government accepts the broad criticisms of the Civil Service (and other public bodies) outlined above but their ideological preference for publicly owned services has led them to seek internal reforms rather than contracting out or the creation of Executive Agencies.

In 1999, the head of the Civil Service set out six themes for reform (Wilson 1999):

- Stronger leadership with a clear sense of purpose
- Better business planning from top to bottom

- Sharper performance management
- An improvement in the diversity of staff
- A service more open to people and ideas, able to bring on talent
- A better deal for staff

His successors, Sir Andrew Turnbull and Gus O'Donnell, have continued the reform process by concentrating upon the development of professional staff. The Civil Service College has been recast as the National School for Government and a new training benchmark established, Professional Skills for Government (PSG), aimed at the upper echelons of the Service. More recently, the drive for improved professionalism has been allied with a drive for greater efficiency (National Audit Office 2006). By 2008, the number of Civil Servants will have returned to the numbers inherited by New Labour in 1997 (BBC 2006).

There is not the space to set out progress (or otherwise) on all of these themes but it does set out the context for the Foundation for Government (F4Gov).

F4Gov is not an elite qualification. It is designed for a large number of people lower down in the organisation. As well as providing specific learning in respect of leadership, it provides people with the opportunity to progress with their careers. It facilitates the processes of business planning and improved performance and enables people from non traditional backgrounds to progress in the organisation. Improving the education and training of staff enables people to progress, stimulates new ways of working and should improve working conditions for all.

In 2002 the Department for Work Related Studies (DWRS) at the University of Chester was approached by senior civil servants, who had personal experience of the Work Based framework and were anxious to see it applied more specifically to the modernising agenda in the Civil Service. Since September 2004, nearly 350 students have been recruited from four departments- the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills and the Cabinet Office.

The Foundation for Government programme is not a pilot but a Pathfinder. That is, it is planned to be available in all departments and other provider universities will be recruited.

THE DEPARTMENT FOR WORK RELATED STUDIES (DWRS) AND THE WBIS FRAMEWORK

DWRS is one a small number of UK university departments delivering work based learning. In broad terms we aim to facilitate learning for people in the workplace and provide academic credit for it. The mechanism for delivering programmes of study is a pre-validated degree framework in Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS).

The WBIS programme has been in existence since 1998 and is informed by a distinctive educational philosophy:

- To bridge the divide between knowledge located in higher education and that in 'real life', specifically the work place so that both are informed by one another
- Enable individuals to engage with lifelong learning by sensitising them to their learning needs and preferred methods of learning. In short to produce reflective practitioners
- To place the learner and their needs at the centre of the learning process
- To provide low cost flexible education that recognises the profoundly social nature of the learning process
- To value knowledge from all sources including that of learners and recognise that we as facilitators learn from them as well as they from us

WBIS programmes are designed and tailored to the needs of either individual learners or those of an employing organisation. Learners, provided they meet standard academic entry

criteria, determine not only the content of their programme but also the award they obtain. They can opt for Higher Education Certificate, Foundation Degree/Diploma, Degree, Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma or Masters. The title of their programme reflects their preference and the content of the programme.

The WBIS team have developed considerable experience in guiding and assisting individuals and employers to develop programmes which are relevant to their needs and which are coherent and progressive.

A fundamental aspect of the programme is therefore that it is demand led. We do not determine the content of the learners programme: the learner does. Our role is to facilitate and assist the learning process and translate it into formal academic credit bearing qualifications.

Another distinctive feature of the WBIS approach is the intimate connection with workplace practice. In a typical WBIS module, the learner is introduced to a body of theory and wider literature and then asked to interrogate their practice. From the learners perspective the relationship with theory becomes much more immediate than is the case on conventional programmes. They select those theories/models which are relevant to their needs and use this as the basis for an internal dialogue, based upon their own practice and that of colleagues. This requires a degree of sensitisation to formal, reflective practice which is usually embedded at the start of most programmes. In this way learners are encouraged to reflect upon their current practice as a means of improving performance.

For the approach described above, we reserve the term **work based** learning and wherever possible this is the approach we seek to encourage. In practice this is not always possible, for a number of reasons. Many people embark on a programme of study precisely because they have no experience of a subject, they require contextual knowledge or their current role offers only a limited scope for reflective practice. In such cases learners engage in **work related** learning- that is learning which is relevant to their work but not necessarily to their current role.

We encourage short term placements and job swaps either within or between organisations to facilitate work based learning wherever possible. For example, someone studying finance management may not be a budget holder. We would encourage that person to work along side someone who is.

In order to help learners develop a programme, we have a suite of existing, dedicated modules. These have been developed over a period of time in response to learner demand. People enrolling on the programme can choose from any of these modules.

They are also eligible for any accredited module at the appropriate level in the University. If there is a topic the learner wishes to study and neither of these options meets that need, the learner can write the module themselves (with help) or if we think others may want it, we will write it. Very often learners who have particular individual needs are able to satisfy them through project modules.

Having a pre-validated learning framework means we do not have to keep validating new programmes for each individual learner or cohort. Instead we have a monthly Credit Approval Panel which scrutinises and approves new modules. No modules can be approved unless it is academically rigorous and fitness for purpose (by practitioners) is demonstrated. All new modules are therefore scrutinised by practitioners as well as academics. The programme is Quality Assured by the University's internal systems and an external assessor.

Delivery and student support

Another important aspect of the WBIS programme is its delivery. Some modules, typically those involving such 'soft skills' as Conflict Transformation and Bargaining and Negotiation, are delivered in workplace workshops, supplemented by formal written content. Other

modules are delivered by means of personal learning, either in the workplace or in the students own time.

Increasingly this is supported by the use of technology. The F4Gov programme has a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) where all learning materials, including a theory document, electronic journals and all other learning materials are located. The VLE also enables discussion and submission of assignments. Induction to the modules is facilitated by video streaming.

Student support is available through a programme induction process, study skills workshops, access to tutors through phone and e mail and a mentoring system. Peer learning is encouraged in workplace groups, study skills video conferences and occasional workshops, upon request. Students are encouraged to submit formative assessments as a way of developing their critical and analytical capabilities.

Submission is flexible in the sense that students are free to negotiate their own pathway and deadlines.

THE F4GOV PROGRAMME USING THE WBIS FRAMEWORK

Throughout most of its existence the WBIS framework has been used for individual learners. However in the last few years we have begun to develop programmes for employers. One of these is a Foundation Degree programme for the UK Civil Service called Foundation for Government (F4Gov).

F4Gov is the first higher education qualification specifically for Civil Servants to be delivered in the UK. The level, content, means and delivery has been developed jointly between the University of Chester, the National School of Government, the Cabinet Office and the participating departments.

From the outset the Civil Service wanted a qualification which would not be exclusively focussed on the upper echelons of the Service but which was suitable for the broader mass of employees and therefore more 'bottom up'.

Within the UK in recent years Foundation degrees have been developed to meet the need for an intermediate, vocational qualification (DFES, undated). This seemed to best suit the needs of the Civil Service, as it allows for considerable employer involvement in the design of the programme.

A Foundation Degree is the equivalent of the first two years of a degree and it has to be designed and delivered in partnership with employers. It also has to combine formal academic elements with practical projects. It is therefore in keeping with the Civil Service's desire for a broadly based, vocationally oriented qualification.

It enables progression to level 3 and whilst the Civil Service itself may not be prepared to pay for a third level, the University of Chester will develop one for all individuals wishing to progress.

F4Gov has been designed to deliver the UK Civil Service modernisation agenda, referred to earlier in this paper. It is intended to provide people with the skills necessary to run a professional, customer focussed organisation. Modules specifically designed for it include:

- Customers and Stakeholders
- Managing and Leading People
- Working with People
- Managing Resources
- Leading Organisational Change

- Project Management
- Public Finance Management

The learners are located all over the country and are given a day Induction onto the programme. In addition, there are Study Skills Workshops to assist the process of learning. Learners are allocated a personal tutor and there is a subject tutor for each module. Workplace support is provided by means of a personal mentor. Learning material is delivered through the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

The VLE is a dedicated web page which contains learning documents specially prepared for each module (Theory Documents) and all other materials necessary to complete the programme of study. This includes the student handbook, assignments, online discussion boards, electronic submission facility and links to a wide variety of learning materials. In addition, there are tutor supported learning seminars and some students have created their own peer support groups. Tutor student contact is also maintained via phone and e mail. Electronic journal access etc

Students begin the programme by completing a module called 'Introduction to Work Based Learning'. Within the module students conduct a self assessment of past and present achievements, as the basis for assessing their learning needs. From this they develop their intended learning pathway on the programme. They also are introduced to the idea of reflective practice by applying formal theorising to a critical workplace incident. At this stage, we also consider any applications Accredited Prior Learning (APL), either Certificated or Experiential.

The second module students are encouraged to complete asks them to consider the rationale for and wider process of Civil Service reform, as it affects their department and themselves personally. The aim here is to enable contextualisation for the whole programme. After that the programme of learning varies depending upon the needs of the learner. Where learners have no strongly expressed preference, we have devised a recommended route.

In addition to the normal academic Assessment and Quality oversight, the programme is overseen by a joint University and Civil Service Management Board, which meets approximately three times a year. This involves representatives from all stakeholders in the management and development of the programme. There is also a student representative who attends the Management Board.

ISSUES ARISING

In developing this programme we have learned a number of valuable lessons, particularly in respect of learner recruitment and support. The programme has not yet been formally evaluated but we have been encouraged by progress to date. We also know from the assignments we see that the programme does indeed change world view and practice.

This is not to say that it has been all plain sailing. What follows is some of the practical issues we have encountered:

- The introduction of the programme has coincided with major restructuring/contraction across the Civil Service, especially in the largest participating department. Under such circumstances it has sometimes been difficult to focus students on the wider agenda
- There is an inherent tension between the employers desire to see students progress quickly, whilst continuing in work and our view as educational providers that a more blended approach would improve progression and retention rates (Garrison and Cleveland Innes 2003; Garrison and Kanuaka 2004; Williams 2002)
- One of the consequences of the programme is that the programme has exposed poor writing and studying skills on the part of the students. To some extent, the latter was

anticipated but not the former. As a result we are spending more time on formative assessment than expected but there is evidence of greatly improved performance.

- We are an experienced group of tutors and anticipated anxiety from some students from non traditional backgrounds approaching study in higher education for the first time. What we had not anticipated is that some students with experience of university education would find it difficult to adapt to a work based rather than a more traditional academic approach. The same is true of some of the mentors.
- While we see the evidence of enhanced capacity from our students' assignments, we have not always found it easy to communicate this to the departments themselves. This is important from a student perspective. A foundation degree is unclassified so to an outsider a student who barely passes each module is indistinguishable from one who excels.

Reflecting on experience with F4Gov

I want to conclude this paper by engaging in a process most of you are familiar with- Schon's (1992) famous 'reflection on action'. Inevitably, in a programme such as F4Gov there are a number of issues and challenges I would like to share with you but I should make clear at the outset that we are not overwhelmed by them.

So it is important to say that the feedback we have had from students, Government Departments and our external has been uniformly excellent.

An important element in this has been successful teamwork. Although we have had changes in personnel, we have worked cohesively and have striven to adopt the customer focus we exhort in our students. We try to respond to all requests quickly and positively and this has been essential

Inevitably we have experienced issues over participation and completion. This has been partly because of changed working roles for our students, isolation and for some, a lack of support in the workplace. The Civil Service has changed dramatically in the last two years as the reform agenda has clearly swung towards a concern with greater efficiency. Offhand, I cannot think of one student who is performing the same job they were two years ago.

We have had to recognise that our own relaxed attitude towards submission has also contributed to a lack of progress by some so we have now tightened up our procedures.

Another important aspect of delivery is keeping abreast of rapid change and hence learning requirements.

For example, the change in emphasis of the reform agenda has rendered some materials prepared just two years ago, out of date. A module on Organisational Change assumed growing or stable resources and emphasised cultural change. In practice there are declining resources and the organisational change experienced by our learners is quite different from that anticipated.

In some cases we have had to develop materials in anticipation of events. The whole balance and structure of the programme had to be designed in anticipation of the Professional Skills for Government proposals, before any proposals were made.

There are other issues which space does not allow me to discuss but there are two final observations I will make. The first concerns our development as tutors. The delivery mechanism means that a lot more effort has to go into the preparation of materials. We have discovered that writing things down is a lot more demanding than giving lectures. We also spend much more time with students on their work. At the beginning of the programme, it is not unusual to spend two hours providing formative assessment on a draft. So we put more in at the beginning and end than is traditionally the case and we are more focussed on the development of learners as individuals.

The final observation I will make is on the nature of the student experience. Leaving aside questions of motivation and participation, the process of learning is much more demanding partly because of the access to much more information. Students, even at level 1, even from non traditional backgrounds, are far more engaged in the process of constructing their own meaning than is typically the case of 'lectured to' students. So from their perspective, it is tougher but the rewards are greater. The work we see (and this is confirmed by the external) is of a far higher standard than would be expected.

On that note, I would like to conclude.

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