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Delivering distance education for the Civil Service in the UK: the University of Chester's Foundation for Government programme

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ABSTRACT

Since 2004 the University of Chester has been running a distance delivered work based learning programme using a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment for the British Civil Service called 'Foundation for Government'. There are currently about 350 students on the programme and at time of writing, the first learners are completing. The programme is designed to equip the broad mass of Civil Servants with the essential skills for modern government. While the programme has undoubtedly been successful, it has also raised a number of issues requiring further research. These are: the involvement of employers; technological versus educational imperatives; learner experience and progression and the assumption of knowledge transfer.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s in Britain, there have been ongoing attempts by governments to improve the quality of public services, including the Civil Service. In this context, the Civil Service refers to the collection of organisations which services the administrative needs and delivers services for Central Government and the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This agenda for public service transformation has become global, often transmitted through major development agencies. An important aspect of reform is the education and training of Civil Servants to equip them with the ability to manage a more professional service, focussed on efficient delivery. This chapter describes the development of a programme developed jointly between the University of Chester and the British Civil Service which is cost effective, flexible and delivered largely in the work place.

The Foundation for Government (F4Gov) programme is a part time Foundation Degree using a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Unlike better known programmes such as Masters in Public Administration (MPAs) it is not aimed at senior personnel but is designed for the broad mass of Civil Servants whose job it is to deliver services directly to the public. It aims to improve individual and hence organisational performance. F4Gov is located within Chester's pre-validated Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework. WBIS is flexible in terms of design and delivery and enables individuals and organisations to devise learning which meets their needs. The programme incorporates an emphasis upon the integration of theory with practice and facilitates reflection.

This chapter describes the rationale and development of the programme and identifies key issues for future evaluation in respect of distance delivered work based learning programmes. In particular, four key issues are addressed: employer involvement in design and delivery; the tension between technological and educational imperatives; the impact of the programme in terms of knowledge transfer and progression rates. Finally, the implications for more widespread application of the programme are discussed.

MODERNISING THE CIVIL SERVICE

In the last 10-20 years there has been a global movement to modernise all public services and most notably civil services (World Bank 2000). The impetus for reform originated with the British and New Zealand governments in the 1980s and stems from a disillusion with the performance of traditional Weberian bureaucracies. What became known as New Public Management spread to the USA in the same decade and by the 1990s organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, the Inter-American Development Bank and the OECD had programmes in place to encourage improved public sector performance across the world (Karmarck 2003).

The British Civil Service has historically enjoyed an enviable reputation for probity and neutrality but it has been subject to the same criticisms of large Government bureaucracies the world over.

Traditional complaints, 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 the public they nominally serve. Critics of public services, traditionally drawn from the political right, have been joined in recent years 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 fundamental reform (Cherney 2002).

The immediate predecessor to the present UK Government introduced a series of reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s. These had the effect of reducing the overall number of Civil Servants, the creation of Executive Agencies whose only role is to concentrate on delivery, the introduction of performance indicators and the contracting out of services to the private sector. (Massey and Pyper 2005)

The successor New Labour government has continued with the emphasis on performance, efficiency and delivery and has made it a central objective of government. Each of the three heads of the Civil Service they have appointed has instituted reforms, beginning with those of Sir Richard Wilson (Wilson 1999). His successors, Sir Andrew Turnbull and Sir Gus O'Donnell, have continued the reform process by concentrating on 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). At the same time, government departments have been subjected to a series of external audits designed to assess competence in key areas such as leadership, improved delivery, responding to the needs of the public and increasing the skills of staff (Cabinet Office 2006).

The final strand of the modernising agenda is a commitment to the application of new technologies to the efficient working of government (HM Government 2005). In the years since 1999 there have been numerous strands of Civil service reform. In summary these are:

- Improved leadership
- Improved efficiency
- Better business planning and greater financial expertise
- Enhanced staff capacity and more professional management
- An emphasis on meeting clearly specified performance indicators
- Greater transferability of staff between the public and private sectors
- Exploitation of new technologies wherever possible

The F4Gov programme is designed to help achieve these goals.

THE WBIS FRAMEWORK

In 2002, when the Cabinet Office was given responsibility to develop a Foundation Degree for the Civil Service, the University of Chester was approached to use the Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework as the mechanism for its delivery. Knowledge of WBIS had been gained first hand by members of the Cabinet Office on WBIS programmes. It is a pre-validated degree framework designed to facilitate learning for people in the workplace and provide academic credit for it. WBIS 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 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.

A fundamental aspect of the programme is therefore that it is demand led. Tutors do not determine the content of the learners programme: the learner does. The tutor's 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 WBIS. In this way learners are encouraged to reflect upon their current practice as a means of improving performance.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PATHWAY

Within the UK in recent years Foundation degrees have been developed to meet the need for an intermediate, vocational qualification. They are the equivalent of the first two years of a conventional three-year degree programme. They are intended to be more practically oriented than conventional university programmes and have to combine formal academic elements with practical projects (DFES, undated). An important feature of Foundation degree is that institutions can only develop them where they are demanded by employers. There is also a requirement for considerable employer involvement in the design of programmes to ensure relevance. A Foundation degree is consistent with the Civil Service's desire for a broadly based, vocationally oriented qualification. The level, content, means and delivery has therefore been developed jointly between the University of Chester, the National School of Government, the Cabinet Office and the participating departments.

From an outsider's perspective it is important to understand that the British Civil Service is not a monolithic organisation. At time of writing it is comprised of 554,000 people in 26 separate bodies which range in size from 140 (the Northern Ireland Office) to 129,110 (Department for Work and Pensions) (Office for National Statistics 2006). Each department has its own history and culture and in large departments like the DWP, there are considerable variations between its constituent parts (Pyper 1999). Securing agreement among so many stakeholders has therefore presented challenges.

Following initial discussions, a research exercise was carried out among all Government departments to ensure their needs were identified. The academic content of the programme was then developed during 2003/4 on a working party basis. From consultation with the employers, two requirements were paramount:

- First, the demands of the Service are such that learning has to involve minimal time away from the job. In practical terms this has resulted in minimal face-to-face contact between tutors and learners. To compensate for this a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) was created during 2003/4 to support distance learning.
- A second important requirement from the employer side was that the programme be as relevant to practice as possible. An important issue for the employers is that individual performance and that of the Service as a whole is improved as a result of attendance on the programme.

The resultant programme is designed to deliver the UK Civil Service modernisation agenda, as described above. It is intended to provide people with the skills necessary to run a professional, customer focused organisation. In terms of Bratton's (2001) distinction between learning for task and learning transferable skills for work, it is definitely the latter. It is the first higher education qualification specifically for Civil Servants to be delivered in the UK.

Since its launch in September 2004, almost 350 students have been recruited, principally from four departments- the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills and the Cabinet Office. Future plans for the programme include greater extension to other

departments and a large increase in the number of participating departments and learners. It is envisaged that two partner universities will participate in delivery. F4Gov is therefore one of the largest Foundation degrees.

PROGRAMME DESIGN AND ACADEMIC CONTENT

The traditional pattern of education in the Civil Service is for entrants to acquire a general education prior to entry and then use a combination of common sense and on the job training. Unlike a country such as France, it is unusual, even for senior members, to undertake an education specifically designed to facilitate management and leadership (Pollit 1990). Even where training has existed, such as via the former Civil Service College (now the National School for Government), the emphasis has been upon policy development for high ranking officials, not management and delivery for the broad mass of the service.

The ambitious programme of reform in the Civil Service places an unparalleled strain on the ability of staff to deliver it and has necessitated a change of emphasis. F4Gov is a radical departure in a number of ways. First, it is not delivered by the National School for Government but is an accredited University programme. Second, it does not rely upon the traditional (and expensive) residential approach but instead uses new technology to deliver the programme to where the learner is situated. Third, as it is much cheaper to deliver, it has opened up the possibility of delivery on a mass rather than limited basis. Fourth, the content is aligned with the reform agenda outlined above and in particular on delivery rather than policy issues.

Designing the academic content of F4Gov involved a number of challenges, in addition to the usual academic issues of coherence, relevance and progression:

- The content has to reflect what are often rapidly changing government priorities as well as satisfy the needs of the participating departments, each of which is autonomous
- The programme has to incorporate as much work based learning as possible, in the sense of enabling learners to integrate practice and theory
- There was a tension between the employers desire to prescribe which topics learners should engage with in accordance with an organisationally driven learning agenda and the idea of student choice
- Within 12 months of beginning, it became apparent that the recognised benchmark of achievement for more senior Civil Servants (Professional Skills for Government- PSG) would require the programme to be aligned to ensure compatibility. What has made this especially difficult is trying to develop modules in anticipation of what PSG would finally look like.

Despite these difficulties, the programme has been successfully developed and includes modules on topics included as core competences in PSG. Module titles therefore include:

- Customers and Stakeholders
- Managing and Leading People
- Working with People
- Managing Resources
- Leading Organisational Change
- Project Management
- Public Finance Management

The programme is prescriptive at Level 1, reflecting the employers desire to see all those on the programme demonstrate learning in what it sees as core skills. There is greater flexibility at Level 2, where learners have options and can complete negotiated project modules. In addition to the kind of generic competence modules described above, there are modules at the beginning, middle and end of the programme which enable students to reflect on their experience and learning.

The first module learners complete is 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. In addition to developing their Pathway Rationale, learners are also introduced to literature in respect of learning preferences and critical reflection. They learn to engage in reflective practice by applying

formal theorising to a critical workplace incident. The module is designed not only to enable the learner to think about their learning needs but also to begin to adjust mentally to the process of critical, workplace reflection.

At this stage, any applications Accredited Prior Learning (APL), either Certificated or Experiential are considered. Hereafter learners can complete the Level 1 modules in any order although they are encouraged to complete a module on the Civil Service itself next. This 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, there is a recommended route.

After completing Level 1, students progressing on to Level 2 first complete a module reflecting on their cumulative learning at Level 1 and its application to practice. At the end of Level 2 there is a similar module to reflect on learning from the entire programme.

At the time of writing, the first learners are completing the programme and, using the WBIS framework, pathways are being developed which will enable them to complete a full undergraduate degree.

PROGRAMME DELIVERY: THE VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

One of the key requirements of the programme, from the employers' perspective, is minimal time away from the workplace. Following an initial two day induction, most learning on the programme is facilitated via a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The VLE is hosted on the University's intranet system, IBIS. The VLE contains specific learning materials developed for the programme as well as links to a variety of other sources. These include electronic books, parts of books scanned in, e-journals and other relevant web sources. For each module, learning outcomes and learning opportunities are specified. There is also a Theory Document specifically created for the module, which summarises those theories and models appropriate to the learning outcomes. In addition, all other features, such as assignments, are on the VLE. Submission is also electronic.

The VLE attempts to meet all learner needs and there are facilities for on-line discussion. In practice, these have not been well used and the VLE, despite recent improvements (such as the incorporation of short videos) is text dominated and essentially uni-directional.

The requirement for minimum time away from work has greatly restricted face-to-face contact between learners and between tutors and learners. Many of the learners are from 'non traditional' backgrounds and have varying learning preferences; independent study is by no means ideal for all those on the programme.

The University has attempted to overcome learner isolation. In addition to the Induction process, learners are allocated a personal tutor and there is a subject tutor for each module. Tutor support is available on-line or by telephone. Workplace support is provided by means of a personal mentor. Peer learning is encouraged wherever possible and if an individual employing organisation requests it, the tutor team provides additional study workshops.

PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT

Assessment is in the form of formal reflective reviews, related to the learning outcomes for each module. In effect, the learner, in consultation with the module tutor, devises their own assignment. This is formalised through a Topic Learning Plan, where the learner indicates to the tutor how the requirements of the assessment will be met. To support learning, a theory document for each module has been prepared. Learners are encouraged to read the learning outcomes and Theory document and then consider ways in which they can relate materials to their own experience, which should form the basis for their assignment.

Learners are encouraged to submit drafts for formative assessment. Heavy emphasis is placed on formative assessment as a means of facilitating personal development. Most learners submit in this way before formal submission. One of the limitations of a work-based approach is that it assumes the

learner is engaged in a wide variety of situations and activities upon which to reflect. In practice many on the programme perform fairly limited work roles. Assignments therefore always present learners with the option of work based or work related assessment. *Work based learning* is appropriate where the learner is engaged in an activity and therefore able to reflect upon it in the light of formal theories, models and empirical evidence which are supplied as part of the learning resources. *Work related learning* is suitable where the learning is contextual or where the learner is acquiring knowledge which will be applied in future.

Learners are always encouraged to engage with work based learning as much as possible to meet the employers need for relevance. Wherever possible learners submit artefacts or portfolios of material generated in the workplace, accompanied by a short reflective commentary. Submission is flexible in the sense that students are free to negotiate their own pathway and deadlines.

MANAGEMENT, RECRUITMENT AND DELIVERY

Management of F4Gov is more complex than most academic programmes. 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 (that is all participating departments, the National School of Government and the Cabinet Office) in the management and development of the programme. There is also a student representative. The result is that the programme is not directed solely by academic considerations. Decisions also reflect employer interests.

Recruitment to the programme is co-ordinated centrally by the National School of Government. The National School is also the key co-ordinator and driver of the programme for the employer side.

REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE: A TUTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

In developing and delivering this programme there have been a number of challenges. It is still early days and there has, as yet been no formal evaluation. There are a few observations to make about F4Gov from the perspective of a tutor (as in Schon's (1992) famous 'reflection on action') before setting out in more detail some of the issues any future evaluation is likely to focus upon.

The most important observation is that the feedback from students, Government Departments and the External Assessor has been uniformly excellent. Despite its highly vocational approach, there do not appear to be any major issues in relation to academic standards on F4Gov. An important element in this has been successful teamwork. Although there have been changes in personnel, the programme team have worked cohesively and have striven to adopt the customer focus essential in delivering a programme for an employer.

The tutor team itself has been on a steep learning curve. Coming from a conventional HE background, the tutors have discovered that writing things down is a lot more demanding than giving lectures. The formative assessment has also proved time consuming. It is not unusual to spend two hours providing formative assessment on a draft. The tutor team have also had to learn to prepare learners for the sheer volume of learning materials available for students and the requirements for formal writing. The results have justified the hard work and assignments are of a noticeably higher quality than would be expected from a conventional programme.

Against this there have been a number of difficulties. The Civil Service has changed dramatically in the last two years as the reform agenda has clearly swung towards a concern with greater efficiency. Very few of the initial cohorts two years on are still performing the same role they were when recruited. Some have had more than two job changes in that time. Changing jobs is hugely disruptive to study. Not only are there new roles to learn but there is a change in line management. Learners tend to originate from parts of the Service which are supportive of learning; this is not always true of the areas they move to. It is not just that learners are performing different roles. The consequences of the Gershon (2004) report and the reduction in headcount mean that most of them are also working a great deal harder, leaving less time for study.

A further consequence of rapid change is that the programme itself has had to be adapted more or less continuously. Each of the three Heads of the Civil Service since 1999 have had different views

about reform of the system. In recent years there has also been a subtle change in emphasis reflecting the gradual transition of power within government from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown, prior to the latter becoming Prime Minister in July 2007. The point is that a government programme has to be relevant but government changes very quickly.

ISSUES FOR EVALUATION

In addition to the personal observations above, there are four major issues which require more formal research:

These are:

- The implications of employer involvement
- The conflict between technological and educational imperatives
- The nature of the learner experience and progression rates
- The assumption of knowledge transfer

Employer involvement

Employer involvement in university programmes is still a relatively new idea for many. It is an integral feature of Foundation degrees and has its advocates, not just among employers and in government (Morgan et al 2004). Whilst it is clear that such involvement is likely to result in programs which are more relevant to learner needs, it is not without problems.

As engagement between employers and universities has increased so has the literature. In this context, the development of a theoretical model by Evans et al (2006) is especially useful and resonates with our experiences. The model postulates a continuum of organisational approaches to workforce development, which are either 'expansive' or 'restrictive'. There is not the space here to further elaborate but for anyone familiar with organisational literature, these organisational types broadly equate to Burns and Stalker's (1961) famous continuum between 'mechanistic' and 'organic' companies. The British Civil Service is not monolithic and is comprised of many separate organisations but overall, the majority of learners are undoubtedly in a restrictive learning environment. The consequences of this are reflected in the observations below.

From the learners' perspective, one of the most fundamental restrictions relates to time. Understandably, employers want people at their desks whilst learners and tutors academics want to see the creation of dedicated learning time. 'Work based learning', we have discovered, is often interpreted by employers, as meaning 'at their desks' and a persistent difficulty for learners has been a lack of time allowed for study.

Allied to this is a further misunderstanding of the nature of work based learning. From the perspective of the tutor team, there is an awareness from the literature, borne out by experience, that e-learning without much personal contact is likely to result in low rates of progression and completion (Garrison and Cleveland Innes 2003; Garrison and Kanuaka 2004; Williams 2002). Yet many on the employer side seem either unaware of this or are unwilling to concede it, perhaps because of pressure to 'deliver'.

Further difficulties have arisen in respect of employer expectations of completion of the programme. A Foundation Degree is the equivalent of two years full time study, yet in practice, this has been interpreted as a 'two year programme'. Publicity for the programme is the responsibility of the employer in this instance, not the University and there have been issues in respect of expected completion dates.

Employer control results in other difficulties. Ensuring learners are effectively represented in the management of the programme is difficult on most, especially distance programmes. Isolated learners may feel discouraged, thinking their problem is theirs alone. Allied to this is the difficulty of finding an effective spokesperson in a situation where people do not know one another and where the experience is highly individualised. Third is the issue of finding a platform; the student representative (if able to attend) is only one voice in a room comprised of employers. Finally, in a situation where

employers feel it is 'their programme', there may be an unwillingness to accede to the interests of learners.

Technological and educational imperatives

One of the most attractive features of F4Gov to employers and learners is the VLE because it enables access to information pretty much whenever it is needed. There are also other features such as electronic submission of assignments. Attempts to facilitate communication by means of Discussion Boards, facilities for informal chat, personal and group blogs and so on are also available although usage has been low.

Most of these additions have come from learning technologists rather than being demanded by either learners or tutors and uptake has been low.

A number of other e-learning programmes attempt to encourage on-line dialogue by including it as part of the assessment process (Johnson and Dixon 2006). The F4gov tutor team have not gone down this route because of a shared view that the technology can assist in certain key educational tasks, notably providing information, but it is less well suited to changing attitudes, inspiring interest, facilitating personal and social interest and teaching behavioural skills- the kinds of issues Bligh (1998) so effectively demonstrated lectures are also poor at over 30 years ago.

The development of e-learning has been accompanied by the creation of a new group of professionals to facilitate the process- educational technologists. To date the literature on this group is sparse and largely examined their role in terms of describing their activities (Oliver 2002). However, the presence of a new professional group with a claim to expertise in areas beyond the competence of tutors has implications for the learning process. For example, the inter-learner communication features on the VLE have not been created as a result of demand from learners or pressure from tutors but have been created by technologists. By contrast, tutors' preferences, for a more multi-media, synchronous interactive approach, have not been heeded. Our learning technologists seem to be a great deal more powerful than in other institutions (Vallance 2006).

The presence of technology can have a distorting effect on effective delivery. For example, a lack of engagement is 'solved' by a new blog facility; lack of progression is 'solved' by automatic tracking of submissions and so on. Pressure for 'technical fixes' comes from a variety of sources who may be unconsciously projecting their own preferences onto learners. Learning technologists may consider participation on an electronic discussion board a normal event; employers looking for solutions involving minimal time investment consider it a way of overcoming isolation; librarians may be keen to encourage use of e-books. The presence of technology can lead to an enthusiasm for the technological over learning imperatives, with tutors power to assert the primacy of learning diminished.

From a tutor's perspective, increasing motivation and promoting deep learning involves more than the application of technology. For example, the most effective means of promoting thought, inspiring interest and changing attitudes is discussion and face-to-face dialogue (Bloom 1953). On programmes where tutors have control and where there are not the same competing pressures, it is acknowledged that a 'blended' approach, employing a variety of learning methods and experiences, in addition to e-learning, is likely to produce a more satisfactory learning experience, as well as improve progression (see below) (Elliot 2002; Singh 2003; Hughes 2007).

Implementing optimum learning strategies for F4Gov is always likely to be challenging for a number of reasons. The innovative nature of the programme and lack of fit with the culture and procedures of the rest of the University make understanding and acceptance problematic. The significant involvement of alternative centres of power (such as employers and learning technologists) in the learning process has weakened the control tutors traditionally exert over delivery. While there may be benefits in terms of ensuring relevance, there are some negative consequences, on factors such as progression.

Learner experience and progression rates

A casual inspection of the Index of 15 standard texts on e learning by the author revealed no references to the terms 'progression', 'completion' attrition' and 'drop out rates' yet it is widely

accepted that progression and completion rates on e learning programmes are low compared with more conventionally delivered programmes (Greenagel 2002). The programme has not been running long enough for definitive progression rates but they are a cause for concern and the tutor team constantly try to think of new ways to improve it

We know from experience as well as the literature (such as Billet 2004) that access to learning time in the workplace is an important factor in progression. A noticeable feature of those progressing most successfully is that they have been given time (say, half a day a week) to do so. But this is not typical. As previously mentioned, the employers desire for minimal time away from work often translates on the ground into learners having to find their own time for study.

A closely allied issue is that of line manager support. In our experience consistent support greatly facilitates progression. Again, the literature confirms this (Allen & Lewis 2006). We have also observed, and this is again validated by research, that progression is a function of individual motivation, mediated by the degree to which the work environment is supportive of learning and is unaffected by social characteristics such as gender (Fuller & Unwin 2004). Surprisingly, and we cannot compare with our experience but the evidence suggests progression is unaffected by learning preferences (Walsh et al 2003). More recently Bryson et al. (2006) have demonstrated that access to learning time is mediated by status in the organisation. Since learners on F4Gov are by definition mostly in relatively low status positions, progression is adversely affected.

While the research is useful in highlighting particular factors which affect progression, there are gaps. Many of our slow performing learners have experienced disruption in their working and personal lives. As we have already noted, the Civil Service is going through an intense period of organisational change and only a minority of those on the programme have remained in the same job for more than two years. During that time, some have had four different posts. Each time they start a new job, they are absorbed in learning a new role and progress on F4Gov suffers.

Perhaps an even greater gap in the literature and closely allied to the notion of learner motivation, is the degree of learner *compulsion*. Although we have noted that individual learners have very different personal experiences, there are some common factors. F4gov is employer funded but in practical terms payment is on a modules completed basis. In bald terms, there is no financial penalty to the employer if learners do not progress; as a result there is a corresponding lack of pressure on learners. On other WBIS pathways where there is a far greater deal of compulsion (on one, failure to complete results in learners losing their job!) progression and completion are not an issue. On a more positive note, in circumstances where learners are allocated time by a line manager, motivation may be increased by the need to demonstrate progress.

Knowledge transfer

The final issue requiring more thorough investigation is the assumption that completion of the programme leads to enhanced individual and hence organisational capacity- knowledge transfer. Advocates of work based learning routinely assume that such capacity enhancement occurs but there is very little direct empirical evidence to support this contention (Nixon et al 2006).

The belief in the efficacy of educations as a means of transforming human capital goes back to the early 1960s and in particular, the work of Schultz (1963) and Becker (1964). Schultz, an agricultural economist, was interested in raising agricultural output. The solution to improved yields was not so much greater investment in fertilisers and farm machinery but in educating farmers to better exploit technical progress. Schultz then extended his approach to demonstrate that the yield on investment in people across all sectors was greater than the returns from investment in physical capital such as new plant and machinery.

Becker extended Schultz's analysis to demonstrate that public investment in education and even health care could be regarded as investments in human capital. More recently Lucas (1988) has demonstrated how the accumulation of human capital is facilitated by both formal education and learning by doing. Barro and Sala I Martin (2004) have produced strong empirical evidence on the positive effect government spending on education has on a national economy.

While human growth theory appears to offer insights into how technological development allied to education can enhance economic growth, the theory is extremely broad brush. There is little reason to believe that all education for all individuals benefits all organisations they work for in all circumstances. To begin with, not all individuals learn equally well. Nelson and Phelps (1966) drew attention to the limitations of peoples' ability to learn- that is the stock of human capital is not equally distributed.

The pervasive belief in the effectiveness of educational programmes has resulted, until recently, in few attempts to even identify it- an omission regularly identified by writers on the subject (Bassi et al 1996; Philips 1997; Woodall 2000). There are many practical and conceptual difficulties in identifying effects, such as clarity about the notion of learning itself, separating out informal from formal learning and even in many cases identifying what is meant by 'performance' but none of these in themselves appears to explain why there are so few studies. There are some exceptions to this; Clarke (2004) for example found that the impact of training is more effective in organisations which monitor and evaluate outcomes. More recently a number of other studies have reinforced the impression that knowledge transfer is more effective in supportive learning environments (Beattie 2006; Brown et al 2006; Kirwin and Birchall 2006; Al-Emadi and Marquardt 2007). None of these studies refer to the expansive-restrictive continuum of Evans et al (2006) but it would appear where knowledge transfer occurs, it is likely to do so in a 'learning organisation'.

As previously stated the British Civil Service is comprised of a number of organisations, at least some of which fall into the restrictive camp. If this is so and there is a link with the degree to which learning is applied, this would accord with the experience of our learners, some of whom feel frustrated with the lack of recognition they receive in the workplace. One of the ironies of our experience is that to date, for the most part, employing departments often show little interest in the enhanced capacity of their staff. They are interested in progression in the sense of learners completing the programme but remain largely un-curious about their changed capabilities. Whether this will change over a period of time remains to be seen.

FINAL COMMENTS

The Foundation for Government programme has enjoyed many remarkable successes in its short lifetime. It has developed a syllabus closely aligned with the needs of modern government; it is flexible and low cost; it has embraced new technology to deliver wherever learners are located and it has reached a broad swathe of practitioners for whom access to such a programme was simply impossible until recently. It is the first accredited programme of its kind for the British Civil Service and we suspect the first of its kind anywhere. Its future development seems assured. But like anything truly innovative, it requires careful, long term evaluation. That evaluation will contribute to knowledge in a number of fields, where at present, it is compartmentalised. For example, there is a body of literature on work based learning and another on e-learning, yet rarely are the two united, despite this being common practice (Bates 2005).

There are many benefits from developing a programme in close collaboration with an employer but there are also constraints. The technology is a vital asset in developing a distance programme but there are dangers in seeing technology as the solution to all problems. There are concerns about the student experience and progression and the employers themselves need greater awareness of not only their learners' needs but also their enhanced capacity. The role of tutors is very different from that on a traditional programme and it is our perception that our ability to ensure optimum learning is far more constrained. As the programme matures and evaluation is put in place, the tutor team, the employers and learners will continue to progress with these and other issues.

As such, like all programmes, it is a work in progress, as it is continually refined to better serve the needs of its stakeholders. As other Civil Services around the globe engage in modernisation, there will be lessons to be learned from it.

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