



Delivering distance education for modern government: the F4Gov programme

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to describe the development and operation of an innovative, work based, distance delivered foundation degree developed by the University of Chester and the British Civil Service. The paper is both a case study in its own right but also the basis for a further quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the programme.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper describes the development of the programme in the broader context of UK Civil service modernisation and the application of the University of Chester's established Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework. Important features of the programme are described including academic content, learner support, assessment and management.

Findings – The paper concludes by identifying three areas for formal evaluation. These are: the implications of employer involvement in the design and management of the programme; the differential nature of the learner experience and the factors underlying performance and the impact of the programme in meeting employer goals.

Research limitations/implications – There are limitations in generalising from a particular case study. No formal research questions are posed in the paper or method suggested. Further work is necessary to develop a strategy for evaluation of the programme.

Practical implications – The conclusions are exploratory, awaiting formal evaluation.

Originality/value – The case study is of interest to educators engaged in flexible and distance work based learning. The issue of employer involvement in programme design, management and delivery is of considerable interest to those developing and delivering Foundation degrees and similar programmes. The issues in relation to the student experience are also of considerable interest to those engaged in workplace delivery. The organisational impact of the programme is of interest to employers and educators alike.

Keywords Civil Service, Work-based learning, E-learning, Learners, Employers, Programme evaluation and review technique

Paper type Case study



Introduction

The Foundation for Government (F4Gov) programme developed for the British Civil Service by the University of Chester is an innovative, low cost, accredited, distance foundation degree using a dedicated virtual learning environment (VLE). It is intended 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 is intended to facilitate reflection as well as embed deeper learning associated with higher education. The content of the

programme has been agreed with the Civil Service to foster skills though necessary to deliver modern government.

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

This paper describes the rationale and development of the programme and identifies key issues for future evaluation in respect of employer involvement in design and delivery, the learner experience and the broader impact of the programme on the modernisation agenda.

F4Gov: 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 political 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.

The immediate predecessor to the present UK Government introduced a series of reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s with the following effects:

- 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; and
- 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):

- (1) stronger leadership with a clear sense of purpose;
- (2) better business planning from top to bottom;
- (3) sharper performance management;
- (4) an improvement in the diversity of staff;
- (5) a service more open to people and ideas, able to bring on talent; and
- (6) 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).

The WBIS framework

The second important contextual element for understanding the nature of the F4Gov programme is the WBIS framework developed at the University of Chester. WBIS is a pre-validated degree framework designed to facilitate learning for people in the workplace and provide academic credit for it.

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.
- To 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. 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 that 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 that 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.

Development of the programme

In recent years the WBIS framework has been used by a number of individuals and employers to meet their educational needs and obtain academic credit. Among those on the programme have been a number of senior Civil Servants. When, in 2002, the Cabinet Office was given responsibility to develop a Foundation Degree for the Civil Service, the University of Chester was approached to use the WBIS framework as the mechanism for its delivery. 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. 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, n.d.). An important feature of a foundation degree is that institutions are not free to develop them except where they are demanded by employers. There is also 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 comprises 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 (DWP)) (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 2003/2004 on a working party basis. From consultation with the employers, two requirements were paramount:

- (1) 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 VLE was created during 2003/2004 to support distance learning.
- (2) 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 DWP, 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 in the country.

Programme design and academic content

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 had to be agreed with a large number of stakeholders who often held differing views.
- The issue of securing stakeholder agreement is complicated by frequent changes in Government and Civil Service priorities.
- 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; and
- 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.

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 his/her 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 on 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 that 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.

Learners on the programme are located all over the country and in keeping with the requirement of minimal face-to-face contact are largely, autonomous, independent learners. This has presented the programme team with many challenges. 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. In addition, it is widely accepted that completion rates are considerably lower on e-learning programmes than those conventionally delivered (Greenagel, 2002).

Mechanisms have been put in place to facilitate learning and overcome isolation. All of these have to be negotiated with the management board. At the beginning of the programme there is a two-day Induction and Study Skills workshop. Learners are allocated a personal tutor and there is a subject tutor for each module. Tutor support is available online 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. After the initial induction, the main source of learning is the VLE. The VLE is a dedicated web page that contains learning outcomes, learning documents especially 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 direct links to a wide variety of learning materials. These include access to electronic books or parts of books, electronic journal holdings, specialised electronic knowledge sources (such as INTUTE) and other relevant web pages. Learners can also access their local university library via the reciprocal UK Libraries Plus scheme.

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 on.

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 also a change in line management. Learners tend to originate from parts of the Service that 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 and the current transition in government from one which is dominated by Prime Minister Blair, to one with Chancellor Brown’s imprint has also led to change. The point is that a government programme has to be relevant but government changes very quickly.

Issues for research

In addition to the personal observations above, there are a number of issues which should form the focus for formal evaluation.

There are three particular pressing issues:

- (1) the nature of the employer-university relationship;
- (2) the student experience and representation; and
- (3) the effectiveness of the learning

As may be surmised, there have been tensions between the employers understandably wanting people at their desks and the tutor team aware of not just the educational value of a more “blended” approach (involving more face-to-face delivery) but also the

benefits in terms of progression and completion (Elliot, 2002; Garrison and Cleveland Innes, 2003; Garrison and Kanuaka, 2004; Singh, 2003; Williams, 2002). Employer involvement is an integral feature of foundation degrees and has its advocates (Morgan *et al.*, 2004) but the consequences of this require investigation. “Employer involvement” as a term obscures what is in practice, a highly-contested domain.

One of the other questions in relation to a programme designed to meet the needs of an employer, is the role of learner involvement. In the case of a distance programme with little direct contact between learners who are all progressing on different pathways on different timescales, the issue is even more acute. On the F4Gov programme it has proved difficult to ensure effective student representation.

The second important issue relates to e learning in the work place. While there is a considerable body of research on e-learning and work-based learning, there is less, especially of the student experience, on the two combined (Bates, 2005).

We know that access to learning time in the workplace is an important factor in progression (Billet, 2004). We know that the support of line managers is important (Allen and Lewis, 2006). We also know that progression is a function of individual motivation, mediated by the degree to which the work environment is supportive of learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004) and is unaffected by gender or preferred learning style (Walsh *et al.*, 2003). More recently Bryson *et al.* (2006) have demonstrated that access to learning time is mediated by status in the organisation.

What we do not know is how progression on F4Gov is affected by the different individual motivational factors, seniority, learning culture, attitudes of line managers, colleagues or even changes in job role. As we have already noted, there is considerable variation in Civil Service organisation and culture; there is therefore also a correspondingly diverse student experience. “Equality of experience” is an assumed, implicit objective on most educational programmes. The variation in student experience on F4Gov and its impact on progression are important matters for evaluation.

Finally, as indicated earlier, an important outcome for the employer and the reason they have selected a work-based qualification, is evidence not just of enhanced learning but a translation of that learning into measurable outcomes. From a tutor’s perspective, the assignments provide evidence of enhanced capacity but there appears to be issues within organisations which sometimes prevent that enhancement from being recognised. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for many who are not on the programme and are only vaguely aware of the nature of work-based learning, it is simply “another qualification” with little relevance to capability.

From the organisation’s perspective, this information is important not just as a means for justifying the programme. It is also important in identifying the capacity of individuals and the contribution they can make to the broader modernisation process. This suggests there is considerable scope to investigate the practical consequences of the work-based learning element of F4Gov. Such research is likely to require longer term monitoring.

Conclusions

F4Gov is a highly innovative programme that appears to be performing well but it is still at an early stage in its application. A formal evaluation is required and there are three areas in particular which appear in need of investigation. These are: the nature of

and consequences of employment involvement in the design and delivery of the programme; the quality of the student experience and the factors influencing participation and finally the contribution to the modernisation agenda in the Civil Service. Formulating more precise research questions and devising an appropriate methodology must be the next step.

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Further reading

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