

ACADEMIC ARTICLES

Developing a Virtual Academy for UK Government: A Bridge between Theory and Practice

Cary Cooper* and Julia Hockey**

Correspondence

**Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health*

Lancaster University Management School and Chair of The Sunningdale Institute

***Manager of The Sunningdale Institute 2005 – 2007*

Abstract

It has long been recognised that there is a wealth of academic and practitioner knowledge that could help the UK Government with its agenda of public service reform. Accessing this expertise in a meaningful way, however, has proved to be more problematic. This paper describes the development of the Sunningdale Institute as a virtual academy of Fellows situated within the National School of Government which is the government's own skills training and organisational development resource. Drawing on our experiences as Chair and Manager of the Institute we give examples of the work undertaken by the Fellows and describe the progress made by the Sunningdale Institute so far in helping civil service departments respond to their reform challenges.

Introduction

In step with the Government's agenda for civil service reform, the National School of Government and as an integral part of it, the Sunningdale Institute was launched in June 2005. With over 30 years experience in the public sector, the National School inherited the title of the largest and longest-established public sector academy in the UK. New challenges require fresh solutions, however, and the National School has sought to align itself more closely with the strategic needs of government, whilst raising its own capacity and drawing upon the best thinking and practice that the world of public administration has to offer. This is the role played by the Sunningdale Institute and at the time of its launch Sir Gus O'Donnell, Secretary of the Cabinet, Head of the Home Civil Service and President of the Institute said this of the Fellows:

“The Fellows of the Sunningdale Institute offer senior civil servants another resource for driving through change in their organisations and increasing our levels of professionalism. I look forward to working with them and encourage senior staff to think creatively about how they can do likewise.”

The Sunningdale Institute offers government organisations fresh help in their pursuit of excellence. Managed by the National School, the Institute brings together in the UK an unprecedented breadth of research expertise harnessed to a practical business orientation in organisational development and service delivery. Through the Fellows, the Institute works with organisations in a variety of ways, fostering innovation and learning, and building capacity. The Institute is committed to developing new and creative approaches to organisation development, and to the generation of new ‘practical wisdom’ by bringing together leading academics and industry figures to advise leaders and organisations on public service operational and delivery issues. The Fellows provide knowledge exchange, consultancy, and learning and development activities for senior public servants and are available to give briefings, lead research projects, participate in high-level consultancy interventions, and facilitate dialogue on particular topics of importance to Government.

Background to the Development of the Institute

It has been accepted for a long time that expert help is crucial if Governments are going to move forward successfully with their public service reform agendas. In the UK this help

often takes the form of consultancy services and consultants, when used in the right situations, can help clients achieve things that they do not have the capacity or capability to do for themselves. The National Audit Office estimates that in 2005-06 the UK Government spent £1.8 billion on consulting which is a small decline from the £2 billion spent in 2003-04. The National School, and its predecessors the Centre for Management and Policy Studies and the Civil Service College, has for many years been active in providing consultancy to both the UK and to overseas governments and some of its training business has been directed to giving civil servants the skills to be internal consultants in their own departments.

In the United States, University Schools of Government fulfil an important role in this respect and a study visit to the US a few years ago raised the question as to why this has not happened to the same extent in the UK. This question prompted the view that unlike the US, relevant expertise in the UK is scattered amongst the various business schools and that the way forward would be to bring this talent together - not physically in one location - but virtually, as part of a network of Fellows within the Sunningdale Institute.

As a result many of our Fellows are based at a number of business schools both in the UK and overseas. We have academics from business schools such as Warwick, Cranfield, London Business School, Cardiff, and Nottingham in the UK to name but a few. Our international Fellows include two who are based at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, whilst other Fellows are people who have run large businesses and public service organisations. All have their own day jobs, but

they come together to network and to share knowledge and to work on specific projects.

Appointment of Fellows

Fellows have been appointed for their authority and expertise in the areas of public leadership and governance, organisation and system design, connecting strategy and operations, and fostering innovation. Thirty five Fellows were selected against criteria developed by a working group of senior academics from leading UK business schools and experienced practitioners. Fellowship is by invitation and appointments are made by the President of the Institute for an initial period of two years. All Fellows have agreed to their conditions of appointment which includes issues to do with confidentiality and intellectual property rights. We are currently looking again at our expertise requirements and trying to identify the gap between what we have already and what we think we will need to help the UK Government with its ongoing reform agenda. The next tranche of appointments will take place in the summer of 2007.

Governance and Administration

The Sunningdale Institute is managed as part of the National School, which is a Non-Ministerial Department in the UK civil service. It is directed by the Head of Strategic Capability, Professor Sue Richards, assisted by a small management team. The governance arrangements of the Institute reflect not only the National School context, but also the fact that the Institute is a voluntary association of thought leaders who serve the public by helping the UK Government. The on-going strategy development necessary to achieve the purpose

of the Institute is undertaken collaboratively by the Fellows and the staff of the National School of Government.

In addition to the regular meetings held with Fellows, including an annual overnight event to help foster this collaboration, a smaller core group of eight Fellows has also been established to work with the National School management team. This core group represents the collective interests of the Fellows in agreeing the development of systems and processes that will ensure that the Fellows' efforts are used to best effect. Sub-groups have also been established which have looked at the development of a Fellows Charter setting out the rights and responsibilities of the Fellows and have begun to consider the criteria for the appointment of new Fellows to the Institute.

Help to UK Government

The purpose of the Sunningdale Institute is to serve the public by offering practical wisdom on the difficult management and policy problems facing UK Government. This help is provided in a number of different ways. A key feature of the Sunningdale Institute is the six weekly Lunchtime Briefings that are held at central London venues. These are given by Fellows to a very senior civil service audience on topics that the Institute considers are important to civil service reform. Attendance is by invitation and is free of charge. Some repeat Briefings are also given in Scotland. Subjects covered so far have included issues to do with leadership, customer service, high reliability and failure free working, and workplace stress. One of our international Fellows gave the first Sunningdale Institute Briefing when Professor Mark Moore from the

Kennedy School at Harvard University spoke to Permanent Secretaries about "Recognising Public Value: The Challenge of Measuring Performance in Government" back in May 2006. The Briefings offer senior managers the inside track on research findings and current thinking on public service organisational development and delivery issues. Apart from the Briefings, Sunningdale Institute Fellows have also spoken at conferences and other high level learning events. Another Harvard Fellow, Dr Elaine Kamarck delivered a session on "Public Sector Reform: An American Perspective" at the 21st Century Public Services: Putting People First conference organised by the National School of Government in June 2006. Professor John Benington, a Sunningdale Institute Fellow, has written an overview of the themes for a book published subsequently. Other Fellows have run training sessions for senior civil servants on National School learning events and are assisting with the design of new leadership programmes.

Fellows have also been involved in consultancy-type projects. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) undertook a review into how it should best identify, organise, direct and exploit its intellectual capital. Two Institute Fellows advised on the design of the methodology and peer-reviewed the final report:

"This was a new approach for MoD and we felt we needed external advice - beyond that which could be obtained from academic and practitioner literature - to guide us through a complex area. We approached the Sunningdale Institute to assist us as we wanted advice rather than consultants to do the whole project for us.

Our team within MOD learned a lot from the two Fellows, with the result that the review was more robust than could have been achieved by relying solely on MOD expertise”.

The two Fellows involved in the MoD work appreciated the opportunity to work together and combine their academic and practitioner expertise:

“Our advisory role was an interesting and worthwhile experience for us. It allowed us the opportunity to bring together our experience of the management of intellectual capital and knowledge in business and the public sector to develop a generic framework which we think can now be usefully applied to a variety of arms of government”.

An important part of Sunningdale Institute consultancy-type projects has also been the collaborative approach between the Fellows and the client:

“We met with two Fellows from the Sunningdale Institute to discuss issues around an organisational inspection that we were undertaking. Having access to the Fellows was very helpful – as the work unfolded the two involved proved to be a valuable ‘sounding board’, and helped us shape our thinking. Using the Institute meant that we were able to quickly and thoroughly analyse issues and options”.

The ‘critical friend’ role played by Fellows is also an important one as demonstrated in this quote from the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) concerning the engagement of a Fellow to contribute an impartial, strategic perspective to a report to OGC’s Minister on the reform of the Government Procurement

Service:

“The Professor’s participation was invaluable. Their broad and deep experience of strategy and change management was evident in both their ability to draw out the key issues during our meetings, as well as in the detailed, specific comments provided in writing. As a result we were able to bring a focus to the report very quickly, with confidence that the overall approach was credible. The service we received from the Institute’s team, from helping us to define our requirement at the outset through to closure, was very smooth, swift and easy. I would absolutely recommend the Institute to anyone seeking an incredibly experienced and knowledgeable ‘critical friend”.

Although consultancy services are fee-generating, the charges are not excessive and reflect the very reasonable consultancy day rate paid to the Fellows. There is currently much importance attached to the Departmental Capability Reviews that are in the process of being carried out to assess each UK civil service department’s capability to meet its future challenges. As part of its response to the findings from the first Reviews the National School has made the decision to make an investment in a programme of action research studies by the Sunningdale Institute Fellows. The first of these studies is a Network looking at Effective Business Models which, led by Professor Andy Neely from Cranfield University and Professor Rick Delbridge from Cardiff, offers participating departments an opportunity to add to the body of knowledge available to public services on this subject to help sustain the drive for continuous improvement. The Departmental Capability

Reviews found that departments are too inclined to settle for inherited structures and systems rather than designing new systems to deliver the desired outcomes. Network participants meet together regularly to share knowledge and experience and to consider alternative approaches to business models. Findings will be shared between Network members, and also more widely across the UK civil service and will be incorporated into National School of Government products and services. In this way the Sunningdale Institute is helping to achieve its dual purpose, namely adding to the intellectual capacity of the National School, and developing new and creative approaches to organisational development and generating practical wisdom.