

The 21st century public servant

Introduction

'Public services have continued to be designed around professional specialisms even though the silo institutions these designs created have long since ceased to be useful in achieving local well-being. Public services have continued to be viewed through the lens of the public sector even though voluntary and latterly private sector providers are well established in many areas of service delivery' (University of Birmingham Policy Commission).

As this quote indicates, the nature of public services is changing and this has significant implications for those who work in them. The localism agenda and the devolution of power promise to dramatically alter systems of public services. Added to this, building on the work of previous governments, the increased involvement of private and third sector providers in the delivery of public services means that we are seeing a radical programme public service reform. Taken together these changes could mean a significant shift in terms of what public servants do, where they do it, what skills they may need and what their career trajectories might look like.

The Public Service Academy will build on the work done on this topic as part of the 'future of public services' policy commission. This work programme will develop over the six months that it takes place over (June -December 2012) but will include components of research, high profile events and working with alumni and current students. It is anticipated that the outcomes of this programme will support practice and also inform UoB's public service offer.

What does the model 21st century civil servant look like? (<http://click.mail.guardian.co.uk/?qs=5a3e81f4afd44e2c7cd00020fbd1d3b5b207d52b876ce465f0a95e4ac299bdbc26fddec61fe4acf>)

According to **Helen Dickinson**, director of the Public Service Academy at the University of Birmingham, they are entrepreneurial and locally-minded, with well-practiced intrapersonal skills and plenty of **commercial savvy**.

Who are they and what do they do?

Twenty-first century public servants may be professionals, managers and/or practitioners from across the public, private and third sectors working in a system of local public support. They fulfil a combination of roles, some of which are new, some evolving and some more longstanding. The future of public services policy commission suggested four new roles that will need to be developed in the future:

- **Storyteller** – will play a key role in authoring and communicating stories of how new worlds of Local Public Support might be envisioned in the absence of existing blueprints, drawing on experience and evidence from a range of sources. This is about the ability to fashion and communicate options for the future, however tentative and experimental and will be crucial in engaging service users, citizens and staff in the project of redesign.
- **Resource weaver** – this is the ability to make creative use of existing resources regardless of their intended/original use; weaving together miscellaneous and disparate materials to generate something new and useful for service users and citizens.
- **Systems architect** – someone who is able to describe and compile coherent local systems of public support from the myriad of public, private, third sector and other resources. This is an ongoing task as system resources are likely to vary over time and space.
- **Navigator** – this specifically focuses on guiding citizens and service users around the range of possibilities that might be available in a system of local public support. This is similar to the sort of role that some area based regeneration workers have developed in the past.

These new roles sit alongside three evolving roles:

- **Commissioner** – although much is known about this role already a key issue here will be in ensuring there are sufficient commissioners with the right range of skills to be able to commission services and support on a system rather than service basis.
- **Broker** – a role similar to but distinct from an advocate. Involves working closely with an on behalf of service users to access the appropriate support. Linked to personalisation and individual budgets.
- **Reticulist** – this role is one element of the collaboration domain and focuses on the development and use of networking skills to identify new sources of expertise and support and/or to bring together agents who together can achieve desired outcomes.

There are also four longstanding roles that will also continue to be important including: regulator which involves assessing performance of resources against standards; protector where the emphasis is on intervening to prevent harm; adjudicator where the requirement is to make decisions on balance of evidence; and, expert where the role is to exercise judgement in decision making drawing on relevant skills and experience.

What support do they need?

The policy commission's report makes reference to 'twenty first century literacies' which are the specific skills needed in the new working environment. These include:

- Interpersonal skills specifically facilitation, empathy and political skills;
- Synthesising skills, including sorting evidence from a range of sources, analysing, making judgements, offering critique and being creative;
- Organising skills for group work, collaboration and peer review;
- Communication skills, making more and better use of new and multimedia resources.

In order to develop the kinds of roles and skills set out above, public servants will need appropriate and adequate support. Central government can play an important role in publicly valuing and supporting public service and promote careers in public services. As part of this research package we will hold a high profile round table to establish what we mean by public service in the twenty-first century and what needs to happen to adequately support individuals in a career in this area. We will also work with current undergraduate students to examine what they understand by public service, what careers they believe are on offer in terms of public service and what would attract them to public service. This will be accompanied by the introduction of taster sessions run in conjunction with the local authority and thinking about how we might build work-based projects into the curriculum of appropriate courses. A "blue-chip" internship will also be introduced offering a high profile internship across a number of public service providers which will be won as part of a competitive process by undergraduate students.

Educational and training programmes will also need to take account of these changes. The University of Birmingham has a good reputation in the training of public servants and is involved in the education of a number of individuals at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in addition to training support. Catherine Needham has been brought in to refresh Birmingham's MPA and Public sector MBA and the PSA will work with her to support this process. Universities also play an important role in supporting public servants through their networks and connections and the intelligence they offer about 'how the world works' and how things might be done differently. The PSA will work with alumni to put on events where research insights can be shared and colleagues from across the city will have a chance to network. We will also explore the appetite for a young public servant network which the University would host.

Further information

This stream of work will further develop the findings of the future of public services policy commission and deal with questions such as:

- are the roles envisaged by the policy commission correct and are there any missing activities?
- what are the education, training and development implications of these developments?
- how do young people understand the role of public servants and what would encourage them to embark on this career path?

Your comments on this piece would be very welcome and will help to shape the programme of work related to this issue.

Please contact us direct at psacademy@contacts.bham.ac.uk (<mailto:psacademy@contacts.bham.ac.uk>)

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