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CAPABILITY REFORM:

A SYSTEMATIC AND SUSTAINED STRATEGY FOR THE
INTERSECTION OF ECONOMICS AND SECURITY

Amina Adjerid

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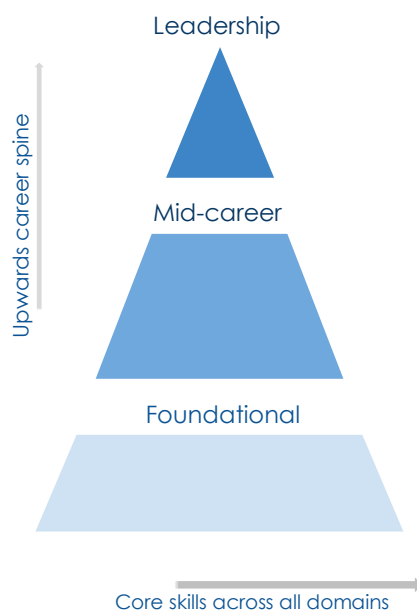
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Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford

Executive Summary

The intersection of economic prosperity and national security interests is becoming more complex and challenging, and geopolitical and wider trends mean this will continue. Given that these two traditionally distinct domains are now more intertwined, policymakers must be equipped with the capabilities to effectively conduct policymaking across disciplines and departments, with a common fluency in both specialisms and an ability to manage uncertainty and complexity. Over the years, the Civil Service has dedicated considerable effort into developing the experience, knowledge, and skills of civil servants across a range of priorities, as well as improving the underpinning mechanisms and incentives for recruiting and retaining talent. However, the volume and frequency of reform programmes signifies that outcomes do not durably stand the test of time in equipping policymakers with the expertise and flexibility to respond to future challenges. In this paper, the Fellowship both explores the potential reasons for why capability reform programmes have had limited success in this respect, and the lessons learned that could improve policymaking today. This approach examines the fundamental outlook and focus of reform campaigns, the approach they took in defining strategic priorities, and the methods through which reform has been implemented in the past.

Considering the lessons learned from history, as well as research conducted by the Fellowship, this paper explores a case for a strategy to improve capability at the intersection of economics and security. The approach includes establishing a structured programme of reforms for the long term that target the building of skills, expertise and experience required for people to straddle both the security to economic and the international to domestic intersections. While some of these proposals are distinctive and unique, many of the most transformational actions are very traditional and familiar: making better use of what we already have, exemplifying existing best practice, and enabling deliberate intervention. The approach is not a single proposed action, but rather a series of recommendations that serve three core objectives:



1. To ensure senior leaders are equipped with the necessary skills, experience, and qualifications through placing stronger emphasis on the importance of expertise in cross-domain policy making and experience in managing complexity.
2. To create an interdisciplinary range with the right career incentives through developing an 'Economic Security Career Cadre' including specialist training, development opportunities and exchange with the private sector.
3. To ensure all have a common baseline of skills and expertise through establishing common foundational skills and standards across domains with entry level economic and security concepts reflected in training.

Background

History can teach us a great deal about capability reform within the Civil Service, and how it can be used to inform a future approach. The most impactful waves of reform programmes came about in the UK in about in the late 1980s, and by the 1990s this trend had spread globally¹. While the movement in the UK initially focused on programmes of organisational culture and process, they eventually shifted during 2002 through the “Modernising Government” agenda to focus on target areas of service delivery. While several target areas are narrow and focused on local levels, many others were broader and driven centrally, attempting to drive agendas across many departments all at once. This is somewhat consistent with the Civil Service's historical tendency to favour generalist development that targeted mixed and professional skills, rather than campaigns targeted at improving skills within or across specific domains or specialisms.

The origins of UK Civil Service reform can be traced back by 170 years, to the Northcote-Trevelyan² report. Here, the original framework for the organisation of the Civil Service was agreed, features of which are relevant still today, namely: entry by competitive and proper examination; work placement suited to capacity and education; the provision of training to build expertise; and promotion by merit rather than seniority. The Civil Service's core framework remained largely based on this philosophy until 1966, when the Fulton Inquiry highlighted that policy was now tackling twentieth century problems³. In response, it addressed six inadequacies: a Civil Service that favoured the development of generalists, rather than specialists, rigid and outdated 'class' system, lack of appropriate authority and respect given to professional specialists, not enough skilled managers, not enough contact between the Civil Service and the end user, not enough career planning; and poor internal communication. The Civil Service Department and Civil Service College were established in the same year, seeing a re-organisation of responsibilities and an energised focus on training services. Further improvements were proposed by the Continuity and Change (1994)⁴ programme, including awarding departments freedom to develop unique management style and structures, and delegated responsibility on pay and grading below senior levels.

Between 1999-2005, a new reform strategy introduced by Prime Minister Blair's government⁵ under the Modernising Government agenda presented a package for the long-term of renewal and reform. It argued that there was a requirement for a more effective system of incentives and levers to put principles into practice: new accountability arrangements, cross-cutting performance measures and appraisal systems which rewarded team-working across traditional boundaries. Five years later, the Delivery & Values⁶ strategy was published, which set out how to improve and develop a wider range of delivery skills, improve the way the Civil Service leads, manages and develops its people. Quickly building on this, the Professional Skills for Government was set up in October 2004, and three professional categories replaced the old “generalist” and “specialist” labels: policy, operational

¹ Pollitt, C., & Bouckaert, G. *Public management reform: A comparative analysis*. (Oxford University Press: 2004).

² Northcote, S.H., & Trevelyan, C.E. *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*. (1954: https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1854_Northcote_Trevelyan_Report.pdf)

³ The Civil Service. *Report of the Committee (1966)*: <https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/fulton/fulton1.pdf>

⁴ The Civil Service. *Continuity and Change*. (1994:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/272025/2627.pdf)

⁵ The Civil Service. *Modernising Government*. (1999: <https://ntouk.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/modgov.pdf>)

⁶ Cabinet Office. *Civil Service Reform Delivery and Values*. (2004: https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/2004-civil_service_reform-delivery_and_values.pdf)

delivery, and corporate services. These were not intended to be silos but rather overlap, requiring collaboration between the categories.

In 2005, then Cabinet Secretary Gus O'Donnell proposed a capability review programme, which aimed to support departments to push development in key areas. To do this, this proposal was shortly followed by the establishment of the Capabilities Reviews Team in the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) which had been set up in 2001. Over the years, its effectiveness varied: the PMDU was initially effective at addressing strategy and delivery through a set of focused Public Service Agreements on priority concerns (such as health, education, crime, and transport) which produced an interesting set of insights. However, it later broadened its focus to cover a wider range of Civil Service priorities, and eventually became less effective. It was later abolished in 2010.

In 2012, the Civil Service Reform Plan was published which set out a vision for a smaller, more strategic Civil Service. It mandated that all policy makers will be expected to undertake at least five days a year of continuing professional development to ensure they had the right skills⁷. By 2014, the government identified that there was a critical skills gap. Follow up progress reports followed shortly, which focused on taking further action to tackle the capability gap. Notably, this approach placed particular emphasis on leadership rather than delegated grades.

*"We need culture change that supports innovation, challenges the bias to inertia, makes us more receptive to relevant experience from other organisations so that all parts of the Civil Service are as good as the best, and makes the most of the formidable talents at our disposal, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability. Leadership here is the key"*⁸

The report proposed a set of specific reforms: opening more Senior Civil Servant appointments to external candidates, forward planning on digital and technology, and formalising the roles of Heads of Function in leadership of their professions. The report also focused on removing barriers for talented individuals by implementing the diversity strategy that was published in the Talent Action Plan, 2014. Talent management was widely identified as an issue due to several external reports commissioned to investigate the barriers facing women and underrepresented groups of employees, such as the HayGroup's Women in Whitehall report⁹, and the Lord Browne Review of Talent Management in 2014¹⁰. The government committed itself to greater leadership focus on identifying and bringing on talent and succession planning.

In the years that followed, the government continued to publish more detailed and practical papers. The Functional Model (2015)¹¹ set out that the government aimed to create more attractive careers and enhanced skills through formalising stronger "functions" which transcended single departments. This required central leadership to oversee recruitment pipelines, reward packages,

⁷ HM Government. *The Civil Service Reform Plan* (2012):

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e4e3c40f0b62305b82231/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-final.pdf>

⁸Civil Service. *Civil Service Reform Plan Progress Report*. (2014):

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7df0f1ed915d74e33ef045/Civil_Service_Reform_Plan_-_Progress_Report__web_.pdf

⁹Cabinet Office. *Women in Whitehall*. (2014):

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dd6f140f0b65d88634ba1/Rpt-GMA-Cabinet_Office-Talented_Women-Final_Report__9.5.14_.pdf

¹⁰Lord Browne, J. *The right people in the right place with the right skills*. (2014):

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7eb301e5274a2e87db1579/Findings_of_Lord_Browne_Review_of_Talent_Management.pdf

¹¹Cabinet Office. *The functional model*. (2015):

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f47f140f0b6230268e8c5/The_Functional_Model.pdf

career paths, talent spotting, capability building for specialist staff through professional accreditation and performance assessment. In 2016, the Workforce Plan¹² was published, which solidified some of these objectives, including how to attract and retain people of talent and expertise, build career paths, develop world class leaders, be the most inclusive employer, and develop flexible reward structures.

The approach set out during a speech given by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, to the Ditchley Annual Lecture 2020 was one of the most impactful developments. Reflecting upon an accumulation of a series of challenging circumstances such as the fallout from the financial crisis, wars abroad in Afghanistan and Iraq, the migrant crisis and COVID, the speech marked a clear case for a step-change campaign of change in government. While Gove repeatedly emphasised the good will and excellence of civil servants, he also highlighted above all else the requirement for government to build the necessary skills to respond to the challenges being faced, driven by clear gaps in skills and knowledge. These gaps represented a symptom of a range of systematic problems including in training programmes, reform priorities and incentives in career structures to build sustained expertise in policy.

"I have never come across any civil servant who did not want to do his or her best for the country. But, nevertheless, there are a limited number, even in the Senior Civil Service, who have qualifications or expertise in mathematical, statistical and probability questions – and these are essential to public policy decisions."

"Determination to instil and to cultivate deep knowledge should apply across Government... but there are systemic problems which mean that we often lose institutional memory and fail to build on hard-won success."

"We need to ensure that we have a proper, and properly resourced campus for training those in Government...[which] equips the many hugely talented people within the Civil Service to become as knowledgeable in their policy areas".¹³

Possibly the most important recommendation arising from this speech was to improve the training offer and incentives with a focus on high-level, specialist knowledge and skills. This had a tangible impact in government, leading to the establishment of the Skills and Curriculum Unit part of the Government People Group within the Cabinet Office, the Fast Stream and Apprenticeship Reforms, and the Leadership College for Government. These capability initiatives are the foundations on which future reform, including the recommendations of this report, are built on.

In 2021, the government machine began reflecting on problems generated by Covid-19. The Declaration on Government Reform saw Cabinet and Permanent Secretaries committing themselves to action on three fronts: people, performance, and partnership. On people, the government committed to deepen its understanding of citizens in all parts of the country, improve recruitment and managed moves, invest in training for all Civil Servants as well as Ministers, promote multi-disciplinary teams and avoid hierarchies slowing down action, incentivise exceptional delivery by introducing measurable targets and a stronger reward and bonus system, and setting a new standard for diversity and inclusion.

¹² Civil Service. *Workforce Plan*. (2016):

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f3993ed915d74e33f51ad/civil_service_workforce_strategy_final.pdf

¹³ GOV.UK. 'The privilege of public service' given as the Ditchley Annual Lecture. (2020):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-privilege-of-public-service-given-as-the-ditchley-annual-lecture>

This was followed by the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022-2025¹⁴ which set out how this would be operationalised.

Overall, the waves of reform programmes over the years show a trend of continuous improvement and adaptation to new priorities. However, the overall focus of reform agendas appears somewhat disconnected, overlapping or failing to build on one another in a constructive way. The measurability of their success is equally unclear, with many follow up review exercises focusing on process and implementation rather than demonstrating tangible policy outputs. A sustainable strategy for the long term must incorporate the lessons learned from the analysis of past reform. This includes some features that are applicable across any successful attempt at reform, such as setting clearly defined strategic priorities, as well as ensuring that there are clear and empowered governance and accountability structures. But in addition to this, a strategy for the long term must go further to investigate effective methods to ensuring that a long-term perspective is considered in its focus, and how to build on existing innovation and best practice in a connected and collaborative way.

Current context

Over the years, a campaign of continuous improvement has driven various programmes of capability reforms. However, the historic debate remains around the balance of focus in building generalist vs specialist skills. The Civil Service maintains its two primary structures of organising people: while they do overlap, professions are groups working within a similar domain, while functions cover cross-government activities which are overseen by a central function. Although the operational delivery profession remains the largest profession making up over half of the Civil Service (55.7%), other professions experienced significant growth over the past few years. Between 2010 and 2023, the policy profession experienced consistent expansion (+75%), likely due to additional workload post EU referendum in 2016, and COVID pandemic in 2020. The economic, intelligence analysis and digital, data and technology professions also experienced long term expansion¹⁵. The growth and change in composition in professions signals how clarification of strategic priorities has helped to shape specialist skills in domains. However, accountability structures play a key role in how capability reform agendas are driven and implemented. As set out earlier in this report, the roles of specialist functions were formalised into central leadership as their professions transcend departments, while leadership figures within departments retain responsibilities for internal day-to-day running and organisation. This has not always been identified as a barrier for successful reform, but the approach to capability reform must factor in coherence of functional and departmental leadership.

Considerable effort has been invested in improving the quality of the learning and development offer across professions and functions. A strand of work led by the Government Campus in the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit in the Cabinet Office is to provide support in developing specialist skills in professions. This includes supporting training initiatives and alignment across HMG. There has also been work in partnership with the Fast Stream to address the generalist and specialist divide, namely by introducing underpinning universal knowledge and skills for individuals to operate across roles, while later focusing on specialist, leadership and management skills.¹⁶ The introduction of

¹⁴ Civil Service. *A modern Civil Service*. (2022): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6256c55ce90e0729fd14bcbd/civil-service-diversity-inclusion-strategy.pdf>

¹⁵ Analysis based on Civil Service statistics between 2010 and 2023 (GOV.UK)

¹⁶ Civil Service. *A Skilled Civil Service: Reforming the Fast Stream - A Modern Civil Service*. (2023): <https://moderncivilservice.blog.gov.uk/2023/11/05/a-skilled-civil-service-reforming-the-fast-stream/>

new schemes, such as Diplomatic and Development Economics which allow exposure into both analytical economics as well as international facing policy careers, demonstrates a more proactive approach to building an interdisciplinary range.

A case for capability building at the intersection of economics and security.

While security and economics have always intersected, the context of increasingly intense geopolitical competition - described by the Integrated Review Refresh as “the backdrop of a more volatile and contested world” - presents uniquely increased intertwining of interests. This is manifesting itself across a wide range of policy across a range of both international and domestic policy and in several domains and will continue to do so. The Fellowship focuses its approach on areas of priority arising from its inquiry: policymakers having the capability to do cross-domain policy making is a crucial enabler to responding to a new era of increased complexity and uncertainty. Given the long-term nature of the challenge, a sustained approach to reform is vital to effectively build capability over time at all levels. This raises a case for raising the floor and ceiling of expertise and experience, developing incentives for career development, and ensuring that leadership have the necessary experience in cross-domain problem solving in uncertainty and complexity. Over time, this will allow civil servants to acquire the ability to bridge understandings between domains, connecting more effectively and instinctively with others.

Setting out this approach as a strategic priority is essential to a sustained approach. In the Integrated Review Refresh (IRR) published in 2023, the government set out its commitment to develop expertise across government, diversify skills within communities to break down silos, and equip policymakers with the skills required to “*pursue British interests in a much higher risk environment than has been the case for several decades*”¹⁷. The IRR acknowledged the need for diversification in core skills in the national security community by ensuring that “*national security practitioners more widely are trained in statecraft and other essential skills*”, boosting and re-skilling existing capability such as diplomatic to “*understand and meet the challenges of an era of systemic competition*” and breaking down silos between communities as seen in security domains. Here, the IRR implicitly recognised the shift required to meet the challenges of the future - although lacking some specificity on implementation and governance by handing responsibility to departments to develop specific actions to enable this reform. Notably, an outcome of this document was commitments to the College for National Security (CfNS) which were originally proposed as part of the 2021 version of the Integrated Review. The announcement of £2 million funding in each of the next two financial years to embed the CfNS into the national security architecture alongside the launch of the first UK National Security Curriculum which draws on the expertise both within and outside of government signals significant progress, and a genuine commitment from government to properly fund and promote the initiative.

Where it relates to building skills for generational challenges, we can look to the past for examples of best practice, such as the digital transformation. Over the past 25 years, reform was undertaken to build specialist digital capability across the Civil Service. New professions were established across departments, with the Central Digital and Data Office which was established in the Cabinet Office in 2021 taking a leading strategic role. Over time, digital expertise was built across

¹⁷ HM Government. *Integrated Review Refresh 2023 Responding to a more contested and volatile world*. (2023: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf)

government, evidenced in part by the “Digital, Data and Technology” profession increasing its number of members by over double between the years of 2010 and 2023. However, barriers remain - particularly where it relates to endorsement for change by senior decision makers. As set out in a report by the National Audit Office in 2021, the shortage of senior officials with experience and expertise in digital change had knock-on effects for the delivery of individual programmes over time¹⁸. In addition to this, efforts to retain specialists remain challenging while the Civil Service struggles to compete with private sector salaries. Work continues across government to improve digital skills, with some recent initiatives highlighting this continued priority.

Spotlight: One Big Thing. *The One Big Thing initiative, launched in September 2023, was an annual training programme based on upskilling all Civil Servants on one of the five Civil Service reform priorities published in July 2023. The inaugural course focused on data capability. It included a standard online training, a compilation of existing courses and resources at various levels between basic to expert level, and a series of live events. The initiative was well publicised across gov.uk, Civil Service Learning, and the Policy Profession network, with additional support provided to Departments to reflect on the training within teams and develop Departmental specific training initiatives.*

Research

The Heywood Fellowship conducted a structured strand of engagement with over 1000 individuals through formal interviews with senior policy makers, two online surveys hosted in partnership with YouGov for Civil Servants across relevant departments and business leaders in key sectors. This engagement sought views directly from policymakers and experts on how they perceived the issue as it manifested in both policy and business.

Across all research conducted by the Fellowship's, raising people's skills and experience was consistently emphasised as the top enabler to improve policy making. Almost all UK Civil Servants interviewed raised capability proactively during interviews, with an emphasis on the importance of expertise, networking and leadership that champions best practice. While participants were able to identify widespread examples of good practice in the system and pointed to many individuals that were sufficiently expert in both professions, participants tended to credit this to individual excellence and initiative rather than systems and structures that encouraged this. Participants noted that this reliance generated vulnerabilities for policy making and did not form a sustained approach. In addition to this, participants noted that the bridging of communities through networking and strong communities was essential to create deeper relationships and enable engagement earlier in the policy making process. While some of the barriers exist in structural issues, more initiatives with the explicit intention of mixing people across domains such as classroom activities, taught modules and case study activities served as examples of positive innovation.

In the survey, participants were asked to rank the effectiveness of a range of components, a net 54% of respondents said that the UK government was “not effective” in ensuring that people have the sufficient skills and knowledge to collaborate effectively on policy making on issues that relate to

¹⁸ National Audit Office. *Digital Transformation in Government Addressing the Barriers to Efficiency*. (2023): <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/digital-transformation-in-government-addressing-the-barriers/>

both economic prosperity and national security. In addition, almost half said that career opportunities and incentives to build expertise across issues were ineffective. These factors ranked higher than any other factor as “net ineffective”. When Civil Servants were asked to assess the importance of improving aspects of policymaking for the future, the ‘people’s skills and knowledge’ category ranked above all other factors, with 92% saying that it is important to improve for the future. These outcomes demonstrate the perceived importance of the issue as it relates to improving policy making.

Chart 1: How effective, if at all, do you think the UK government is in each of the following areas?

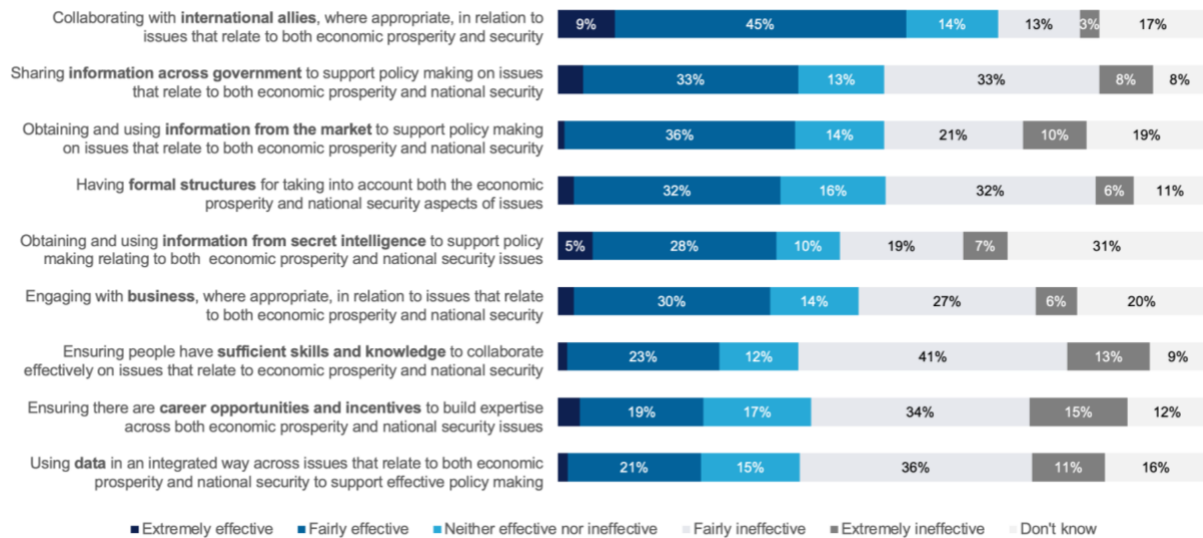


Chart 2: How important do you think it is for the UK government to focus on improving each of the following in future?

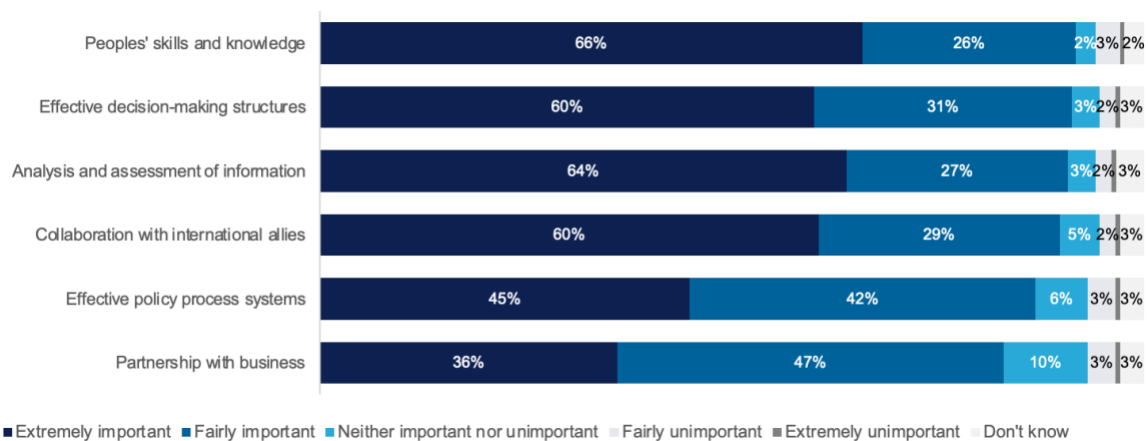


Chart 4: If you could make any one specific change to strengthen policy making relating to both economic prosperity and national security, what would it be?



Recommendations

The Fellowship's research indicates that people's experience and expertise are core to system capability. The following strategy targets all levels: foundational, mid-career and leadership. The Fellowship's approach is not a single proposal but a series of actions that are organised into three main recommendations:

1. Ensure key leadership positions are drawn from experienced, credible, and qualified individuals through preference for experience in managing complexity and uncertainty.

LEADERSHIP



Preference in senior appointments for experience in managing complexity and uncertainty.

Sustained leadership commitment, including champions at the highest levels.

Expanded senior professional development offer, which is encouraged.

The Fellowship recommends placing a stronger relative weight on the requirement for experience of complex cross-domain problem-solving leadership in uncertainty, accepting this will imply less weight on generic leadership and narrow single-domain expertise. The Fellowship's research indicates an increased importance of cross-domain policy making in a new era of statecraft, which in turn requires senior leaders that are equipped to both manage these issues and bring communities together. In time, with the development of the recommendations suggested at the mid-career and foundational levels, recruitment for key leadership positions will be drawn from credible and qualified individuals with cross-domain experience. In addition to this, a case for an expanded senior development offer should be explored to enable leaders to manage complex policy questions and encourage continued learning.

2. Establish a Senior Economic Security Career Cadre

MID CAREER



Professional development programme incorporated in existing frameworks.

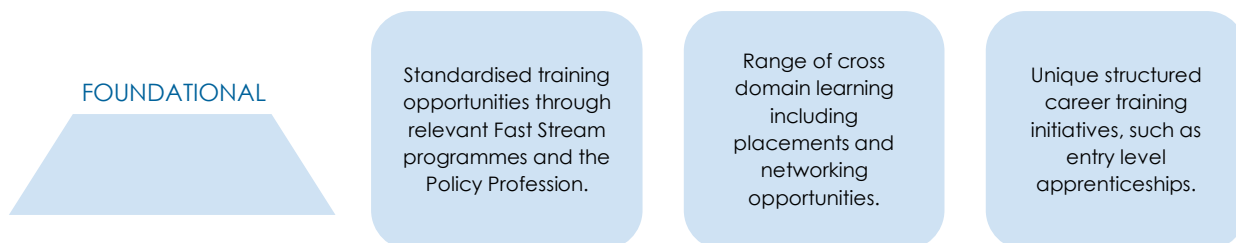
Reserved posts in key departments to incentivise career progression.

Interchange with the private sector, especially those exposed to national security risk.

As the primary recommendation arising from the Fellowships work on capability, the proposed career cadre forms an upwards career spine through economic and security domains to build specialist, technical and applied skills that are defined, specified, and rewarded to develop an interdisciplinary range of career paths that trespass through economic and security domains in key departments. This approach should work closely with existing Policy Profession and Fast Stream frameworks to form a practical and efficient approach that will produce the best outcomes. This includes improving the offer of specialist training opportunities that build on foundational skills; enhancing opportunities for accredited learning with existing and new partners in academia, think tanks and with international partners; introducing more secondments including across departments, internationally and in exchange opportunities with the private sector; hosting more case study courses and away days which mix individuals across departments; and introducing more explicit clarification and assessment of

standards, particularly through the Policy Profession. Key roles could be reserved in departments such as Cabinet Office, FCDO, MOD, HMT, and DBT, develop a greater officer in pay and progression to ensure that talent is not lost to other domains, departments or to the private sector.

3. Ensure that Civil Servants working across relevant domains have a common set of baseline knowledge, skills, and expertise to manage across the intersection.



Building on the foundational levers of the Government Campus and the Leadership College for Government, the Fellowship recommends working closely with teams to introduce a package of training, assessment, incentives, placements, and exchange to establish a standardised bar for foundational and universal skills and knowledge at recruitment, junior and mid-level in all domains. Through this, all Civil Servants in relevant domains should have clarity on standards, build their ability to collaborate across domains throughout their future careers, and receive exposure to options for career paths. This should include a range of opportunities made available through relevant Fast Stream programmes (starting with Government Policy and Economic Service, with the possibility of expanding to a wider range of schemes in future) and all members of the Government Policy Profession, to ensure all have a baseline level of skills and are sufficiently expert in both specialisms. This could include initiatives such as short immersion courses, better offer of online training tools, tailored work shadowing, mentor schemes, apprenticeships, professional accreditation and more.

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