Skills and leadership to ensure high performing civil services in a digital era

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OECD Network of Schools of Government
Annual Meeting
22-23 June 2017, Rio de Janeiro

Introduction

The OECD's National Schools of Government Network met for its 5th Annual Meeting on 22-23 June in Rio de Janeiro at the invitation of Brazil's National School of Public Administration (ENAP) and Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV). Held under the theme of "Skills and leadership to ensure high performing civil services in a digital era", the meeting brought together over 40 representatives of schools of government, academic institutions, and national civil service bodies from 17 OECD member and non-member countries. The meeting was honoured to have Bianor Cavalcanti, President of IASIA, as chair, in the absence of Geert Bouckaert.

The meeting was an opportunity to explore how civil servants' capability and capacity underpins the quality of public governance. The skills and competencies of the public workforce that are brought to bear on increasingly complex policy challenges, in increasingly diverse and pluralistic societies, are fundamental to the quality of government's response, but are not often the focus of study. In addition, as the emerging digital trends bring about new opportunities for economies and societies, they carry significant implications for governments, which will face growing pressure to change their current approach to policymaking, service delivery and public engagement.

On the first day, participants considered the skills for a high performing civil service, including the opportunities and challenges to prepare civil servants for digitalisation and use of data. On the second day, discussions continued on the use of data benchmark civil service capability, leadership and gender balance in public administration. Overall, the two days provided an opportunity to have a fruitful exchange of ideas about common challenges, effective responses, the changing role of schools, and how the OECD network can support their work and activities.

Skills for a high performing and innovative civil service

The initial part of the meeting was devoted to the ongoing work of the Public Employment and Management working party on mapping skills needs for a high-performing civil service. The presentation of the draft report focused on 4 skills areas: policy advice, service delivery, 3rd party commissioning and contracting, and managing through networks. The report argues that professionalization of these areas is fundamentally important, and that consideration also needs to be given to developing strategic skills (outcomes-orientation, evidence based, future-oriented) and, in some cases, innovation skills, in order to maximise impact.

After the initial discussion, participants were presented with the OECD's innovation skills framework, which has been revised and improved, due in part, to the valuable input provided by this Network during the 2016 meeting. In breakout groups, participants focused on specific skills areas to help the secretariat develop insights into the learning environments needed to promote the development and use of these skills. Common insights included the following:

- Innovation skills need to be considered within the context of the specific function and the stage of the policy process. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to being more user-centred, data driven, or iterative.
- Learning for most innovation skills is generally best done through experience and encouragement rather than formal teaching. This implies the need to provide spaces for experiential learning, and for exchanging with those from the outside.

- Schools have a clear role to play in bringing forward new methodologies and practices into their core curriculum, developing hand-on approaches that give civil servant experience with them, organising opportunities for exchange amongst diverse professions to promote cross-fertilisation of ideas, developing case studies

The day continued with discussions on data and digitalisation in the public sector and the challenges and opportunities this provides for schools. Digitalisation is transforming the public sector and the way it works, placing new pressures on civil servants to keep up with the fast pace of technology. Participants discussed the power of data to provide insights for policy development and service impact, and some of the implications that the digital transformation may have on civil service skills and development. Apprenticeship-type programmes, which help to bring in younger, more digitally competent civil servants, was one form of intervention which could be supported by schools.

The day ended with a discussion of the OECD's work to advance principles on civil service capability and insights from participants on some of the underlying features of a high performing civil service.

Comparative data for public governance

The second day of the meeting opened with a presentation from the secretariat on various aspects of comparative data collected by the OECD. The secretariat opened the session with a presentation of the input, process and outcomes indicators presented in the upcoming edition of Government at a Glance (to be launched July 13 2017) and in the Latin American Government at a Glance which was launched earlier in 2017. Participants were asked to reflect on which indicators were most relevant and useful, how schools could use the data for research and analysis, and how the indicators and data could be incorporated into their teaching. The discussions suggested that quality and reliable comparative data is scarce in this space and that there is great potential to include more government at a glance data in participants' activities.

Leadership and Senior Civil Service

Developing highly skilled leaders is one of the highest priority areas of many schools of government. This session provided an opportunity to reflect on recent insights and data collected by the secretariat related to leadership and the development of Senior Civil Service in OECD countries. Participants then contributed presentations and interventions on emerging leadership challenges related to values and culture, networking and collaboration, leading change and reform, and building foresight capabilities. Schools discussed these specific skills for public sector leaders and how they aim to develop them:

- Many schools provide a range of programmes that integrate coaching sessions, networking events, tailored learning and development, and various forums to bring senior leaders together with leaders from other sectors to learn from each other.
- Some schools emphasised the challenges and opportunities of data and digital technologies with regards to leadership, emphasising the necessity of leadership to guide the digital transformation.
- Schools also emphasised the role of schools in a broader set of reforms to the senior civil service, including, for example, competency based hiring, talent management, and competency assessment.

- One theme which emerged often related to the tensions of leading in networks, and the need to work with a range of third sector organisations to effect real social change. The discussion and debate pointed to the potential to broaden our conceptualisation of public leadership beyond the core civil service to include other levels of government and those working in the social sector, which presents their own risks and opportunities – who is responsible for ensuring the devolution of delivery responsibility is matched by the right skills and competencies to drive results?

- The session concluded with a presentation by the chair, Dr. Cavalcanti, of his work defining an equalising style of leadership. Based on case studies of effective public leaders, Dr. Cavalcanti identifies a number of key strategies leaders use to drive effective reform, including: pushing formal borders, bringing in a range of voices, and create spaces to enable experimentation.

Diversity and Inclusion in Public Administration

Recent OECD data on gender distribution in public administrations show a persistent gender gap at senior hierarchical levels, and suggests a pay gap where countries with his levels of women at senior levels also being those with the lowest levels of pay for those positions. Furthermore, OECD research has identified a lack of data in order to conduct similar analysis on other diversity categories, with many OECD administrations not collecting data, and harmonisation challenges among those which do. According to presentations by participants, these challenges are systemic and extend beyond the core administration to the high education sector as well. The ensuring debate brought up the following key points:

- While there is a clear business cases for diversity at the senior levels of the civil service, many countries' Senior Civil Services lag behind the diversity of their elected officials. This may suggest the need to think about more turnover and rotation at the senior levels of the administration.
- "Trickle-up" policies don't work. Hiring diversity at low levels of the organisational hierarchy does not automatically result in their career development. An active approach is needed.
- Some schools are taking steps to make sure they have women delivering some of their leadership programmes as one way of identifying role models and potential mentors. Particularly when inviting in guest speakers.
- Studies point to the importance of mentors– whether for women or men, and some schools incorporate these into their leadership development programmes.
- Some schools teach courses on inclusiveness and recruitment.
- Some countries take active measures to pre-train members of disadvantaged groups in order to improve their chances of entering into training institutions. These have had limited impact.

Conclusion and next steps

This year's annual meeting succeeded in engaging schools on a range of topics that contribute to ongoing OECD research and help to define a path forward for the network. Holding the network in Latin America for the first time enabled new connections with schools in the region.

Follow up activities will be detailed by the secretariat in further emails, but will include the establishment of working groups to help design and develop case studies, contribute to public sector innovation training materials, and identify core topics for upcoming meetings and events.