

Civil Service Policy-Making Competencies in the German BMWi and British DTI: a comparative analysis based on six case studies

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Executive Summary

E1. This study aimed to contribute to contemporary debates over the skills and competencies of civil servants in policy-making. It focused on policies related to business and industry, and compared selected cases of policy-making in the German Economics Ministry (BMWi) and the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

E2. After briefly outlining the aims of the study (section 1), our report begins with a broad comparison of BMWi and DTI as they were in 2001 (section 2) and a description and assessment of the competency frameworks applying to the policy-making civil servants within each department at that time (section 3). Then we describe the biographies of six selected policy documents – three in each department – to examine the competencies involved in their production by the teams of civil servants involved (section 4). The report concludes by drawing out some of the policy implications of the study (section 5). Its appendices give more information about how the study was conducted and the cases that were examined.

E3. The value of the multiple mini-case study approach on which this research study was based is that it allows general frameworks for civil service competencies to be evaluated against specific policy processes. Multiple case studies can also bring out the varieties of skills and competencies called for in different policy domains even within the same department. That is why the study examined the biography of six selected policy documents within three different domains, namely competition and competitiveness policy, communications policy, and energy mix policy. These cases ranged from ‘policy stretching’ exercises through policy re-setting and conflict management to the handling of ‘wicked’ (polyvalent and intractable) issues.

E4. Competition and competitiveness policy demands strong strategic-analytical capacity, but, particularly in the German case, requires there to be parts of the public sector that are not seen and do not see themselves as simple agents of ministers. Communications policy demands an ability to gain access to technical and market expertise that no state bureaucracy can be expected to command on its own (and in neither of our cases did) and ability to contribute creatively to the design and management of consultation processes in an industry whose stakeholder profile is fluid and rapidly changing. Energy mix policy management demands a mix of technical capacity, conflict-management skills, the ability to work creatively in the face of strongly-entrenched interests and strategic command of risk management issues.

E5. The competency frameworks applying to the BMWi and DTI differed in several ways. The UK competencies framework for the SCS (repeated with variations for lower policy staff in DTI) was notable for putting much less stress on subject-expertise (or indeed expertise peculiar to the public service) than equivalent German competency documents. But plainly not all subject-expertise needed for contemporary

policy-making for business and industry could be commanded in-house in either department, and neither department seemed to have any clear set of guidelines (such as a 'best in world' rule) as to what kinds of subject expertise should be in-house and what could be secured from outside, or what special competencies were required of civil servants in securing and using outside expertise.

E6. In both cases the competency frameworks were pitched heavily at the individual level, but many of the interviewees we spoke to in both countries argued that there was too little attention to organizational competencies, where the real weaknesses of both departments were considered to lie both by qualified supporters and middle-level critics. In neither case did we find much evidence of policy teams being actively selected to produce a group competency profile that could be specified and monitored, though such an approach could be argued to be a necessary extension of the emphasis on individual competencies. A modest attempt is made in this report to characterize and compare the competency profile of policy groups, but we were not aware of any attempts at that kind of analysis going on in either department.

E7. Producing documents about civil service competencies is one thing. Making such frameworks 'bite' is another, and in both cases ownership of the competency frameworks was not clearly achieved at the working level. German civil servants we spoke to for the most part expressed little envy of the British Whitehall-wide SCS competency framework (constitutionally barred in the German system), on the grounds that the differences among departments were such that any government-wide framework could only be cast in terms too general and platitudinous to be of much value at the departmental level. On the other hand, the BMWi's own departmental framework did not seem to cut a great deal of ice at the working level, where close understanding of the policy sector and the dynamics of power in the political environment tended to be stressed as the central competency. Whether the competency documents need to be brought more closely in line with practice at working level or vice-versa is debatable, but our study revealed signs of some mismatch or disconnection between the two in both cases.

E8. Compared to the BMWi framework, the UK SCS competency document was notable for its lack of attention to the special competencies civil servants need for designing and managing consultation processes with business and other affected interests (and the same went for the DTI competency framework for civil servants below SCS level). Yet for any department with the sort of responsibilities exercised by BMWi and DTI such competencies are central to the outcome of the policy process, and those competencies are obscured by the rather inward-looking, corporate-management orientation of the formal competency framework documents applying to DTI civil servants. And the competency frameworks applying to both departments underplayed the political skills needed by civil servants, particularly in their outward-facing activities in policy cases involving conflict management and the handling of 'wicked issues', exemplified in our set by German energy-mix policy. The managerial language of the UK's SCS competencies framework did not realistically describe the competencies needed for handling issues of that kind. It did not mesh clearly with what we were told was an emphasis on substantive policy skills and knowledge within DTI.

E9. A vital organizational policy-making competency for a national-level industry department is the ability to link together effective ground-level implementation experience with influence over standard-setting. The different constitutional and institutional setting of the two departments meant that they faced substantially different challenges in developing this competency, but we found little evidence of systematic thinking about how to enhance those capacities.

E10. In neither department did we discover any formal set of benchmarks for evaluating civil service policy work (even of the rudimentary kind contained in the UK's better regulation framework) and not much even in the way of informal standards. Benchmarking was of an unsystematic and informal kind where it could be said to exist at all and tended to consist of comparisons with business for simple service-delivery tasks rather than with comparisons with other countries in complex policy work.