

Executive Summary

Approaches to learning, development and skills across international civil services and select UK public sector organisations

Riikka Hofmann, Sarah Pemberton, Alison Twiner & Marta Stryjniak

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

This research was commissioned by Government Skills. To learn more about this work, please contact: gscu.comms@cabinetoffice.gov.uk



Introduction and Objectives

In Summer 2024 the Government Skills directorate of Government People Group, Cabinet Office, contracted the Cambridge University Faculty of Education research team led by Professor Riikka Hofmann to carry out this piece of benchmarking research on approaches to professional learning and skills development across high-performing international civil services and other UK public sector organisations. This work was undertaken to support Government Skills in harnessing evidence to identify the current and future skills the government needs, and supporting access to effective professional learning to all those who work in government.

Goal: To identify a series of relevant dimensions to use to benchmark the UK civil service approach to workforce skills, learning and development to those of other UK public sector and high-performing international civil service organisations

How to use the report?

This is an executive summary of a full research report. The report is intended for two kinds of use. It can be read as a traditional report, using it as a source of information; a cross-sectional snapshot of some of the practices used across different jurisdictions and organisations. But perhaps more importantly, it is intended to serve as an evidence-informed tool to initiate and facilitate discussions of how to develop fit-for-purpose approaches to professional learning and skills development. For this purpose, we summarise its findings as a series of key reflection questions emerging from the report's analyses. These are intended to invite and enable critical dialogue about skills development in the UK public sector, offering illustrative examples demonstrating a range of possibilities for organising provision.

Approach

This resulting report is based on desk-based research of a set of purposefully selected cases and despite being limited to publicly available information, aims to provide an accurate, insightful overview. The evidence-generation and analysis were conducted between July and October 2024 by our research team at Cambridge University.

Benchmarking dimensions

A list of relevant benchmarking dimensions was first agreed with the Cabinet Office (see Annex 1), which includes dimensions of interest for Government Skills and those grounded in evidence and theory.

Case selection

Four countries - Australia, Canada, Sweden and Singapore were selected for the benchmarking analyses based on being broadly comparable economies and public sector systems, having information available in English and offering a range of diverse learning opportunities of different ways of organising and conceptualising civil service learning and development. Additionally, two UK public sector organisations - the UK NHS and policing - which are both large-scale, with a range of roles and significant continuous skills development and professional learning needs - were reviewed for domestic comparison.

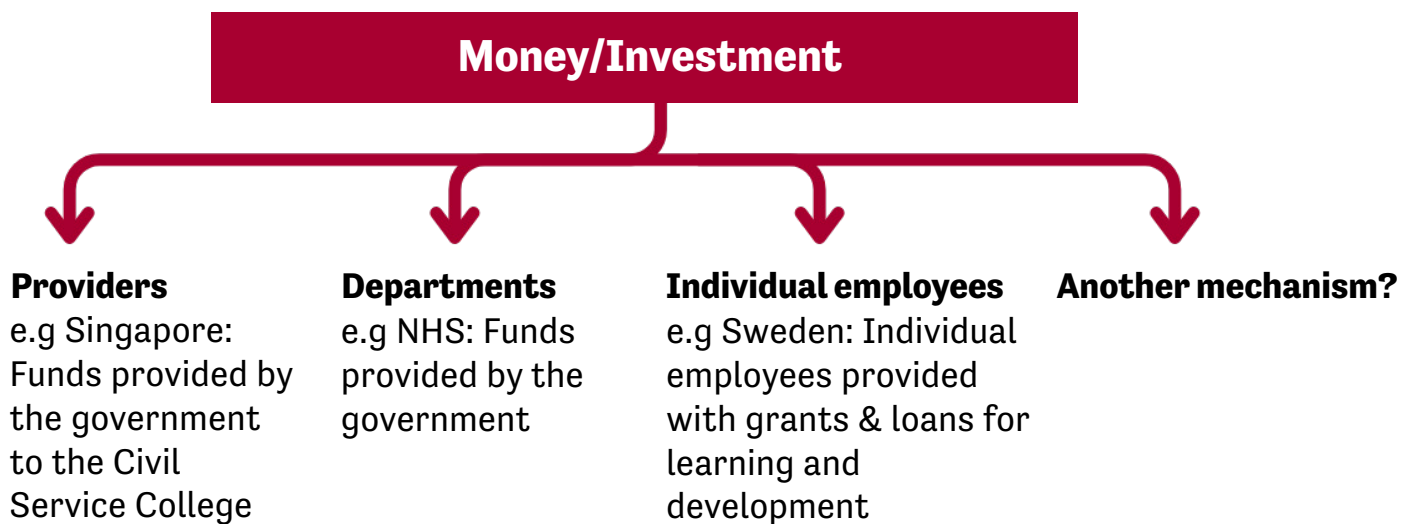
Data collection

We consulted multiple sources, selecting reputable, up-to-date resources to provide the most publicly available, accurate representation of the current learning and development landscapes in the organisations studied.

Key findings and reflections for UK civil service learning and development

A summary of the benchmarking dimensions of key findings is provided in Annex 2.

1. Money / Investment. Across the six organisations, a range of investment models for allocating funds for Learning and Development (L&D) exist.



Reflection questions: what would be the potential benefits and challenges of allocating funds directly to departments or providers (as done in Singapore with its Civil Service College) compared to providing individual employees with grants and loans for L&D in Sweden, or using another funding mechanism?

2. Measurement of training effectiveness. Many systems collect individual participant feedback on professional development provision. This may concern, for example, its perceived efficiency, impact, relevance, flexibility, and accessibility (e.g. Australia), or learning engagement, learning value, and confidence (e.g. Singapore). Some examples also exist of attempts to evaluate system-level / organisational impact, such as self-assessment of clinical placement providers against formal standards on the NHS, and the use of standardised evaluation processes (Australia, Canada, Singapore). However, measuring longer-term impact remains challenging, though the report highlights UK Policing's piloting of new training.

Reflection question: From whose perspective is training effectiveness measured and how consistently it is measured across different courses? A bigger question on evaluating system-level impact and outcome remains.

3. Centralisation of planning and delivery. Different models of training planning and delivery were identified and are discussed in the report.

Training plan and provision



Examples of centralised provision

E.g., **Australia** delivers '**core skills**' which all public servants should have, and other specific training is organised by agencies.

UK Policing has 26 modules of 'authorised professional practice' guidance which **all forces and staff follow**: 'to ensure that previous documents are decommissioned and forces are using direct links to the APP site so they have access to the most up-to-date national policing guidance'

Canada delivers training **tied to specific roles** (e.g. for managers) centrally through the School of Public Service

Similarly, a range of approaches to third party involvement exist across the cases which are discussed in the report.

Involving Third Parties



Wide range of learning programmes: Singapore's Civil Service College's digital learning platform includes offerings from LinkedIn Learning, Udemy, and Harvard Business Publishing



Expanded geographic reach: Australia has partnered with regional universities to deliver entry-level digital and data programmes into their communities



Expertise: Canada's School of Public Service collaborates with Indigenous communities, universities & policy centres as well as public servants and former members of the government and civil service who serve as 'faculty members' and co-create courses



Other reasons for outsourcing training: In the NHS, there is specialist training, e.g. through application for time and funding for Masters or Doctoral study

Reflection questions: Which portions of training content are best delivered centrally, and what should be specific to individual agencies or departments? What types of third parties deliver outsourced training, and what benefits do they bring? (e.g., easily integrated learning programmes; expanded geographic reach; expertise). What are the key reasons for outsourcing training?

4. Degree of prescription. Many factors were found to be linked with the level of prescription identified across the cases. Internal factors involved training requirements derived from individual, team, or department-level skills assessments (e.g. in Australia). External factors were also found to play a role, involving, for example, public expectations, competitor offerings, or the need to attract/retain talent. For example, all NHS nurses and midwives must revalidate every three years through a mandated number of CPD (continuous professional development) hours, but there is flexibility as to the focus of these hours, while for doctors, revalidation is required every five years, based on annual appraisals of practice. Lastly the review suggests that cultural factors at the national level may influence the balance between mandating or encouraging learning, which may limit the ability to apply certain training solutions across different contexts (e.g. Sweden has a culture that encourages learning and development with high numbers of civil service employees participating).

Reflection questions: How does mandation in local provision vary by content, seniority of participants, function/profession etc.? What factors drive the level of prescription, and to what extent are these internal or external? To what extent do cultural differences affect the approach taken? Can learning cultures themselves become a strategic goal?

5-6. Targeting of investment and key career milestones. Targeting of investment varied across contexts. An interesting example was identified at UK Policing, for example, which has a ‘leadership at every level’ approach, with five stages and standards to move to the next stage, which recognises that ‘leadership’ is not just a requirement of those at the top, but that it is necessary to, “help ensure that all officers and staff, including those in frontline roles, are equipped with the leadership skills necessary to look after their colleagues effectively and deliver a good service to the public”. Many cases had programmes, and/or markers to support and track a rebalancing of inequalities in workforce diversity, particularly related to disability and race. For example, Canada’s focus on underrepresented groups provides clear targeting: there is training for ‘equity seeking’ groups, defined in the Canadian Workplace Equity Acts as “women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities”.

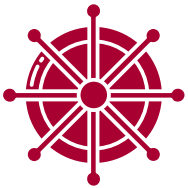
Different approaches were also taken in relation to targeting key career milestones across the organisations.



New hires



Managers



Leadership

Canada

Mandatory training for all newly appointed public servants, other programs targeted by role

- New hires
- First-time managers
- Functional specialists

Singapore

Some programmes are tailored to public servants by seniority

- Support officer
- Senior officer
- Manager
- Middle management
- Senior management

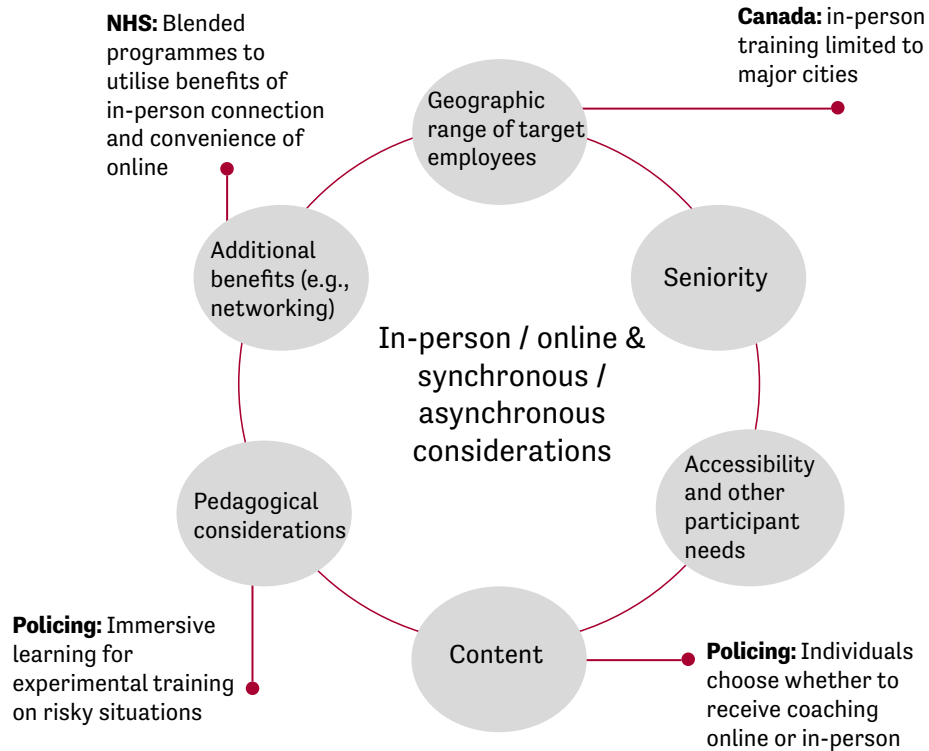
Policing

Progression through the five stages of the UK Policing's leadership programme has standards tailored to level of seniority

| Training | Executive coaching |
|----------|-----------------------------------|
| ● | <i>Available</i> |
| ● | |
| ● | |
| ● | <i>Free for senior leadership</i> |
| ● | |

Reflection questions: What learning opportunities are available at different career milestones and how balanced are those across the career pathway? For example, considering the balance of training offered for senior positions versus junior or entry-level roles. How visible are available learning routes at all career stages and for all groups of people? Where is investment targeted for leadership progression, who is given access and how is that decided?

7-8. Modes of delivery and digital technology. Different considerations appeared to be given weight in different systems in deciding on modes of delivery for professional development.

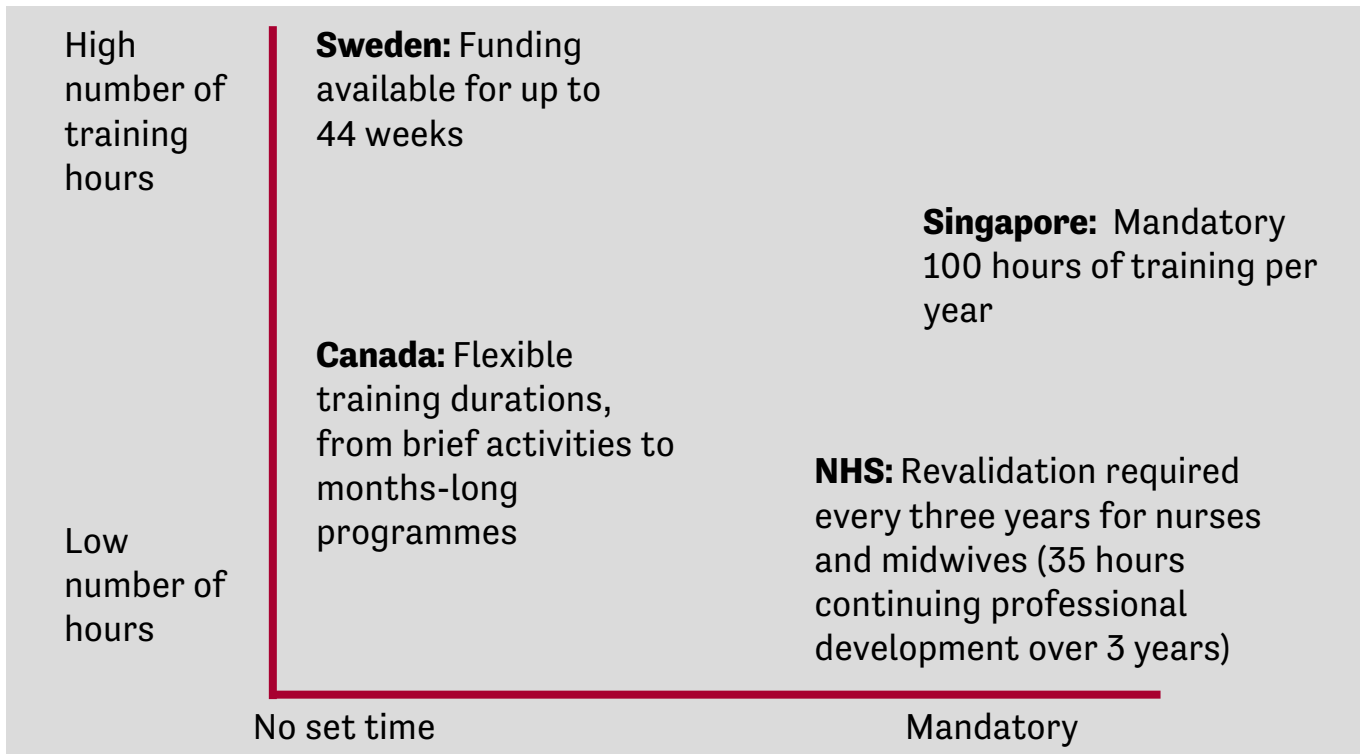


Various discussions and emphases around digital technology were identified. One dimension is the use of digital tools in professional practice itself, such as in the UK, for example, where there has been a recent call to action in the Darzi report to utilise AI in NHS reform. This was also reflected in Canada's Digital Academy which provides learning tools focusing on digital and data themes, the use of AI and cybersecurity. The Digital Accelerator is an applied learning experience for individuals and teams teaching them how to adopt digital best practices. There are also efforts to use digital tools to enhance and personalise professional development regardless of topic. For example, in UK Policing, Authorised Professional Practice training/guidance is offered via an app so officers can access up-to-date, centralised guidance on mobiles on the frontline. Singapore's One Talent Gateway is an AI-powered platform that provides personalised recommendations for developmental opportunities and learning interventions.

Reflection questions: How does the type of training affect decisions about mode of delivery? What are the benefits and disadvantages of different modes of delivery in different training provision? Can we identify and differentiate between the goals of using digital tools in the workplace, depending on whether these relate, for example, to improving innovation and work efficiency (e.g. Canada); mitigating against

technological stress (e.g. Sweden); improving the skills of some employees or to diagnose individualised learning needs (e.g., Singapore)?

9. Time. Both offered and required training hours varied significantly between the cases.



Reflection questions: To what extent is time for training mandated or set aside for different employees, and why? How is time for desired but non-mandatory training protected in principle and in practice, and how and to whom are these principles and practices communicated?

10. Continuous learning/quality improvement. Lastly the report looked at approaches to support continuous learning of employees and the organisation. For example, the NHS has various organisations and schemes, such as the Leadership Academy as well as Clinical Fellowship schemes to support leadership development of frontline staff to facilitate equipping participants with the skills needed to engage in continuous improvement in complex systems. The Canadian School of Public Service collaborates with universities to access research on public administration, making sure that civil servants have access to the latest relevant research findings.

However, across systems supporting continuous learning and quality improvement remains challenging, calling for more research.

Reflection question: If continuous learning is a cultural goal or aim, how does that translate to practice?

Annex 1: List of Dimensions

- 0. Approach:** what is the approach taken to workforce planning and skills strategy - does the organisation/sector have a workforce plan that looks at skills, and/or a skills or capability strategy? If yes, how often is it refreshed, and by what processes? Is there any information on how L&D is planned and delivered in relation to workforce plans or skills strategies?
- 1. Money:** What are others investing? What is an appropriate measure to use e.g. total investment, per capita investment etc.? How does the UK CS compare to others using this measure/s?
- 2. ROI:** Return on investment / how effectiveness of training is measured.
- 3. Planner / Provider:** Degree to which planning and delivery of learning and development is centralised versus decentralised; balance of in-house delivery versus outsourcing e.g. via commercial contracts. Is learning and development handled within organisational HR, or via a different model (e.g. a separate organisation or college, within a different specialist function etc.)?
- 4. Level of prescription/mandation versus optionality/self-directed.** This might include issues like whether there are formal curricula, examinations/assessments, or mandatory accreditations. How do they identify what skills, knowledge etc they need, and how is this brought into planning learning and development? What are the different modalities of optionality versus prescription here e.g. mandatory accreditation linked to a very specific curriculum and assessments (e.g. health) might be at one end of the spectrum, and entirely self-directed learning at the other.
- 5. Targeting of investment:** Balance of investing a lot in a small group of 'high potentials' (or similar) versus investing a little bit in everyone. Is there any work which may be done to promote opportunity and progression for colleagues from underrepresented groups to redress inequities?
- 6. Key career milestones:** What are the key career milestones where staff receive additional investment, particularly on leadership? What is the rationale for this and the form this support takes? How is induction managed? Is there a specific framework or support for people earlier in their career?



- 7. Modes of delivery** and balance between in-person, online, hybrid and a/synchronous modes of delivery, and reasons for this. Uses of physical colleges/campus for in person delivery. What types of training are targeted through different modalities, or which learners? What is meant by online? Is there a specific, physical college or similar?
- 8. Digital:** How are they responding to, and making use of, new digital technology in terms of a) preparing the workforce for digital changes; and b) leveraging new technology to support learning and development?
- 9. Time:** How much time is set aside for learning and development? Is this allocation set for a specific type of learning (e.g., formal, informal)?
- 10. Continuous improvement or continuous quality improvement.**

ANNEX 2

Overview

| Dimension | Australian Public Service | Public Service of Canada | Sweden's Civil Service | Singapore Public Service Division | UK - NHS | UK - Policing |
|---|---|--|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Civil Service Workforce size</i> | 177,442 | 367,772 | 244,535 | 150,000 | 1,300,000 | 150,000 |
| <i>National Workforce Size</i> | 14.2m | 22.0m | 5.1m | 2.4m | 33.4m | 33.4m |
| 1. Money | USD \$53m+ on learning platform contracts (2023) | USD \$47.8m - Canada's School for Public Learning Budget (2024) | USD \$577.6-866.4m in L&D grants for all workers (incl. civil servants) | USD \$68.7m expenditure for Civil Service College (FY 2022) | £333pp/year (equivalent) for CPD (2020/21) | No figure found |
| 2. Return on investment / effectiveness measure | A national Evaluation Framework is suggested (criteria: efficiency, impact, relevance, flexibility, and accessibility), with flexibility for how this is applied to each learning programme | Evaluation of perceived relevance, teaching quality, needs addressed, skills assessment, accessibility, and the number of projects completed across various agencies and departments | Development funding requires proof of improved job prospects, with ongoing support contingent on meeting academic requirements | Data collection on participants' self-rated learning engagement, learning value, and confidence in application on a 1-5 scale. Some programmes test for comprehension | System-level monitoring of standards for workforce racial and disability equality, and ratings from the Care Quality Commission; External evaluations, e.g. reviewing 'perceived efficacy of learning' on Blended Learning Programme | Monitoring through professional development review (PDR), alignment to competencies and values framework, and accessibility of PDR for those with protected characteristics |

| Dimension | Australian Public Service | Public Service of Canada | Sweden's Civil Service | Singapore Public Service Division | UK - NHS | UK - Policing |
|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|
| 3. Centralised planning / provision, in-house / outsource | The APS provides “craft skills” training (training of “core skills” for civil servants) across APS; substantial external providers engaged for training at agency level | Central management by the School & collaboration with other external institutions | Several external institutions, including universities, labour unions, and online platforms, as well as central agencies like The Swedish Agency for Government Employers (SAGE) | Central planning & provision via the Civil Service College; some external providers engaged for e-learning options | Mostly central, from collaborating organisations (NHS England, Health Education England and NHS Digital). Some external provision e.g. for Masters and Doctoral role-related study, and for Allied Health Professional placements | Central leadership curriculum, prioritised and delivered by individual forces; practice-based guidance centralised and provided by Authorised Professional Practice (APP) |
| 4. Prescription / self-direction | Agency-level skills shortages identified; mandatory training required, with options for additional self-directed learning | Training requirements vary by role, with mandatory courses for specific positions and optional courses for personal development | Training is mostly optional, with variation by organisation | Public officers self-register for training with agency approval; some programmes are mandatory; AI-tools to personalise learning recommendations | Mandatory for revalidation - every three years for nurses and midwives, with options for meeting requirements; every 5 years for doctors | Mandatory engagement in PDR and the ‘police leadership programme’ but can meet standards in diverse ways |
| 5. Targeting of investment | Targeting unclear; 60% of employees used APS Academy in 2022-23 | Training mostly tied to position / career milestones, with other initiatives for leadership & underrepresented groups | Employees must meet specific criteria for development funding, while SAGE courses are tied to position | Targeting unclear; wide range of programmes are provided for every grade level | Targeting for racial and disability equality, and leadership routes; can apply for time and money for work-related study | All engage; targeting for those in underrepresented groups; ‘fast-track’ routes for entry and leadership |

| Dimension | Australian Public Service | Public Service of Canada | Sweden's Civil Service | Singapore Public Service Division | UK - NHS | UK - Policing |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|--|---|---|
| 6. Key career milestones | Limited information | Training tied to: new hires, first-time managers, functional specialists; additional training for leadership | SAGE training tied to: management and HR focusing on areas relevant across agencies | Training tied to: new hires, manager, middle manager, director, and public sector lead | Training for entry routes and accrediting advanced practice | Focus on expanding entry routes; progression through leadership stages |
| 7. Modes of delivery | Various modes offered; unclear in which cases online or in-person is selected | Most courses offered online in various modes, with in-person offered in Ottawa and Ontario regions only | Various modes including in-person classes, workshops, lectures, and online courses | Various modes offered; unclear in which cases online or in-person is selected | Most courses offered online, some blended options for entry training and Allied Health Professional placements | Most courses offered online; APP practice-based guidance online; coaching in-person or online; some immersive learning |
| 8. Digital | Digital skills uplift strategy in place; use of digital tools in learning varies by agency | Several initiatives in place, notably the Digital Academy with the main goal of applying digital innovation | Sweden's digital skills exceed EU averages; several initiatives ongoing to address technology stress and advance AI in public services | Several initiatives in place. Example tool: One Talent Gateway (AI-powered platform with learning recommendations) | Digital identified as critical in 2024 Darzi report, and one of three areas of reform in a projected government 2024 10-year plan | There is a 'science and technology strategy' related to practice and training |
| 9. Time | No set time dedicated for training | Flexible training durations, from brief activities to months-long programs | Full-time training and individual learning and development funding for up to 44 weeks and extended for part-time study | Mandatory 100 hours of training per year | Revalidation required every three years for nurses and midwives, to include 35 hours Continuing Professional Development | No figure found for allocation; some APP programmes suggest hours per year, per topic. Some programmes have set durations |



| Dimension | Australian Public Service | Public Service of Canada | Sweden's Civil Service | Singapore Public Service Division | UK - NHS | UK - Policing |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|---|
| 10. Continuous improvement | Continuous learning highlighted in strategic plan and steps taken for culture shift | <p><i>System-level:</i> monitoring learning goals completion, collaboration with universities for research findings on public policy;</p> <p><i>Individual level:</i> promoted through concentrated learning paths and “functional communities” (informal learning for employees with similar work purposes)</p> | <p><i>System level:</i> assessments, forecasting to guide skills development, supported by a strategy emphasising continuous skill growth;</p> <p><i>Individual level:</i> Learning and development grants awarded; strong learning culture</p> | 70% of learning is expected to be experiential (compared with 10% on formal learning) | <p><i>Individual and system-level:</i> Evaluations, e.g. of Blended Learning Programme; Self-assessment by placement providers, and ‘evidence-based’ guidance for allied health professional placements; Promoted through concentrated routes (e.g. Clinical Leadership programmes; Academic Clinical Fellows)</p> | <p><i>System-level:</i> What Works Centre reviewing evidence for continuous quality improvement; ‘Pillar’ to ‘embed a culture of continuous improvement’; APP guidance training explicitly embeds and cites academic and policy evidence in training material;</p> <p><i>Individual level:</i> recognising diversity in evidencing leadership through in-job work</p> |