

# Standards Without Substance: A Critical Evaluation of the UK Policy Profession's Competency Framework

Public Administration Quarterly

1–18

© SPAEF 2026



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/07349149261484111

[journals.sagepub.com/home/paq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/paq)Matthew Collins<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article asks whether the UK's competency framework for policy officials is fit for purpose, and finds that it is not. The quality of policy advice across Westminster systems has been eroding for some time, and reform efforts in several jurisdictions have tried to build the individual policy capacity of officials. In the UK, that effort has produced a succession of frameworks, none with much impact; the most recent, the 2021 *Policy Profession Standards*, is referenced in only 0.5% of advertised policy roles. The article makes two contributions: the first systematic account of how the earlier frameworks developed into the Standards, and a policy instrument analysis, supported by reflexive thematic analysis, of the Standards themselves. They are functional, specifying tasks to perform rather than the knowledge and capabilities officials need; atomistic, fragmenting the role into hundreds of separate descriptors; loaded with extraneous requirements; and missing fundamentals such as specialised policy knowledge and experience. Because a framework meant to build policy capacity instead carries the power to promote rather than hinder policy failure, these findings offer a design lesson for any jurisdiction that sets out to codify policy capacity.

## Keywords

policy capacity, British politics, Westminster model, policy advice, civil service, public administration

## Introduction

Academics have long been interested in what constitutes competent policy advice (Halligan, 1995; Walker & Washington, 2025), with the continuing erosion of the quality of advice having been noted for some time (Craft & Henderson, 2024a). Remedying that has developed into a story of reform in Westminster Model jurisdictions, with Australia, the UK, Canada and New Zealand all having developed initiatives to improve individual policy capacity (Craft & Henderson, 2024b). The UK provides a particularly well-documented case for analysis, where ministers have often exploited the rich seam of political capital that is the perceived ineffectiveness of the Civil Service (Dudman, 2019; Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, 2018; Slater, 2022). The UK Civil Service has, in particular, been accused of failing to keep pace with the ever-increasing complexity of the tasks it has been asked to perform (Gleeson et al., 2011; Public Administration Select Committee, 2007), and whilst that almost certainly exists alongside other variables, the failure to keep pace and improve has introduced delay, increased costs, and reduced the effectiveness of policy interventions (National Audit Office, 2017; Public Accounts Committee, 2020). In the UK, work to improve the quality of policy advice is led by the Policy Profession Unit, currently housed in the Department for Education (M. Collins, 2026a). Their work, and consequently the analysis in this article, concerns the Civil Service in its support of the UK's central government; the devolved administrations therefore lie outside the scope adopted here. Whilst a competency framework for policy officials in the UK Civil Service has existed for well over a decade. That framework, and the analysis in this article, however, of the 6,072 policy roles advertised on the Civil Service Jobs website during 2024, only 0.5% of them included any reference to it (Cabinet Office, 2025).

<sup>1</sup>Cardiff University, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Matthew Collins, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK.

Email: [collinsmm@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:collinsmm@cardiff.ac.uk)

This article makes two contributions. First, it provides the first systematic account of the development of policy competency frameworks within the UK Civil Service as they evolved into the current *Policy Profession Standards*. The second is to report the findings of a policy instrument analysis of the 2021 *Policy Profession Standards* that assess their suitability as a mechanism for building policy capacity. This study is important given the emerging consensus that a lack of individual policy capacity will contribute to an increased likelihood of policy failure (Cairney et al., 2024; Capano et al., 2025; Capano & Malandrino, 2025); if the competency framework conceived to guide officials in the acquisition of this capacity is flawed, then it is carrying the power to promote rather than hinder policy failure. This article concludes that the 2021 *Policy Profession Standards* are not capable of achieving their objective. These findings are not solely of potential interest to those interested in the British State; the article makes a number of important observations about the significance of the work and policy context on the design of competency frameworks that will be of interest to those studying policy capacity in any jurisdiction.

## Evaluating Competency Frameworks: What Does Good Look Like?

### Defining Competence

Competence is generally understood as the effective application of knowledge, skills, experience and dispositions in a specific work context (Ali et al., 2021; S. F. J. Child & Shaw, 2020; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Sheikhabaeddinzadeh et al., 2022; Tuononen et al., 2020), but how to define which knowledge and which skills is and are most important is a source of debate. On the one hand, a work-oriented approach considers that the competence required to deliver work is bound to the work context and not the worker (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Sandberg, 2000b), thus requiring the researcher to develop an understanding of the activities required to accomplish a task in the context within which it is undertaken (Sandberg, 2000b). This perspective is made difficult by the recognition that competence is a combination of attributes (Eraut, 1998), but reinforced by the fact that it is the work context that allows competence to become observable (S. F. J. Child & Shaw, 2020; Hoskins & Fredriksson, 2008). In the alternative, most rationalist perspectives view competence as a function of the context in which it is applied (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005), where ‘worker and work form one entity through lived experience of work’ (Sandberg, 2000a, p. 50). This is also known as the worker-oriented approach, where the required attributes are captured through discussion with current workers and their managers (Sandberg, 2000b). The socially constructed nature of competence means that even where there is an agreed framework against which competence is measured, there will remain some element of interpretation, particularly given some roles and tasks are easier to define than others (Eraut, 1998).

Competence is not, however, universally accepted as meaning the same thing as competency. Rowe (1995, p. 12), for example, believes that competence is ‘what people can do while [competency] focuses on how they do it’. Many more, however, view competencies through the prism of competency frameworks (Megahed, 2018) and it is for this reason that this article relies upon the European Reference Framework description of competencies as a ‘combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context’ (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007, p. 3). It therefore follows that a competency framework is ‘a descriptive tool that identifies the skills, knowledge, personal dispositions, and behaviours needed to effectively perform a role in the organization and help the business meet its strategic objectives’ (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999, p. 5). Before proceeding, it is important to expose the approach the article takes to the concepts of knowledge, skill, experience, and disposition as the building blocks of competence.

In simple terms, knowledge is that which is known by at least one person (Lehrer, 1965). The distinction that arises in the context of this landscape, however, is the manner by which knowledge is acquired and shared. If it is to be decided that knowledge of a subject is of a certain type, that decision will have implications for the approach taken to installing that knowledge into another, for one’s assessment to the extent of another’s knowledge and for how knowledge requirements are described. Explicit knowledge is that which can be expressed in words and numbers and is easily shareable; it is the sort of information found within an instruction manual (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). This contrasts with tacit knowledge: that which is not easily tellable and is difficult to express in language, and in some cases is difficult even to be conscious of (Gascoigne & Thornton, 2014; Polanyi, 1966). Identifying explicit and tacit knowledge is perhaps most easily done in comparative terms as, whilst they do ostensibly sit apart from each other on a spectrum, they have a strong relationship and can co-exist in one mind. Collins even goes so far as to describe the idea of tacit knowledge as ‘parasitic on the notion of the explicit’ (H. Collins, 2010, p. 85) to indicate that the explicit is the gateway to the tacit.

‘At the core of all definitions is the idea of competence or proficiency – the ability to do something well’ (Attewell, 1990, p. 423). The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘skill’ as ‘practical knowledge in combination with ability’

(2024). Skill is therefore the type of knowledge often referred to as ‘know *how*’, or the type of knowledge required to do a thing (see Stanley and Williamson, 2017, pp. 715–716). This contrasts with ‘know *what*’ associated with explicit knowledge described earlier. To that end, whether skill is deserving of its own section in this article apart from knowledge, rather than merely being described alongside knowledge could be debated. However, the *Policy Profession Standards* refer both to knowledge and skills separately (Policy Profession, 2021), and this article’s analysis therefore proceeds on that basis. That notwithstanding, it is important to recognise that there exists a substantial debate about the nature of skill, with the boundary between skill, knowledge, and competence being persistently contested (Brockmann et al., 2011; Markowitsch & Plaimauer, 2009; Payne, 2017).

Experience is a process of learning where knowledge arises out of ‘direct observation of, or participation in, events’ (Politis, 2005, p. 401). The learning does not arise automatically following relevant observation or participation; it requires grasping and transformation (Kolb, 2014), alongside practice and repetition (Brinkmann, 2017). In any event, experience has been widely recognised as having an important role to play in the acquisition of occupationally relevant knowledge (Borman et al., 1993; Schmidt et al., 1986); it plays a particularly important role in the integration of new knowledge into the workplace (Ucbasaran et al., 2008). This is because decision-making is generally grounded in the way the world appears to a person at any one moment, conditioned by the things they know, but dominated by what they have experienced (Roth, 2012). Consequently, its value is context-dependent and will develop over time (Matthew & Sternberg, 2009). It is also inherently tacit (Ribeiro, 2013; Sternberg, 1997), although there continues to be debate as to whether it can *usefully* be made explicit through reflection (Matthew & Sternberg, 2009). Whilst experience does sit somewhat apart from the discussion of knowledge and skills that this article has so far concerned itself with, in the fact that experience is a process through which knowledge is acquired rather than knowledge itself, experience is widely considered a separate constituent of competence (Paloniemi, 2006; Takase, 2013). Just as with skill, experience is an element with some baggage, the most significant portion of which in this context is that it is insufficient by itself. Absent sufficient alternative knowledge and/or skill (or even a disproportionate weighting of experience relative to those other factors), a person can find themselves in the ‘experience trap’, with a tendency to apply wrong or outdated solutions to new problems, and to have difficulty in adapting to different environments (Campbell et al., 2014; Sengupta et al., 2008).

Dispositions are personal qualities or characteristics; they are not knowledge nor skills, and are not parasitic on knowledge nor skill and can exist outside of any sort of specialist domain (H. Collins & Evans, 2007). The need for dispositions to feature as a professional requisite has been identified before (R. Jones et al., 2013; Thornton, 2006) and they are likely to feature in the bucket of soft skills often captured within professional frameworks (S. F. J. Child & Shaw, 2020). The analytical distinction maintained here between dispositions and the other components of the analytical framework is a product of practical necessity as much as theoretical preference. The typology requires a category for elements that are not domain-specific, not parasitic on specialised knowledge, and that concern how officials approach their work rather than what work they do. Hart et al.’s work on the terminology of transversal skills and competences illustrates that this difficulty in categorisation is not peculiar to this article; it is a recurring challenge in the design of professional frameworks more broadly (Hart et al., 2021). Whether the category is ultimately labelled dispositions, transversal skills or soft competencies is, in that sense, a less important question than whether the requirements it contains are adequately recorded.

### *Constructing Competency Frameworks*

The most significant observable distinction in competency framework design is that between the functional and behavioural approaches. The behavioural approach was developed in the USA, and is linked to performance in general, rather than to a specific occupation or activity with a focus on the accumulation of a range of attributes (Mills et al., 2020). The idea is to observe ‘successful and effective job performers to determine how these individuals differ from less successful performers’ (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005, p. 31). The behavioural approach recognises competencies as fundamentally behavioural, to be learned through training and development (McClelland, 1998); the overriding objective is to identify the factors or inputs associated with individual success, and teach them (Megahed, 2018). In straightforward terms, the behavioural approach looks at the things a person needs to be able to do to perform a task well. An example might be ‘has the ability to convey complex ideas confidently through conversation’. The functional approach was developed in the United Kingdom, and is the approach taken in the *Policy Profession Standards* that will be evaluated later in this article. Its objective is to capture the performance expectations (Mills et al., 2020) required of employment in a work context (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). The functional approach is therefore dichotomous: a person either demonstrates the standard and is competent, or they are not (Rowe, 1995). This approach is also

concerned solely with the occupational role at hand, with dispositions being considered distinct from competence (Mills et al., 2020). An example might be ‘promotes the “digital first” approach to providing information and services where appropriate’. The functional approach is problematical. Its dichotomous nature exists in tension with the requirement for differing levels of proficiency. Rowe (1995), in their description of the functional approach, recognises that Nigel Mansell does not get a better driving licence than anyone else because they were a Formula One driver.

Both functional and behavioural competency frameworks generally share a common foundation of two broad buckets of competencies: soft and hard (Miranda et al., 2021). Soft, cross-functional, or transversal competencies are those that involve critical thinking, teamwork, collaboration, communication and creativity; they are generic and common to a wide range of employment types (S. F. J. Child & Shaw, 2020). Hard, subject-specific, or disciplinary competencies are specific to the context in which the individual operates and include specific specialised knowledge. In the context of this article, the dispositions are the soft competencies and the other aspects the hard competencies. Building upon those two broad buckets, an effective competency framework will comprise three key elements (Batt et al., 2021; Sultan et al., 2020):

1. Core competencies (both soft and hard): these are fundamental to the role and encompass any relevant specialised knowledge (Trollor et al., 2017).
2. Behavioural indicators: the observable actions that serve to prove the possession of core competencies. A competency framework should indicate guidelines for assessing proficiency (Whiddett & Hollyforde, 1999).
3. Levels of proficiency: these are levels that indicate the extent of an individual’s competence (Ali et al., 2021). They should operate alongside behavioural indicators.

The reason the literature on the building blocks of competence is theorised as it is here is because that is how the academy has traditionally theorised policy capacity. Underpinning the analysis that will follow was a systematic review of the existing literature on individual policy capacity that is reported elsewhere (M. Collins, 2026b). That review was configurative rather than aggregative in character: its purpose was not to pool commensurable findings but to arrange a fragmented and conceptually heterogeneous literature into a coherent account of what individual policy capacity comprises. The elements identified across that literature were extracted, grouped, and synthesised into the four constituents of competence adopted here and disaggregated into the sub-elements that populate the analytical framework; the categories are therefore the product of that synthesis rather than an a priori imposition. The full method, including the search strategy and the basis upon which the literature was appraised and synthesised, is reported in that companion study, with its findings summarised in the typology at Table 1:

## The Origins of the 2021 Standards

### Before the First Standards

This investigation begins with two papers. The first is the *Modernising Government* white paper (Cabinet Office, 1999a) and the second is the paper published 6 months later by the Cabinet Office’s Strategic Policy Making Team, titled *Professional Policy Making for the Twenty-first Century* (1999b). The account begins there because it is with these two papers that the professionalisation of the policy function as a defined category takes concerted form. The aim of the white paper was, unsurprisingly, to modernise government, as part of the New Labour Government’s ‘programme of renewal for Britain’ (1999a, p. 4). It noted the positive impact of New Public Management (NPM) on productivity, simultaneously recognising that insufficient attention had been paid to its impact upon policy capacity (1999a). To deliver against the better policy-making aim, the white paper established the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) with four objectives, one of which was to ‘. . . develop and strengthen policy evaluation capacity. . .’ (1999a, p. 57). The objective of *Professional Policy Making for the Twenty-first Century* (1999b) was to flesh out the commitments made in *Modernising Government* and it did so with three aims (1999b para 1.1):

1. examine what professional ‘modernised’ policy making should look like;
2. provide a snapshot of current good practice as a high-level indication of areas where policy making is; and
3. suggest possible levers for change to help to bring about the White Paper ‘vision’ for policy making.

The focus was on the capacity and processes of the Civil Service in the round rather than on the individual policy capacity of officials, but the paper did recognise the need for ‘new and different skills amongst policy makers’ (1999b, para 1.6), describing ‘nine core competencies that . . . encapsulate all the key elements of the policy-making process’

**Table 1.** Analytical Framework (M. Collins, 2026b).

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I – Knowledge    | <p>IA – Policy</p> <p>IA.I – Specialised: technical knowledge of the policy domain within which the official works. This should include the organisational, political, and wider social context.</p> <p>IA.II – General: a comprehensive understanding of the policy issues active within the official's department and knowledge of theory from across academic disciplines relevant to the work of their department.</p> <p>IB – System: how to move ideas through the system towards a decision, the constitution, and the rules and principles of public life.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2 – Skills       | <p>2A – An ability to appropriately balance the necessary types of Knowledge, Skills, Experience, and Dispositions (KSED).</p> <p>2B – Policy-making:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. The ability to frame a policy problem.</li> <li>II. The ability to see around corners.</li> <li>III. The ability to recognise and judge the operational feasibility of policy.</li> <li>IV. The ability to keep abreast of, identify, select, analyse, and make use of relevant evidence (including that with which one may be unfamiliar) in support of policy.</li> <li>V. The ability to conduct cost-benefit analysis.</li> </ul> <p>2C – Relational capacity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. The ability to manage ministers by, amongst other things, quickly determining how the minister works best and through effective empathy.</li> <li>II. The ability to coordinate and cooperate with others, through networking and negotiating, in support of policy and implementation design.</li> <li>III. The ability to coordinate the policy-making process within government.</li> </ul> <p>2D – Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. The ability to take analytic conclusions, recontextualise them, and write them in the language of the reader.</li> <li>II. The ability to communicate orally.</li> <li>III. The ability to persuade those with whom you attempt to collaborate of the value of your minister's perspective.</li> </ul> |
| 3 – Experience   | <p>3A – Experience of witnessing the lived experience of the users of the policy output of the official's department.</p> <p>3B – Experience of the occupational culture within the official's department.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 4 – Dispositions | <p>4A – Political astuteness: the ability to understand the competing needs and perspectives of stakeholders and bring them together in the development of a politically and socially convincing position.</p> <p>4B – Creativity: the ability to view a problem imaginatively and propose alternatives in perspectives and methods that are unique and unlike any prior attempts to solve similar problems.</p> <p>4C – Judgement: a strong sense of what is relevant to decision making and an ability to reliably judge the plausibility and credibility of claims.</p> <p>4D – Leadership: the ability to harmonise internal and external leadership to generate evidence in support of advice.</p> <p>4E – Adaptive capacity: the capacity to adapt and deal with uncertainty.</p> <p>4F – Risk taking: the capacity to confidently take appropriate risks.</p> <p>4G – Resilience: the capacity to cope, persist, and recover in the face of adversity and criticism.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

(para 2.10). The problem that follows is that attempts made to improve individual policy capacity get caught up in a reductionist framework logic that makes it difficult to design meaningful remedies. Nevertheless, in proffering these competency requirements, the paper recognises that the challenge of policy-making is growing more complex. It implies that, but for the increase in complexity, officials would be adequate; it is only in the face of increasing complexity that they must improve. This gives rise to a theme that would dominate the remainder of the paper: that the focus should be on improving the process, not the people and this judgement is epitomised through the authors' decision to capture nine competencies as being hallmarks the policy *system* should bear as opposed to the people that work in policy.

## 2004–2019

Having got to 1999 without a competency framework for policy officials, the pace of their development began to build after 2004. 2004 brought *Civil Service Reform: Delivery & Values* (Cabinet Office, 2004), which revived career anchors and by 2008, a nascent form of the Policy Profession existed, but it was in 2012 that *The Civil Service Reform*

*Plan* explicitly identified a need to increase policy capacity (defined within the report as relating to ‘the quality of policy advice’ (HM Government, 2012, p. 14)), recognising that policy advice was often of inconsistent quality and delivered with a weak understanding of the challenges in implementation. The following year, *Twelve Actions to Professionalise Policy Making* was published, recognising that many reviews have ‘diagnosed similar enduring problems’ (2013, p. 4). Another year later, and the government observes that progress on improving policy capability had been minimal (Civil Service, 2014). Notwithstanding those observations, between 2004 and 2018, there were at least four versions of a competency framework for Civil Service policy officials.

The earliest of those is a 2005 document titled *Policy Delivery Skills with Underpinning Context* (Civil Service, 2005), developed as part of the Professional Skills for Government programme. The point of the paper was to separate skills specifically required of policy officials from those which are common to all civil servants (Civil Service Website, 2010). The document is thin, however, and does not attempt to justify the choices made by its authors. Instead, it simply lists between two and six requirements under each of four themes (policy delivery, policy design, sector knowledge, strategy), brigaded by three of the more senior grades (Grade 7 and Senior Civil Service Pay Bands 1 and 2). For the most part, the things that sit under each of those are variations on the skills presented in the 1999 *Professionalising Policy Making* paper.

In 2009, the Cabinet Office commissioned Capita to undertake a training needs analysis (TNA) of the Policy Profession (Capita Resourcing, 2009) in response to the findings in the *Skills Strategy for Government* (Government Skills, 2008, p. 10). Capita concluded there were more similarities than differences amongst policy roles, with the most prominent difference being the policy specialisation. The authors consequently found that a single, unifying skills framework would have value and so set about creating one that would define ‘the non-negotiable skills for effective performance within a policy role’ (Capita Resourcing, 2009, p. 6). Capita identified skills profiles that were accompanied by development priorities and included a framework of core policy skills required by all policy officials in all departments. Capita’s work contributed to the design of the 2010 *Policy Skills Framework* (Cabinet Office, 2010). This was a significant document with 48 different competencies, each sub-divided into up to seven examples (in practice, these were mostly different ways of saying the same thing), which meant the framework contained 298 different functional competencies; it was seen as a positive step in the right direction (Hallsworth & Rutter, 2011).

The 2010 framework was replaced in January 2013 with the *Policy Profession Skills and Knowledge framework* (Civil Service Learning, 2013). This makes no reference to earlier work, but it is reasonable to assume that it is the new framework referenced in the *Twelve Actions* paper (Policy Profession Board, 2013), which was designed to sit alongside the (then) new overarching competency framework for all civil servants trailed in the preceding year’s *Civil Service Reform Plan* (HM Government, 2012). The framework described three characteristics of successful policy work (Civil Service Learning, 2013, p. 6):

1. The development and use of a sound evidence base
2. Understanding and managing the political context
3. Planning from the outset for how the policy will be delivered.

These translate into ‘four areas of competence’ (2013, p. 7), which the authors say directly relate to the three characteristics of successful policy. Three of those replicate the stated characteristics of successful policy work, to which the authors add a fourth: ‘Bring together evidence, politics and delivery to support ministers’ (2013, p. 7). Each of the four areas of competence was split into between one and four categories, with each category incorporating between three and eight functional competencies, giving a total of 55.

### **Background to the 2019 Standards**

The *Policy Profession Standards* were completely rewritten in 2019, with input from ‘over 500 colleagues across government, and other experts’ (Policy Profession, 2019a, p. 7). The result was 18 ‘skill areas’, each with three levels of standard. Level One aligned with the learning outcomes of the Level Four Apprenticeship that began to be offered in 2016 through to Level Three, which is expected to be demonstrated by ‘a skilled leader of policy portfolios, with depth of expertise’ (Policy Profession, 2019b). When the Cabinet Office came to review *Twelve Actions*. . . in 2019, it found yet again that awareness of the *Policy Profession Standards* was poor, notwithstanding they had been republished the same year (Policy Profession, 2019a, p. 16). Nevertheless, one person who contributed to the review described the work as ‘unequalled internationally’ (Policy Profession, 2019a, p. 11). This is a difficult contention, given that at the time of that review, only 19% of policy officials even knew a central Policy Profession Unit existed and more than two thirds felt there had been no improvement to policy systems or activities since the *Twelve Actions* paper was published (Policy Profession, 2019a, p. 13).

The 2019 framework is much more detailed than its predecessors. It nevertheless retains the functional approach, with examples such as ‘provides advice and recommendations that show a detailed understanding of the relevant financial situation, a value for money approach and a clear understanding of risks; plans for and responds appropriately to changes in financial circumstances or concerns’ (Policy Profession, 2019b, p. 10). Amongst its content are explicit knowledge requirements, such as ‘Demonstrates understanding of the powers and responsibilities of the Prime Minister, Cabinet, Ministers, Special Advisers and civil servants’ (2019b, p. 9), but the framework does not separate out requirements as knowledge or skills, etc. Some are also compound, including more than one category: ‘Understands the basic mechanisms of law-making in the UK . . . interacts with the people who support them’ (2019b, p. 9). The 20-year period following 1999 is the period in which the desire to prescribe competency requirements for policy officials grew into something substantial, with the pace increasing in the latter half. There is, however, very limited data available on the reasons why the drafters made the choices they did and so it is difficult to discern why these frameworks have developed in the way they have. What is obvious, however, is that the scale of complexity has increased dramatically since 1999, with *Professional Policy Making for the Twenty-first Century* listing nine competencies through to 333 in the 2019 framework.

The 2019 *Policy Profession Standards* were revised in 2021; it is the product of that revision that forms the centrepiece of this article’s analysis. The intention of the review was to make the standards ‘fewer and simpler’ (Policy Profession, 2021, p. 3), refined ‘via consultation with subject matter experts across the Civil Service’ (2021, p. 3). The 2021 document boasts 380 separate functional competencies across 14,706 words, compared to the 2019 document, which includes 333 functional competences across 8,390 words. If the aim really was ‘fewer and simpler’, the data indicates the authors were unsuccessful. Neither the *Standards* document nor the detailed descriptors make any attempt to justify themselves through an explanation of how they came to be. In the course of this study, the author submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the Policy Profession Unit, asking questions and seeking the disclosure of documents. Whilst some of what was sought was disclosed, much of the original content of these documents was redacted because the Policy Profession Unit felt that disclosing it would ‘be likely to have a potentially corrosive effect on good Government and lead to less fully informed decision making’ (Department for Education, 2023). What was disclosed did indicate that no impact assessment or review of effectiveness was ever undertaken on the 2019 *Standards* before the 2021 refresh. The Policy Profession Unit did disclose the heavily redacted consultation responses, but did so in the form of comments attached to the then draft standards; comments were mostly generic with no critical engagement with the standards demonstrated and it appears as though the consultation took the form of an opportunity to add to the 2019 *Standards* new competencies that those consulted judged to be missing. The Policy Profession Unit also disclosed the list of people invited to contribute to that consultation: they were exclusively civil servants with no evidence of any external challenge. This is problematical given the challenge of diminishing individual capacity that has been explored extensively in the literature (Boston, 1994; M. Collins, 2026a; Dunleavy, 1995; Guy Peters, 1996; Sapeha et al., 2020); a likely outcome from such an approach would be the replication of new officials in the image of the old, rather than the making of progress towards a more capable workforce (see S. Child & Shaw, 2023; Lepre et al., 2021).

## Methods

The methods used in this article are in two parts that work together. The first is policy instrument analysis and the second is thematic analysis.

Policy instrument analysis considers whether a policy instrument is sufficient to achieve its intended effect (Howlett et al., 2018; Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007). In this case, the instrument is the 2021 *Policy Profession Standards* and the intended effect is to move officials towards possessing the knowledge, skills, experience, and dispositions (hereafter, KSED) required for effective advisory work. A policy instrument is never a neutral technical device; it embodies a theory of how the desired change is to be produced, so interrogating its design tests whether the instrument is even capable, in principle, of delivering its aim. That test does not depend on the outcome data that the difficulties of measuring policy capacity place largely out of reach (Hartley & Zhang, 2018): a framework whose construction and content cannot build capacity will not build it however faithfully it is applied. That framing governs the paper in its investigation of the extent to which the 2021 *Policy Profession Standards* are fit for purpose, which requires an examination of both its construction (does it have the characteristics of an effective competency framework?) and its content (does it contain the right things?). This approach is both necessary and beneficial because the consequences of the policy intervention have not been studied in light of the difficulties in measuring policy capacity that have been discussed elsewhere in the literature (Hartley & Zhang, 2018). It is also the case that analysing the policy instrument,

**Table 2.** Number of Descriptors by Category.

|                       | Total unique | Knowledge | Skill | Experience | Disposition | Two categories |
|-----------------------|--------------|-----------|-------|------------|-------------|----------------|
| Number of descriptors | 268          | 51        | 219   | 2          | 7           | 11             |

**Table 3.** Number of Themes by Category.

|                  | Total | Knowledge | Skill | Experience | Disposition |
|------------------|-------|-----------|-------|------------|-------------|
| Number of themes | 41    | 14        | 21    | 1          | 5           |

rather than its consequences or inputs, helps us to see most clearly the Civil Service's position on individual policy capacity in a 'concretized' way (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007, p. 11).

It is important, however, to note that policy instrument analysis is an approach to analysis rather than a method in and of itself, so while it delivers the guiding approach to analysis that frames the object of the inquiry, it must be accompanied by something else. In this case, the construction question is answered by applying the framework described earlier in this article directly to the *Standards*: do they contain core competencies, behavioural indicators, and levels of proficiency? That is straightforward evaluative analysis within the policy instrument frame. The content question is where thematic analysis enters. With 127 practitioner-level descriptors requiring systematic categorisation and comparison against the typology, an impressionistic approach would be insufficient; a replicable method for reducing the unpacked descriptors into analysable themes and then mapping those themes against the typology's categories is required. That method is inductive semantic reflexive thematic analysis, following the guidance given by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). It is worth being explicit that this is not content analysis, notwithstanding that the process involves categorising and counting descriptors (Neuendorf, 2017). Content analysis is typically quasi-quantitative and concerned with the frequency of manifest content, oriented towards replicability across coders (Krippendorff, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis proceeds otherwise: it is, by design, the work of a single analyst whose interpretive engagement with the material is treated as a resource rather than a threat to validity, such that consensus coding and measures of inter-coder reliability are neither sought nor appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The primary interest in this article is in meaning, not frequency: the question being asked of each descriptor is what it signifies in relation to the requirements of effective advisory work, not how often a given category of requirement appears. That interest in meaning, and the interpretive judgements it requires, made reflexive thematic analysis the most appropriate choice.

The analysis proceeded in two phases: themes were generated inductively from the descriptors before being compared deductively against the typology. The inquiry is centred on the middle 'Practitioner' tier of the framework as this is where most policy officials sit and because the research focus is on the baseline requirement for an official to be effective rather than a novice or contributory expert. In focusing the approach on the practitioner tier, the detailed descriptors within that column were entered into Excel, with each descriptor its own row, generating 127 rows. Many of the descriptors are compound; where it was straightforward to split those out, with the results retaining sufficient meaning independently, that was done. Where splitting them out would leave a descriptor without independent meaning, the compound descriptor was left undisturbed. That exercise left 268 unique descriptors. Each row was categorised as being closest to (1) knowledge, (2) skill, (3) experience or (4) disposition. Where a descriptor did not align neatly with a single constituent, it was assigned to the closest fit; where it resembled two constituents in substance and where a single assignment would have suppressed part of its meaning, it was recorded against both, subject to a ceiling of two. That procedure applied in 11 of the 268 cases, none of which fell into more than two constituents. That produced (Table 2):

Each category was then grouped into themes. It is these themes that would be used to frame later analysis. The number of themes per category is recorded below (Table 3):

Three limitations exist within this design. The analysis is the work of a single analyst. That is, as noted above, a product of reflexive thematic analysis; nonetheless, the categorisations represent a disciplined interpretation and another researcher might reasonably have settled some of the finer distinctions differently. Further, the analysis is of the instrument and not of its effects, a choice prompted by the difficulty of measuring policy capacity directly (Hartley & Zhang, 2018): it can establish whether the *Standards* are capable, in principle, of supporting officials to build capacity, but it cannot speak to the capacity they have in fact built. Finally, the documentary records disclosed by the Policy Profession Unit are partial; much of the material released under the Freedom of Information Act was redacted, such

that the account of how the *Standards* were drafted rests upon what the Unit was content to disclose and represents only a portion of the whole.

## Findings

### *Characteristics, Construction and Utility*

The 2021 *Standards* are arranged across two documents. The first introduces and summarises the framework, with an annex containing the detailed descriptors. The *Standards* are organised over three pillars (Policy Profession, 2021, p. 4):

1. Strategy: using evidence and analysis. Generating, assessing and applying evidence and analysis to understand the context and develop new strategies.
2. Democracy: understanding and supporting good governance. Understanding and supporting good governance and accountability through the production of robust and challenging advice to inform decisions
3. Delivery: designing policy implementation. Designing policy implementation and delivery systems in collaboration with delivery partners and users, including how policies will be evaluated and improved.

‘Delivery’ exists in the 2019 *Standards* but with a subtly and inconsequentially different definition. ‘Strategy’ and ‘Democracy’ are titled differently in the 2019 *Standards*, but nevertheless synonymous with the ‘Evidence’ and ‘Politics’ pillars from the earlier framework. Each pillar contains four categories of standards (‘standards’ is the term used throughout the document), and each category contains between one and six ‘learning outcomes’. Each learning outcome is subdivided into detailed descriptors, which are ‘the skills, knowledge, and activities included for each Standard’ (2021, p. 3), and bucketed across three levels (Developing, Practitioner, Expert; in 2019, these were ‘Attaining Knowledge’, ‘Applying Skills’, and ‘Leading the Way’); these are, in effect, functional competencies. That means there are 380 detailed descriptors or functional competencies. In practice, however, many of these are compound, making the total number of different functional competencies much higher. Before considering the quality of the content, the construction of the framework will be examined.

Drawing upon the analytical framework developed earlier in the article, what are described as learning outcomes are the core competencies, and the detailed descriptors are the behavioural indicators. The three levels of learning are a poorer fit for the third building block. A level of proficiency should indicate the extent of an individual’s competence and operate alongside the behavioural indicators, grading how well a given competency is demonstrated. The framework does not work in this way. Instead, its descriptors are bucketed across the three levels, so each level holds different requirements rather than grading the same one, and within any single level the functional logic still holds: an official either demonstrates the descriptor or they do not. The levels therefore hold different requirements at each developmental stage; they do not grade proficiency in any one of them. This is the dichotomy identified earlier, reproduced within each level. On its face, then, the Framework supplies two of the three building blocks cleanly and the third only in an attenuated form.

The analysis cannot, however, end there. Behavioural indicators are alternatively known as progression indicators, and in this case should be a description of what the official ‘can be expected to do for each domain competency’ (S. F. J. Child & Shaw, 2020, p. 1151). The functional competencies contained within the framework are assistive in that regard, but that is not the end of the matter. Their sheer volume makes the framework unquestionably atomistic. Atomistic approaches to behavioural/progression indicators are also reductionist and lead to difficulty when constructed imprecisely or where they fail to capture holistic elements in some other way (Batt et al., 2021; Collier-Sewell et al., 2023; Holmboe et al., 2017). This is perhaps necessarily the case for a framework that seeks to capture policy officials working across the entire breadth of government business. Nevertheless, to illustrate the imprecision at play, examples of the functional competencies include ‘stays focused on the most important aspects of the problem’ (2021, p. 6), and ‘Applies a range of futures tools to explore the various possible futures’ (2021, p. 8). Such an atomistic approach leads to problems in the way practitioners interact with the framework; by focussing on the need to observe ‘performance and to tick the appropriate boxes in a completely ambiguous checklist’ (A. Jones, 1999, p. 148).

Bringing this together, it is apparent that the framework’s authors have clearly sought to develop it in a conventional way, recognising the three main building blocks. However, their atomistic and imprecise approach was imperfect and has compromised the effectiveness of the framework, also likely contributing to low uptake (Hendry et al., 2007). The consequences of these issues extend into the utility of this framework; whilst there is no available data on what proportion of officials are aware of the existence of the framework, there is data on its utilisation in recruitment. In the calendar year 2024, 6,072 separate vacancies were advertised on the Civil Service Jobs platform that were

tagged 'Policy'; of those, only 31 referenced this Framework anywhere in the advertisement (Cabinet Office, 2025). Thus, only 0.5% of Civil Service policy roles advertised make use of the *Policy Profession Standards* as part of the selection criteria, notwithstanding the fact the *Standards* were designed with the intention of enhancing the recruitment of suitably qualified people into the profession and that every department undertook to adopt them (Policy Profession, 2019a). The available data does not support a robust conclusion as to why the *Policy Profession Standards* are not being used in the way that was envisaged. What the analysis can speak to is whether a framework built in this way could realistically be used as intended, and on that it offers the following reflections. Policy work is complicated, and that complexity continues to increase; it is also diverse, encompassing everything that government does. Consequently, trying to develop a prescriptive framework that captures all policy officials undertaking all policy work is likely to be a recipe for disaster, given it is impossible to develop a framework that applies across the entire breadth of government. Because of that ever-increasing complexity and because of the extremely wide breadth of different policy contexts governments must address, even if one were to be successful in creating a catch all framework, it would be necessarily atomistic and undermine the effects it seeks to achieve. A framework that lays claim to catch all atomistically is almost certain to struggle for credibility amongst the workforce.

## Content

Having recognised the issues inherent in the Framework's construction, it is now necessary to consider its content. The aim is to examine the extent to which it aligns with the available research on individual policy capacity described above.

**General Observations.** The numbers above in Table 2 indicate a strong emphasis on skills. However, as described above, many of these descriptors do not neatly resemble one of the categories. The framework separately pays only modest attention to what an official must know, and what is included does not break the requirement down to the extent necessary for it to function as an accessible handrail for officials seeking to usefully expand their knowledge. For example, the knowledge requirement is often inferred (e.g., 'Commissions, generates and collates evidence and resources to support futures work and understanding future challenges or opportunities, e.g., horizon scanning, surveys, interviews and economic and social metrics'), and some have significant underlying complexity (e.g., 'Understands the kinds of methods that can be used to explore user behaviour and reactions, including trial design').

Some skills feel incongruous within the larger whole (e.g., 'Promotes the "digital first" approach to providing information and services where appropriate'), which is likely consequent of a lack of stewardship in a process that did not deliberately weight the value of the contributing stakeholder's viewpoints. Whilst some skills are general, others are oddly specific (e.g., 'can engage effectively on development issues to deliver agreed policy objectives, while recognising the context of developing countries own policies and objectives'). In addition to the oddly specific, some are unreasonably prescriptive, particularly those around stakeholder management and others are in no way related to policy (e.g., 'Aware of expectations; seeks opportunities to make a corporate contribution beyond role'). And of course there are those that are a little too general: 'can identify how and when to use various processes'.

**Knowledge.** The 51 descriptors in the knowledge category were distilled into the following 14 themes (this and other similar tables are ordered by frequency) (Table 4):

None of these knowledge themes sits squarely in any one of those types of knowledge discussed earlier. All of them sit, to some extent, at their intersection. For example, K1 contains elements of explicit and tacit. Knowing about research methods is explicit; but knowing which will be most appropriate in the circumstances will require a substantial tacit element. This intersectionality further contributes to the complexity of this framework and reinforces the strength of the analytical choice to divide research approach into knowledge, skills, experience and dispositions as opposed to the single list of descriptors used by the Policy Profession.

The literature cited throughout this article recognises two broad knowledge requirements policy knowledge ((1A.1) specialised policy knowledge, (1A.2) general policy knowledge) and (1B) system knowledge. On its face, only system knowledge is apparent within this framework, but it is apparent to a very substantial extent. All the themes speak to the issues of how to move ideas through the system towards a decision, the constitution and the rules and principles of public life. There is no specific requirement for any form of policy knowledge, however one could infer the intention to create such a requirement from the use of words such as 'relevant' or phrases such as '. . . in the policy area'. Nevertheless, the requirements for both general and specialised policy knowledge are significant, given the extent to which they dominate the discussion throughout the literature (Gleeson et al., 2011; Lindquist & Desveaux, 2007;

**Table 4.** Knowledge Themes.

| Number | Description                                                                                                                                                                 | Descriptors in each |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| K1     | Understands the basics of analysis, and how/when to commission support from badged analytical and scientific staff; knows how to interpret analytical and scientific output | 10                  |
| K2     | Understands policy analytical processes, and the factors that contribute to them                                                                                            | 9                   |
| K3     | Understands the principles of Managing Public Money and the issues that influence the Value for Money judgement                                                             | 5                   |
| K4     | Understands the international context (including trade), the multilateral system                                                                                            | 4                   |
| K5     | Understands legislative and Parliamentary processes                                                                                                                         | 4                   |
| K6     | Understands basic legal and ethical principles and how they relate to policy work                                                                                           | 4                   |
| K7     | Knowledge of devolution, the devolved context, and the relationship between devolved administrations and the UK Government                                                  | 3                   |
| K8     | Understands the principles of governance and risk management                                                                                                                | 3                   |
| K9     | Understands commercial processes and practice                                                                                                                               | 2                   |
| K10    | Knows about the work of different Departments, and how they relate to each other                                                                                            | 1                   |
| K11    | Understands local and regional government                                                                                                                                   | 1                   |
| K12    | Understands policy delivery                                                                                                                                                 | 1                   |
| K13    | Understands communications                                                                                                                                                  | 1                   |
| K14    | Miscellaneous                                                                                                                                                               | 3                   |

Mukherjee & Bali, 2019), which means their absence here significantly weakens the value in this framework overall. This is not, however, to say that the nature of any required specialised policy knowledge should be included prescriptively; that would reinforce the construction criticism levelled elsewhere. The requirement should nevertheless have been established in sufficiently general terms.

**Skills.** The 219 descriptors in the skill category were distilled into the following 21 themes (Table 5):

The analytical typology contains 12 different skills across four themes: balancing, policy-making, relational capacity and communication. All the social skills in that typology (the ability to manage ministers; the ability coordinate and cooperate with others; the ability to coordinate the policy-making process) are readily apparent in this framework. So are most of the policy-making and communication skills. Missing from the policy-making skills in the framework is the ability to see around corners, and from the communication elements, the ability to persuade those with whom you attempt to collaborate of the value of one's minister's perspective. Seeing around corners is implied in a few places, but its core tenet of anticipation is not. Similarly, the persuade element is implied in the elements that touch upon negotiation, but the explicit requirement to do so in a competitive way, in support of the minister's perspective, is missing. Finally, the skill in balancing the necessary types of KSED is missing. This was an inevitable product of the Framework's construction, with holistic elements often absent from atomistic approaches. Notwithstanding these omissions, the reality remains that many of the requirements identified earlier are present here, and but for a small number of additions this would be complete. The challenges of the framework's construction do, however, remain and the atomistic characteristic of this framework is most apparent when considering the skills section.

**Experience.** The two descriptors in the experience category were distilled into a single theme: E1 'Has experience/corporate knowledge to know which policies/interventions are more likely to succeed/fail'. As discussed above, experience is widely considered a separate constituent of competence (Ali et al., 2021; Hahn & Kim, 2022; Paloniemi, 2006; Takase, 2013). On the one hand, it could be argued that experience is socially situated (Splitter, 2009) and so has no place in a broad framework such as this. However, that approach neglects the utility of experience as an indicator of a person's progression through the levels of proficiency (Paloniemi, 2006). Given the above, it is noteworthy that the two experiential elements of the analytical typology (of witnessing the lived experience of users; of the occupational culture within the official's department) are absent.

**Dispositions.** The seven descriptors in the disposition category were distilled into the following five themes (Table 6):

The typology that underpins this analysis includes seven different dispositions. Of those, two are wholly present here: adaptive capacity (D2) and political astuteness (D4). A third is present in part, with elements of leadership contained here and across the skills contained in the Framework. The remaining four (creativity, judgement, risk taking, and resilience) are absent.

**Table 5.** Skill Themes.

| Number | Description                                                                                                                                                    | Descriptors in each |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| S1     | Can identify, understand, interpret, and make use of relevant sources of evidence (including individual experts); can discern the limitations of that evidence | 32                  |
| S2     | Can effectively manage relationships with stakeholders, both internal and external to government, making use of them in support of advice when required        | 30                  |
| S3     | Can design policy implementation strategies, and lead delivery                                                                                                 | 22                  |
| S4     | Can conduct policy analysis (including evaluation)                                                                                                             | 16                  |
| S5     | Can conduct basic statistical analysis                                                                                                                         | 16                  |
| S6     | Can design effective policy interventions                                                                                                                      | 13                  |
| S7     | Can support the design and delivery of effective, public-facing, communications strategies                                                                     | 10                  |
| S8     | Can bring together various forms of evidence and analysis in support of advice                                                                                 | 10                  |
| S9     | Is able to manage and deliver Parliamentary work                                                                                                               | 8                   |
| S10    | Can manage contracts and participate in commercial processes                                                                                                   | 7                   |
| S11    | Can manage projects                                                                                                                                            | 6                   |
| S12    | Can negotiate effectively                                                                                                                                      | 6                   |
| S13    | Can conduct financial and investment appraisal/analysis; can manage a budget                                                                                   | 5                   |
| S14    | Can effectively brief orally                                                                                                                                   | 4                   |
| S15    | Can systematically and quickly build a knowledge base, and remain up to date                                                                                   | 4                   |
| S16    | Can lead, both directly and indirectly                                                                                                                         | 4                   |
| S17    | Can manage risk appropriately                                                                                                                                  | 4                   |
| S18    | Can write well, tailoring their approach appropriately                                                                                                         | 4                   |
| S19    | Can design, implement, and manage governance mechanisms, including for oversight of external bodies                                                            | 3                   |
| S20    | Is able to effectively manage ministers                                                                                                                        | 2                   |
| S21    | Miscellaneous                                                                                                                                                  | 13                  |

**Table 6.** Disposition Themes.

| Number | Description        | Descriptors in each |
|--------|--------------------|---------------------|
| D1     | Focussed           | 2                   |
| D2     | Adaptive capacity  | 2                   |
| D3     | Responsible        | 1                   |
| D4     | Politically astute | 1                   |
| D5     | Confident          | 1                   |

## Discussion

This article has highlighted substantial differences between the prevailing research and the 2021 *Policy Profession Standards*. There are several possible reasons why these differences exist. The most obvious is that the authors did not engage with the ministerial perspective (M. Collins, 2025; Richards & Smith, 2016). Whilst there is no evidence of any such engagement, it is important to remain mindful that the material disclosed by the Policy Profession Unit represents only a very small piece of the puzzle and so it is not possible to determine this point definitively. Nevertheless, if it were the case that the authors did not engage ministers then that is a considerable flaw that has plainly contributed to the deficiencies described above. In the alternative, or perhaps in tandem, there is no evident engagement with the literature; there are no references to it in the consultation responses or the notes thereof and the complete absence of large parts of the skills requirement is symptomatic of that lack of engagement. This is particularly relevant given most requirements pervade the literature; they are not novel or niche, and it would not have taken much for a competent researcher to find them. In the alternative, they were noted and dismissed – but that would have run contrary to the *Policy Profession Standards*’ requirement to ‘use the existing evidence base’ (Policy Profession, 2021, p. 12) or ‘Engages professional researchers from the earliest stages and throughout policy development’ (2021, p. 28). Given those two significant factors, the 2021 *Standards* are judged to be deficient in their content: they do not contain the fundamental requirements that an official should have if they are to deliver an effective advisory function.

Not only do the 2021 *Standards* not include key requirements, but they also impose additional extraneous requirements. For example, ‘Can engage effectively on development issues to deliver agreed policy objectives, while recognising the context of developing countries own policies and objectives’ (2021, p. 15), and ‘Demonstrates an understanding of key commercial concepts including how markets may react to policy announcements and (where appropriate) proactively engages with the market to assess the viability and implications of policies’ (2021, p. 27). This article does not attempt to argue those requirements, if possessed, would not be useful. On the contrary, they and the other extraneous requirements will doubtless have some utility in many policy fields, so broad is the business of government. However, their presence here serves to distract from the fundamentals, a distraction that is complicated by the excessive complexity that results from a very large number of descriptors (Mills et al., 2020).

That distraction is underpinned by the decision to adopt an atomistic construction. As discussed earlier, atomistic constructions are generally viewed as reductionist and lead to difficulty when constructed imprecisely or where they fail to capture holistic elements in some other way; the approach also leads to a problematical checklist approach to engagement. The deficiency in content is not helped either by the decision to adopt a functional approach, an approach that has failed to capture the depth of the KSED required for demanding policy work and that will consequently continue to fail to adapt to novel contexts (Billett, 2016). It is an approach that caused the authors to choose not to separate out KSED individually, when disentangling them has been shown to be more effective (Mills et al., 2020). These are not merely faults of execution; they follow from the managerial approach within which the framework was conceived. The fragmentation of the role into hundreds of separately assessable descriptors, the dichotomous logic by which an official either meets a standard or does not and the reliance on exhaustive measurement to secure performance are characteristic of the New Public Management approach whose influence upon this lineage the article has already noted (Hood, 1991). That this managerial logic of performance measurement should sit poorly with the demands of policy work is unsurprising given it was not devised with such work in mind. In short, it leaves the document telling officials what tasks to perfect, rather than what they must learn. Had the authors adopted a more flexible approach of offering a scaffold to departments, rather than attempting to be atomistically prescriptive, their position would be much easier to defend. The objection advanced here is therefore to the method of codification, rather than to codification itself – an atomistic, functional and prescriptive framework is simply the wrong instrument.

These faults highly likely conspire to contribute to the limited awareness and utilisation of this framework. That is problematic, given it means that most policy officials are either unaware that such a framework exists, or of the view that the one that does exist should be ignored, thus leaving them without an effective competency framework, and leaving their leadership without effective guidance as to how policy officials should be best developed and trained. That is likely to have contributed to the inconsistency in the service that is provided to ministers frequently described in the literature (Andrews & Gilmore, 2025; Harries, 2015), or at the very least has done nothing to stop it emerging. It has also likely contributed to issues of quality in the decisions made regarding recruitment and promotion that have also been widely discussed in the literature (Urban & Thomas, 2022). In addition to the organisational consequences, these issues leave ambitious officials lacking in effective guidance in how to better themselves; in the alternative, they are busy acquiring competencies that are unlikely to deliver more effective results. These things are important given the emerging school of research demonstrating that insufficient individual policy capacity contributes to a lack of governmental effectiveness (Capano et al., 2025).

These are issues not unique to the UK, and the effectiveness of interventions such as that investigated here have been considered comparatively by others (Craft & Henderson, 2023), albeit not to the level of granularity offered here. Given this established comparative utility, those charged with preparing similar competency frameworks in other Westminster Model jurisdictions would likely find value in observing the findings of this article, so as not to fall into the same traps. That is because the decision to build something atomistically prescriptive and functional, to proceed without engaging either ministers or the literature and to tell officials what tasks to perfect rather than what they must learn, are choices open to any government that sets out to codify policy capacity, and there is little reason to suppose the United Kingdom is alone in making them. Finally, this study offers a comparatively useful theoretical perspective, too; that is, the breadth and complexity of policy work makes an atomistic, prescriptive, catch-all framework close to self-defeating, and that this is a design lesson rather than a UK-specific quirk.

## Conclusion

This article set out to establish whether the competency framework designed to regulate the development of United Kingdom policy officials is fit for the purpose and has concluded that it is not. In doing so it has made two contributions. The first is a systematic account of how a succession of competency frameworks developed, over the two decades following the 1999 *Modernising Government* white paper, into the 2021 *Policy Profession Standards*. The

second is a policy instrument analysis of those Standards, supported by reflexive thematic analysis of their practitioner-level requirements, which found them to be atomistically constructed and functional in approach, loaded with extraneous requirements and missing the fundamentals that the literature treats as settled. That matters because a framework conceived to build individual policy capacity instead carries the power to contribute to policy failure. Policy failure is, of course, over-determined and a deficiency in individual policy capacity operates as only one contributor amongst several rather than as a sufficient cause in itself; the claim advanced here is narrower, that a framework neglecting the fundamentals removes a safeguard against failure.

The significance of these findings, however, reaches beyond the British case. What the construction of the 2021 *Standards* exposes is a lesson in the design of competency frameworks rather than a UK peculiarity: the faults identified here follow from choices that any government setting out to codify policy capacity might equally make. What follows from this is not that the enterprise of codification should be abandoned, but that it should be approached differently. A framework that recorded the fundamentals an official requires, that disentangled the knowledge, skills, experience and dispositions of which competence is composed, and that then offered a scaffold to departments on which to grow within their own contexts, would answer the deficiencies identified here without succumbing to the atomism that undermines the present *Standards*. Such an approach would demand engagement with the ministerial perspective and with the research literature, both of which are conspicuously absent from the record of how the current framework came to be.

The timing is opportune. Five years have now passed since the *Standards* were last reviewed, 1 year short of the record interval between the 2013 and 2019 frameworks, so it is probable that the Policy Profession Unit will shortly turn to the next iteration; that this should coincide with the confirmation of a new head of profession is fortunate (Policy Profession, 2026). Those charged with the task would do well to proceed with a flexibility their predecessors did not exhibit, and to draw upon a body of research that is more accessible now than it has ever been.

Questions remain that this article has not sought to answer. Why a framework every department undertook to adopt should be referenced in only 0.5% of advertised policy roles is a matter the available data cannot resolve, and the teaching and development of officials against whatever framework succeeds the present one is a distinct and legitimate field of inquiry in its own right. What the analysis does establish is that the instrument on which the United Kingdom presently relies to build the capacity of its policy officials is not up to the task, and its successor will need to do better.

## ORCID iD

Matthew Collins  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7458-3593>

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Ali, M. M., Qureshi, S. M., Memon, M. S., Mari, S. I., & Ramzan, M. B. (2021). Competency framework development for effective human resource management. *Sage Open*, 11(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211006124>
- Andrews, L., & Gilmore, S. (2025). The evolving practice of UK government ministers. *Public Administration Review*, 85(3), 628–640. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13902>
- Attewell, P. (1990). What is skill? *Work and Occupations*, 17(4), 422–448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888490017004003>
- Batt, A., Williams, B., Rich, J., & Tavares, W. (2021). A six-step model for developing competency frameworks in the healthcare professions. *Frontiers of Medicine*, 8, 789828. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2021.789828>
- Billett, S. (2016). Beyond competence: An essay on a process approach to organising and enacting vocational education. *International Journal of Training Research*, 14(3), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2016.1254365>
- Borman, W. C., Hanson, M. A., Oppler, S. H., Pulakos, E. D., & White, L. A. (1993). Role of early supervisory experience in supervisor performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(3), 443–449. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.78.3.443>
- Boston, J. (1994). Purchasing policy advice: The limits to contracting out. *Governance*, 7(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.1994.tb00167.x>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (Eds.). (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide* (1st ed.). Sage.

- Brinkmann, M. (2017). Repetition and transformation in learning. In A. Laros, T. Fuhr, & E. W. Taylor (Eds.), *Transformative Learning Meets Bildung: An International Exchange* (pp. 73–83). Brill.
- Brockmann, M., Clarke, L., Winch, C., Hanf, G., Méhaut, P., & Westerhuis, A. (2011). Interpretive dictionary: Competence, qualification, education, knowledge. In M. Brockmann, L. Clarke, & C. Winch (Eds.), *Knowledge, skills and competence in the European Labour Market: What's in a vocational qualification?* (pp. 190–223). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203814796-11>
- Cabinet Office. (1999a). *Modernising government*. HMSO.
- Cabinet Office. (1999b). *Professional policy making for the twenty first century*. HMSO.
- Cabinet Office. (2004). *Civil service reform: Delivery & values*. HMSO.
- Cabinet Office. (2010). *Policy skills framework*. Cabinet Office.
- Cabinet Office. (2025). *FOI2025/04519*. Cabinet Office.
- Cairney, P., Boswell, J., Ayres, S., Durose, C., Elliott, I. C., Flinders, M., Martin, S., & Richardson, L. (2024). The state of British policymaking: How can UK government become more effective? *Parliamentary Affairs*, 77(4), 837–864. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsae019>
- Campbell, T., O'Brien, E., Van Boven, L., Schwarz, N., & Ubel, P. (2014). Too much experience: A desensitization bias in emotional perspective taking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(2), 272–285. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035148>
- Capano, G., & Howlett, M. (2020). The knowns and unknowns of policy instrument analysis: Policy tools and the current research agenda on policy mixes. *Sage Open*, 10(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019900568>
- Capano, G., & Malandrino, A. (2025). Speaking truth to power: The dynamics of knowledge use in policymaking. In M. Howlett & I. Mukherjee (Eds.), *Handbook of Policy Advice* (pp. 15–24). Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035318087.00008>
- Capano, G., Pritoni, A., & Profeti, S. (2025). Does policy capacity truly matter for governmental effectiveness? A conjunctural analysis of the quality of governance in Italian regions. *Governance*, 38(3), e70027. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.70027>
- Capita Resourcing. (2009). *Policy profession in central government: Skills needs analysis—Summary report*. Capita Resourcing.
- Child, S., & Shaw, S. (2023). A conceptual approach to validating competence frameworks. *Research Matters*, 35, 27–40. <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/research-matters-35-a-conceptual-approach-to-validating-competence-frameworks.pdf>
- Child, S. F. J., & Shaw, S. D. (2020). A purpose-led approach towards the development of competency frameworks. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(8), 1143–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2019.1669773>
- Civil Service. (2005). *Policy delivery skills with underpinning context*. Civil Service.
- Civil Service. (2014). *Civil service reform plan: Progress report*. HMSO. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-reform-plan-progress-report>
- Civil Service Learning. (2013). *Policy profession: Skills and knowledge framework*. HMSO.
- Civil Service Website. (2010, July 2). *Defining policy skills*. The National Archives. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20100708143437/http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/my-civil-service/networks/professional/policy-profession/news.aspx>
- Collier-Sewell, F., Atherton, I., Mahoney, C., Kyle, R. G., Hughes, E., & Lasater, K. (2023). Competencies and standards in nurse education: The irresolvable tensions. *Nurse Education Today*, 125, 105782. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2023.105782>
- Collins, H. (2010). *Tacit and explicit knowledge*. University of Chicago Press.
- Collins, H., & Evans, R. (2007). *Rethinking expertise*. The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226113623.001.0001>
- Collins, M. (2025). *In The Thick of It: A critical evaluation of the Home Civil Service policy profession* [Thesis, Cardiff University]. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/187127>
- Collins, M. (2026a). New development: Is this really the “end of the generalist”? *Public Money & Management*, 46(7), 867–871. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2025.2549829>
- Collins, M. (2026b). Beyond technocracy: a systematic review of individual policy capacity in the Westminster tradition. *Policy Studies*, Early Access. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2026.2710097>
- Craft, J., & Henderson, S. (2023). Comparing formal public sector policy staff: Organizing principles, composition, and distribution in Anglophone countries. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis Research and Practice*, 25(3), 283–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2023.2206790>
- Craft, J., & Henderson, S. (2024a). Policy staff and the evolving nature of policy analytical capacity in Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand. *Policy Studies*, 45(6), 883–907. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2023.2233452>
- Craft, J., & Henderson, S. (2024b). Punching above their weight or falling flat? Flagship policy modernisation initiatives in Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 83(2), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12600>
- Department for Education. (2023). *FOI2023/04509* (No. FOI2023/04509). Department for Education.
- Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S. (1986). *Mind over machine: The power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*. The Free Press.
- Dudman, J. (2019, October 30). Brexit has brought civil servants a barrage of unfair criticism. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/30/brexit-civil-servants-unfair-criticism-accusations-bias-whitehall>

- Dunleavy, P. (1995). Policy disasters: Explaining the UK's record. *Public Policy And Administration*, 10(2), 52–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095207679501000205>
- Eraut, M. (1998). Concepts of competence. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 12(2), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13561829809014100>
- Gascoigne, N., & Thornton, T. (2014). *Tacit knowledge*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315729886>
- Gleeson, D., Legge, D., O'Neill, D., & Pfeffer, M. (2011). Negotiating tensions in developing organizational policy capacity: Comparative lessons to be drawn. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis Research and Practice*, 13(3), 237–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2011.565912>
- Government Skills. (2008). *Building professional skills for government: A strategy for delivery*. HMSO.
- Guy Peters, B. (1996). *The policy capacity of government*. Canadian Centre for Management Development.
- Hahn, H., & Kim, S. (2022). Experience, experience, experience: Too much of a good thing for executive performance. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 33(1), 11–28. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21438>
- Halligan, J. (1995). Policy advice and the public service. In B. Guy Peters & D. Savoie (Eds.), *Governance in a changing environment* (pp. 138–172). Canadian Centre for Management Development. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt8139b>
- Hallsworth, M., & Rutter, J. (2011). *Making policy better*. Institute for Government. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Making%20Policy%20Better.pdf>
- Harries, R. (2015). *Review of the civil service policy profession*. Reform. [https://civilservant.org.uk/library/2015-Reform-Review\\_of\\_the\\_Civil\\_Service\\_Policy-Profession.pdf](https://civilservant.org.uk/library/2015-Reform-Review_of_the_Civil_Service_Policy-Profession.pdf)
- Hart, J., Noack, M., Plaimauer, C., & Bjørnåvold, J. (2021). *Towards a structured and consistent terminology on transversal skills and competences: 3rd report to ESCO Member States Working Group on a terminology for transversal skills and competences (TSCs)*. European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/MSWG%2014-04%20Report%20of%20the%20expert%20group%20on%20transversal%20skills%20and%20competences.pdf>
- Hartley, K., & Zhang, J. (2018). Measuring policy capacity through governance indices. In X. Wu, M. Howlett, & M. Ramesh (Eds.), *Policy capacity and governance, studies in the political economy of public policy* (1st ed., pp. 29–120). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54675-9\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54675-9_4)
- Hendry, C., Lauder, W., & Roxburgh, M. (2007). The dissemination and uptake of competency frameworks. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 12(6), 689–700. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107079652>
- HM Government. (2012). *The Civil Service Reform Plan*. HMSO. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-reform-plan#:~:text=The%20government%27s%20plan%20to%20make,less%20bureaucratic%20and%20more%20unified>
- Holmboe, E. S., Sherbino, J., Englander, R., Snell, L., & Frank, J. R. (2017). A call to action: The controversy of and rationale for competency-based medical education. *Medical Teacher*, 39(6), 574–581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2017.1315067>
- Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration*, 69(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.1991.tb00779.x>
- Hoskins, B., & Fredriksson, U. (2008). *Learning to Learn: What is it and can it be measured?* Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. <https://doi.org/10.2788/83908>
- Howlett, M., Mukherjee, I., & Woo, J. J. (2018). Thirty years of research on policy instruments. In H. Colebatch & R. Hoppe (Eds.), *Handbook on policy, process and governing* (pp. 147–168). Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781784714871.00015>
- Jones, A. (1999). The place of judgement in competency-based assessment. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 51(1), 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636829900200073>
- Jones, R., Bhanbhro, S. M., Grant, R., & Hood, R. (2013). The definition and deployment of differential core professional competencies and characteristics in multiprofessional health and social care teams. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 21(1), 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2524.2012.01086.x>
- Kolb, D. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.
- Krippendorff, K. (Ed.). (2019). *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Lascoumes, P., & Le Gales, P. (2007). Understanding public policy through its instruments—From the nature of instruments to the sociology of public policy instrumentation. *Governance*, 20(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2007.00342.x>
- Le Deist, F. D., & Winterton, J. (2005). What is competence? *Human Resource Development International*, 8(1), 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1367886042000338227>
- Lehrer, K. (1965). Knowledge, truth and evidence. *Analysis*, 25(5), 168–175. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/25.5.168>
- Lepre, B., Palermo, C., Mansfield, K. J., & Beck, E. J. (2021). Stakeholder engagement in competency framework development in health professions: A systematic review. *Frontiers of Medicine*, 8(759848), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2021.759848>
- Lindquist, E., & Desveaux, J. (2007). Policy analysis and bureaucratic capacity: Context, competencies and strategies. In L. Dobuzinskis, M. Howlett, & D. Laycock (Eds.), *Policy analysis in Canada* (pp. 116–142). University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442685529-007>
- Lucia, A. D., & Lepsinger, R. (1999). *The Art and Science of Competency Models: Pinpointing Critical Success Factors in an Organization*. Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Art+and+Science+of+Competency+Models%3A+Pinpointing+Critical+Success+Factors+in+Organizations-p-9780787946029>

- Markowitsch, J., & Plaimauer, C. (2009). Descriptors for competence: Towards an international standard classification for skills and competences. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 33(8/9), 817–837. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090590910993652>
- Matthew, C. T., & Sternberg, R. J. (2009). Developing experience-based (tacit) knowledge through reflection. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 19(4), 530–540. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2009.07.001>
- McClelland, D. C. (1998). Identifying competencies with behavioral-event interviews. *Psychological Science*, 9(5), 331–339. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00065>
- Megahed, N. (2018). A critical review of the literature and practice of Competency Modelling. *KnE Social Sciences*, 3(10), 104–126. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v3i10.3106>
- Mills, J.-A., Middleton, J. W., Schafer, A., Fitzpatrick, S., Short, S., & Cieza, A. (2020). Proposing a re-conceptualisation of competency framework terminology for health: A scoping review. *Human Resources for Health*, 18(1), 15–16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-019-0443-8>
- Miranda, J., Navarrete, C., Noguez, J., Molina-Espinosa, J.-M., Ramírez-Montoya, M.-S., Navarro-Tuch, S. A., Bustamante-Bello, M.-R., Rosas-Fernández, J.-B., & Molina, A. (2021). The core components of education 4.0 in higher education: Three case studies in engineering education. *Computers & Electrical Engineering*, 93, 107278. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compel-eng.2021.107278>
- Mukherjee, I., & Bali, A. S. (2019). Policy effectiveness and capacity: Two sides of the design coin. *Policy Design and Practice*, 2(2), 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2019.1632616>
- National Audit Office. (2017). *Capability in the Civil Service (No. HC 919)*. HMSO. <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/capability-in-the-civil-service/>
- Neuendorf, K. (Ed.). (2017). *The content analysis guidebook* (2nd ed.). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802878>
- Nonaka, I., & Konno, N. (1998). The concept of “Ba”: Building a foundation for knowledge creation. *California Management Review*, 40(3), 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41165942>
- Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. (2007). *Key competences for lifelong learning: European Reference Framework*. European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/publication-detail/-/publication/297a33c8-a1f3-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1>
- Oxford English Dictionary (Ed.) (2023). *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary (Ed.) (2024). *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- Paloniemi, S. (2006). Experience, competence and workplace learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 18(7/8), 439–450. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13665620610693006>
- Payne, J. (2017). The changing meaning of skill: Still contested, still important. In J. Buchanan, D. Finegold, K. Mayhew, & C. Warhurst (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of skills and training* (pp. 54–71). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199655366.013.3>
- Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension*. Doubleday.
- Policy Profession. (2019a). *Looking back to look forward: From ‘Twelve Actions’ to ‘Policy Profession 2025’*. Policy Profession.
- Policy Profession. (2019b). *Policy Profession Standards: A framework for professional development*. Policy Profession.
- Policy Profession. (2021). *Policy Profession Standards: Our competency framework for professional development*. HMSO. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1032009/PP\\_Standards\\_main.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1032009/PP_Standards_main.pdf)
- Policy Profession. (2026, May 11). *A new chapter for the Policy Profession*. Policy Profession. [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/policyprofession-share-7459633294175846400-6mv5/?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=member\\_desktop&rcm=ACoAAEJFU4UBltuBkSL5MoRCTPBS05Dk36HxMI](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/policyprofession-share-7459633294175846400-6mv5/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAEJFU4UBltuBkSL5MoRCTPBS05Dk36HxMI)
- Policy Profession Board. (2013). *Twelve actions to professionalise policy making*. HMSO. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/805991/12\\_actions\\_report\\_web\\_accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805991/12_actions_report_web_accessible.pdf)
- Politis, D. (2005). The process of entrepreneurial learning: A conceptual framework. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 29(4), 399–424. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2005.00091.x>
- Public Accounts Committee. (2020). *Specialist Skills in the civil service* (No. HC 686). HMSO. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3932/documents/39375/default/>
- Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. (2018). *The Minister and the Official: The Fulcrum of Whitehall Effectiveness* (No. HC 497). HMSO. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpubadm/497/497.pdf>
- Public Administration Select Committee. (2007). *Skills for Government (No. HC 93-1)*. HMSO. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmpubadm/93/93i.pdf>
- Ribeiro, R. (2013). Tacit knowledge management. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 12(2), 337–366. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9251-x>
- Richards, D., & Smith, M. J. (2016). The Westminster model and the “Indivisibility of the political and administrative elite”: A convenient myth whose time is up? *Governance*, 29(4), 499–516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12225>
- Roth, W. M. (Ed.). (2012). *First-person methods: Toward an empirical phenomenology of experience* (1st ed.). Sense Publishers.
- Rowe, C. (1995). Clarifying the use of competence and competency models in recruitment, assessment and staff development. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 27(11), 12–17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00197859510100257>
- Sandberg, J. (2000a). Competence – The basis for a smart workforce. In R. Gerber & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *Training for a smart workforce* (1st ed., pp. 47–72). Routledge.

- Sandberg, J. (2000b). Understanding human competence at work: An interpretative approach. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(1), 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1556383>
- Sapeha, H., Wellstead, A., & Evans, B. (2020). Peering into the black box of government policy work: The challenge of governance and policy capacity. *Canadian Political Science Review*, 13(1), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.24124/c677/20191612>
- Schmidt, F. L., Hunter, J. E., & Outerbridge, A. N. (1986). Impact of job experience and ability on job knowledge, work sample performance, and supervisory ratings of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(3), 432–439. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0021-9010.71.3.432>
- Sengupta, K., Abdel-Hamid, T. K., & Van Wassenhove, L. N. (2008). The experience trap. *Harvard Business Review*, 86(2), 94–101, 137. <https://hbr.org/2008/02/the-experience-trap>
- Sheikhbaheddinzadeh, E., Ashktorab, T., & Ebadi, A. (2022). Technical competency required by postgraduate psychiatric nursing students: A qualitative research. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, 11(1), 320–327. [https://doi.org/10.4103/jehp.jehp\\_1479\\_21](https://doi.org/10.4103/jehp.jehp_1479_21)
- Slater, J. (2022). *Fixing Whitehall's broken policy machine*. The Policy Institute.
- Splitter, L. J. (2009). Authenticity and constructivism in education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 28(2), 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-008-9105-3>
- Stanley, J., & Williamson, T. (2017). Skill. *Nous*, 51(4), 713–726. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12144>
- Sternberg, R. (1997). Tacit knowledge and job success. In N. Anderson & P. Herriot (Eds.), *International handbook of selection and assessment* (pp. 201–213). Wiley.
- Sultan, S., Morgan, R. L., Murad, M. H., Falck-Ytter, Y., Dahm, P., Schünemann, H. J., & Mustafa, R. A. (2020). A theoretical framework and competency-based approach to training in guideline development. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 35, 561–567. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05502-9>
- Takase, M. (2013). The relationship between the levels of nurses' competence and the length of their clinical experience: A tentative model for nursing competence development. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 22(9–10), 1400–1410. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2012.04239.x>
- Thornton, H. (2006). Dispositions in action: Do dispositions make a difference in practice? *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(2), 53–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23478934>
- Trollor, J. N., Eagleson, C., Weise, J., & McKay, R. (2017). Development and dissemination of a core competency framework. *Journal of Mental Health Training Education and Practice*, 12(4), 237–248. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jmhtep-04-2017-0028>
- Tuononen, T., Parpala, A., & Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2020). Complex interrelations between academic competences and students' approaches to learning – mixed-methods study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(8), 1080–1097. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2019.1648776>
- Ucbasaran, D., Westhead, P., & Wright, M. (2008). Opportunity identification and pursuit: Does an entrepreneur's human capital matter? *Small Business Economics*, 30(2), 153–173. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-006-9020-3>
- Urban, J., & Thomas, A. (2022). *Opening Up: how to strengthen the civil service through external recruitment*. Institute for Government. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/strengthen-civil-service-external-recruitment.pdf>
- Walker, C., & Washington, S. (2025). Guiding the provision of quality policy advice: The 5D model. *Policy Design and Practice*, 8(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2025.2495375>
- Whiddett, S., & Hollyforde, S. (1999). *The competencies handbook*. Chartered Institute of Personnel.