Crowdsourcing for Policy Innovation

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That the Canadian federal public service (FPS) has solicited input from a particular section of academia is a curious thing. Having a vision – Blueprint 2020 – and asking for citizen engagement about how this can be achieved, but doing so outside the traditional democratic channels, is in itself novel, or innovative. Indeed, they are employing the concept of crowdsourcing to gather ideas from a cross-section of the population. That the FPS is not actually paying for this advice and students are essentially paying universities to give this advice is ironic, but shows just how efficient the government can actually be. In line with innovation literature is the value of reaching out to young academics. These people will be employed in low and mid level positions throughout the public service and research indicates that people within these positions are the most likely to innovate (Borins 2001). In fact, it is a similar tactic used by popular management consulting firms who hire recent graduates premised on the idea that those graduates are filled with the newest cutting-edge theories and information. What this paper proposes is that a Federal Crowdsourcing Program (FCP), administered in a similar way as the paper competition, can help overcome the traditional challenges of public sector innovation.
2. WHAT IS INNOVATION?

Like most buzzwords, innovation is both overused and consequently, misunderstood. The simplest way to define innovation, or in this case, public sector innovation, is according to Mulgan (2008, 6), something that creates public value, offers more than just an improvement on an existing idea, and is actually implemented rather than left as just a good idea. Consider the National Student Paper Competition itself. In simple terms, the FPS has an objective detailed in the Blueprint 2020, and has asked graduate students in business, policy, and administration to give input on how this objective might be achieved. Rather simple, but still rather divergent from the norm of in-house problem solving or through the use of consultants and also divergent from how the government traditionally interacts with the public. Voting, by choosing one person’s (or party’s) stated objectives over another’s, almost indisputably, has been the primary means of telling the government how to function, or rather, in what ways to discharge its functions. Likely as old as democracy itself, lobbying is another example of citizen-government relations whereby likeminded groups, regardless of constituency, can try and influence the direction of politics. These examples demonstrate how the public can approach government, but the relationship is equally reciprocal. The government can establish various ‘bodies’ to interact with the public on a specific problem exemplified by The Future of Uranium Public Consultation Process that sought engagement vis-à-vis the nuclear industry in Saskatchewan (Government of Saskatchewan 2009). The ‘duty to consult’ is another example whereby the government is required to engage with the First Nations people when they are stakeholders in a government decision.

By applying Mulgan’s definition on top of the paper competition – and as well, the expansion of the process into a federal crowdsourcing program – we can see how this new form of citizen-government engagement is in itself innovative. The FPS is looking for ways to improve – creating public value; it is doing so through untraditional ways – a new approach; and has stated the possibility of moving the best result beyond paper – actually implementing the idea. Before discussing how this can be taken further, the following sections explain the overarching concepts of crowd sourcing, and the non-traditional approach of seeking advice from the bottom.
This is paper is essentially a discussion extolling the virtues of crowdsourcing. Merriam-Webster Online defines crowdsourcing as: “the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers” (n.d.). Another definition suggests that crowdsourcing is a way for a community to participate “in tasks typically completed by organizations or by specialists,” by assuming “that putting a problem to a large group increases the likelihood of generating an important innovation” (Shepherd 2012, 10). People may have different objectives or interpret a problem differently, and this is exactly the point because each person can bring their own unique perspective to a challenge. Innovation thereby becomes the product of this task diffusion, capturing the skills and time of many people (Shepherd 2012, 11). Taewoo Nam writes about ‘citizen-sourcing’ as a participatory-democratic form of crowdsourcing with similar implications and functions as crowdsourcing. His notion of crowdsourcing opens up a new mechanism for citizen engagement by drawing on collective knowledge while augmenting the New Public Management ethos that relies heavily on outsourcing and contracting-out (Nam 2012, 12). Crowdsourcing becomes another avenue that the public service can use instead of relying solely on contractual business relationships. Although somewhat ambitiously, Nam suggests citizen-sourcing “adds two new virtues (from the people and with the people) to the three classical cornerstone principles of democracy (of the people, by the people, and for the people)” (2012, 12). Creating a FCP would facilitate a more collaborative process, and by its very nature, foster innovation.

SEEKING ADVICE FROM THE LEAST EXPERIENCED

However virtuous crowdsourcing may be, there is a need to substantiate who should constitute the ‘crowd’. Because crowdsourcing traditionally takes place over the internet, the crowd usually constitutes anyone wishing to participate. Rather than soliciting from the general public in this traditional manner, the FPS would specifically target the audience who are likely to be directly involved with the public service – MBAs, MPPs, and MPAs. The idea of looking to (recent) graduates is not a new concept. Marvin Bower, prominent figure in McKinsey & Company and heralded as the father of management consulting, pioneered the hiring of business school graduates over experienced management – what was the traditional practice of the time (Edersheim 2004; HBS n.d.). Furthermore, current literature about innovation highlights the value of looking to young, recently graduated employees for creative ideas because they have the most experience with current technologies, trends, and theories (Borins 2001). While public sector innovation is often associated with upper management, Borins has found that the majority of innovation actually comes from middle management and front-line workers (2001, 313). He argues that this is because at these levels younger people “are close to the cutting-edge thinking they encountered in university” and are directly involved in day-to-day operations allowing them to apply that thinking in an innovative way (2001, 314). What these two examples demonstrate is the value of ideas from graduate students who will spend time and effort researching for papers regardless, but given the right direction, could produce innovative ideas.

CROWDSOURCING CHALLENGES

Not without its own risks, Rosen (2011) captures two overarching problems with crowdsourcing. First, the quality of ideas may not be very good or useful. And second, the nature of crowdsourcing produces a plethora of
ideas but does not filter through the quantity of ideas – or “vast amounts of noise that may be of little relevance to the company looking for quality ideas” (2011, 317). However, these problems are significantly reduced through the inherent nature of the graduate crowd because there is already a certain amount of legitimacy in their ideas. The FPS is already asking them for ideas, many will be hired into a public service, and a portion of those students already have careers within the public service. A process similar to that of the paper competition can counter the problem of filtering. The Privy Council Office can propose a particular challenge or issue, which can be taken up in an appropriate course. Once the papers have been evaluated (filtered) by the professor they can be forwarded to the government and undergo further evaluation and assessment— in-house or through the use of a consultant. Government crowdsourcing has been implemented in Singapore through the Enterprise Challenge program, operated from the Prime Minister’s office, which has funded almost 70 proposals (Mulgan 2008, 12). A slightly different model was used in 2007 by Cisco, who held a crowdsourced competition for IT network solutions (Schweitzer et al 2012, 32). Teams were asked to submit ideas backed by business plans (to substantiate the ideas) and in 5 weeks Cisco received 2500 ideas from contributors from 104 countries. A peer-review point system was used to prescreen followed by an assessment of top ideas by an in-house steering committee that eliminated all but 12 ideas. These 12 were presented to high-level management (2012, 32). Even though challenges exist, the Cisco example demonstrates how they can be mitigated with effective program design.
It has so far been suggested that there is value in crowdsourcing graduate students. Generally speaking, using the creativity of a large group of eager and knowledgeable students can facilitate innovation. The actual implementation of this program can be adapted from the process used for the current national paper competition. The Privy Council Office because of its centrality in the federal government would helm the crowdsourcing program. Having been a key strength discussed within innovation literature, and similar to the paper competition, the FCP would encourage student collaboration. Bloch and Bugge state that innovation depends on the interplay between different actors and is strengthened by the multiplicity and recombination of knowledge from those actors (2013, 135). Sørensen and Torfing have a similar view and claim that public innovation is achieved through network-based forms of collaboration (2011, 845). Using student engagement in a collaborative way can be instrumental in adding legitimacy to new or novel government programs or policies (Nam 2012, 13). As stated, effective program design, including stages of filtering that start at the university level, can ensure ‘noise reduction’ once ideas reach the government evaluation stage. The benefit of a FCP for innovation is twofold, one of which is the ability to mitigate risk. The second is the efficiency produced by crowdsourcing, especially in a scenario where demonstrated authorities (professors) are able to pre-screen the crowd, limiting the exhaustive problem of filtering crowd-sourced data.

MITIGATING RISKS

Literature locates risk and risk of failure as significant challenges to public sector innovation. That the FPS is looking for ways to innovate signals the risk averse environment within any public service. There are many reasons for this, especially in a top-down hierarchy like the public sector: governments must be held accountable for failure; bureaucracies were designed to be systematic and rule bound to ensure smooth operation; and innovation is stifled from the silo effect of separately run ministries (Mulgan 2008). All of these challenges create a risk adverse environment. Moreover, it suggests that innovation is hard to force, and when looked at within an organizational setting, usually happens organically (Borins 2001). Manufacturing innovation in-house is difficult, and this may be a prominent reason why it is a focus within Blueprint 2020.

These risks can be externalized through the very nature of graduate-sourcing.

COSTS

Budgeting for innovation has two main problems, and both can be overcome through the FCP. First, innovation is not something that can simply be produced. Second, as a consequence, it is difficult to allocate resources for innovation. Especially in a time of austerity and FTE reductions, there is a strong demand for fiscal accountability. Paying someone to innovate, knowing fully that they might not produce anything, is difficult to justify. Moreover, there is an opportunity cost in allocating someone to innovate when that person could be used elsewhere. Although still not clear of these problems, it might be more productive to allocate resources in filtering through a pool of ideas produced through the FCP. The nature of the FCP can externalize the costs of innovation by allowing students to come up with ideas and having professors filter out the ‘noise’.
EFFICIENCY

Similar to the benefits from citizen-sourcing in the narrower sense of government benefit (Nam 2012, 13), crowdsourcing from graduate students has the potential to deepen and enrich student knowledge of issues and broaden their understanding of government and its functions. From a program specific lens, student benefit may be purely ancillary, however in a wider FPS context, student benefit can have significant positive impacts. Students of public administration and public policy are, by the nature of the programs, likely interested in careers with the public service, be it municipal, provincial, or federal. Not only does the proposed program provide a practical framework for research and study, it also allows future public servants to help shape the organization that will constitute their future careers. Students are already stakeholders in how the FPS operates and functions because at some point, they will be taking the reigns. The academic environment, especially within the aforementioned programs, already fosters the value of teamwork and collaboration, both formally and informally. The circulation of ideas through class discussions is a perfect example where individual ideas are challenged, transformed, and expanded. This form of participation in the classroom facilitates mutual learning (Sørensen and Torfing 2011, 852), from people having a multitude of backgrounds and experiences, something essential in the innovation process.
The Blueprint 2020 document clearly states its desire to find new ways to innovate. This paper has proposed the creation of a Federal Crowdsourcing Program. By moving beyond the competition framework, the federal public service can foster innovation through the diversity of knowledge and experience of university graduate students. Management consultancies and innovation scholars already understand the value of these students because of student proximity to current theories and an eagerness to perform. Furthermore, crowdsourcing is a growing trend whereby a large group participates in the generation of ideas. It is this innovative form of idea creation that the FPS has yet to fully engage with beyond the competition itself. If the Privy Council Office and IPAC are able to facilitate a competition of this nature, it is entirely possible that it could be modified to produce more specific ends.


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