

Hansard Society HeadsUp internet forum

The Electoral Commission established the New Initiatives Fund to support and promote innovative ways of raising awareness about voting and democracy. We have awarded grants to local and community groups as well as national organisations, working with different target audiences across the whole of the UK.

This evaluation report provides information about the Hansard Society's HeadsUp project, which was part-funded by the New Initiatives Fund. We highlight the aims and objectives of the project, the key achievements, and the lessons learnt.

The grant

The Hansard Society is an independent educational charity that aims to promote effective parliamentary democracy. This project was designed as part of a wider Citizenship Programme, which produces educational resources to help establish effective links between MPs and their younger constituents.

The Electoral Commission granted a sum of **£10,500** to the Hansard Society specifically to develop the HeadsUp website to ensure that it was appealing and accessible to young people from different backgrounds. The Commission funding and this evaluation covers a period of 15 months, from January 2003 to March 2004.

The Commission's grant provided half salary costs for a web producer for the duration of the project, with the rest funded by the House of Commons' Library. The project also attracts funding from the Department for Education and Skills and the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust.

Aims and objectives

The main objective of the project was to 'demystify' democracy and demonstrate how young people can engage with the democratic process.

The pilot website aimed to provide a forum for debating issues around democracy. It was designed mainly for access in schools, with guidance being provided for teachers and students using the site. The site itself ties in with the MPs in Schools pack produced by the Hansard Society (see separate project report), providing further opportunities for young people to engage with MPs about the democratic process.

The website was designed to be accessible to Key Stage 3 and 4 students, and as such it needed to be 'student friendly'; using techniques that would engage young people in key topical issues and encourage participation in democracy.

Target outcomes

At application, the Hansard Society stated that the main target outcome was for young people to become better

informed about electoral issues through the medium of the HeadsUp website.

The Hansard Society also expected that the model provided by HeadsUp would be used by government and organisations aiming to engage with young people via e-democracy methods. They expected to liaise with other organisations to establish whether the model led to greater participation in the consultation process by young people, although no specific targets for increases in participation were set.

Evaluation

The project was evaluated in four ways:

- Online evaluation – during every forum, there was a ‘give us your feedback’ area for students.
- School visits – to talk with students about the issues discussed in the forums and to hear their opinions about the way the site works. Questionnaires were also distributed in advance of these visits to gauge reaction.
- Teacher evaluation – to obtain teachers’ views on the preparation of support materials, aspects of the forum, and their experience of citizenship and how they used HeadsUp in their teaching.
- Parliamentary evaluation – conversations with all the parliamentarians (or their staff) who took part in HeadsUp.

Deliverables

The key deliverables during the grant period were:

- January to March 2003 – the website was piloted with 10 schools across the UK, with the forum focusing on the issue of gun crime.
- April to August 2003 – a full time project co-ordinator was appointed to oversee the launch and operation of HeadsUp. The site was publicly launched in June 2003 with a forum looking at the role of the MP and young people’s perceptions of politicians.
- September 2003 to March 2004 – online forums were held, with further forums planned up to the end of the 2003–04 academic year, looking into the voting and candidacy age, anti-social behaviour, asylum, the media’s role in politics, the European Parliament, and education.

Project and resource management

The activities of the project were supervised by the director of the Citizen Education Programme, Fiona Booth, who also recruited the web producer responsible for managing the website on a day-to-day basis.

The majority of the Commission’s grant related to the payment of 50% of the web producer’s salary from April 2003 to March 2004. Records of budgeted and actual income and expenditure were maintained and monitored at

the Hansard Society’s London office.

The project delivered its activities within the budget allocated.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

The initial phase of the project was a pilot launch, the key aspect of which was to gain sufficient evaluation to establish the value of moving towards a nationwide launch and make the site good enough for its nationwide initiation.

The most productive area was the school visits, as they gave the Hansard Society the opportunity to discuss the site’s look, feel and operation with its users, as well as to raise its profile within the schools visited, by discussing the forum topics. There was a good uptake, with 143 schools and 1,527 students aged 11 to 17 registered to use it. The students were also willing to put forward their ideas to improve the site, as well as to raise points about the forum topics or politics in general.

Teacher evaluation, carried out over the phone, was successful in developing and improving the support materials, aspects of the forum, and how HeadsUp is worked into the teaching of citizenship in schools.

The online evaluation process was not very successful. There was a low take-up from students; the majority seemingly reluctant to give

feedback in this manner. The feedback that has been received has been positive, but not very constructive, meaning that improving the HeadsUp project for the students has been problematic. From this, it is difficult to estimate how the site has had an impact in terms of students' awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

The parliamentary evaluation has also not been as effective as was envisaged, largely because of the competing time commitments that the parliamentarians have. However, the responses from them have been largely positive, with most saying that they support this form of consultation and would consider involving themselves in future forums.

Longer-term evaluation

HeadsUp is the first forum website to try and engage young people on this scale, and with a student-centric approach. The Hansard Society is encouraged by the pilot, but acknowledges that there are still some improvements to be made which will impact the long-term evaluation of this project. The Society has continued to develop and improve the facility offered, with further funding from the Department of Education and Skills' Participation Fund.

Whether the project is a success in the long-term will depend on whether the website is managed and improved in line with the requirements of

the users, and whether the user-base is extended to enough schools to make the project sufficiently inclusive. This will be assisted by a proposed increase in the publicity budget.

As the website is opened up to larger numbers of young people, this will require the hosting of it to be transferred to a dedicated server. This needs to be accompanied by an upgrade to the monitoring software, allowing the monitoring of management information statistics. The final technical requirement will be to increase the capacity and responsiveness of the database.

Students are keen to see the use of images extended on the website, to make the pages more engaging. Furthermore, interactive content on the website is minimal, and the students found the website bland. This has had an impact on the enthusiasm of students, and the quality of their posts on the forum. Interactivity could take the form of embedded video and sound clips, or online quizzes.

One of the main areas for development, and therefore its influence on students, is the way in which the forum works. Initial evaluation has shown that when there are lots of forum participants, it moves very quickly and the debate can be difficult to track. The intention is to process posts on the forum by a moderation team before they appear on the site. This means that debates would progress at a more

sensible pace, and good posts from students would be highlighted.

There also needs to be further action in student evaluation. The low level of feedback online needs to be improved by making opportunities for doing so more appealing. One avenue for this could be incentives for completion of an online questionnaire. A questionnaire would also mean the project could regularise what information is received in feedback.

Teacher support is a vital area where improvement needs to be made. It is proposed that a defined area of the site be created solely for teacher access; enabling teachers to co-ordinate log-in times between themselves and improve the standard of forums. Another improvement could be the greater involvement of the Citizenship Programme in supporting teachers' preparation of students before they go online.

Finally, there is a desire to gain greater involvement from parliamentarians. A training workshop is proposed to ensure that MPs and peers are able to use the internet to consult with young people. This could be further enhanced with the introduction of a dedicated area in the forum for student-parliamentarian interaction.

Conclusions

The funding from the New Initiatives Fund was designed to support the pilot phase of the project and ensure effective

evaluation to inform the development of a national roll-out. This was achieved. Thus far, it also appears that the national implementation of the project has been successful. There has been good feedback from students, teachers and parliamentarians.

Suggestions have been made about potential improvements to the site and the facilities offered, and these have been taken seriously by the project team.

As outlined above, the proposed website modifications will significantly change the actual outputs of the website and arguably improve the project greatly over the coming months. In order to ensure that maximum benefit is gained from each development, further evaluation by the Hansard Society is essential. This would serve to identify if the proposed improvements to the project have been made, and establish the impact that they have had. Robust evaluation procedures would also help to ascertain which areas of the project did not perform to expectation and could be improved.

Through the evaluation of the initial phase of the project it has been possible to identify a number of elements of good practice and 'lessons learnt' that could be of interest to other organisations or bodies

considering replicating this concept.

Good practice

- Developing several methods of evaluation to ensure the requisite data is captured.
- Conducting school visits to increase interest and to gather feedback.
- Offering training to parliamentarians to ensure that they can maximise the website's potential.

Lessons learnt

If repeated in future, such schemes should:

- Provide more structure to feedback mechanisms – by giving a structure to evaluation forms, the risk of vague answers (that make improvements to the project difficult to determine) will be reduced.
- Set quantitative targets to measure achievement against.
- Use post-project questionnaires to ask students how their perceptions of the electoral system have altered.
- Encourage teachers to use the forum as a tool to discuss how electoral issues can be built into classroom activities for students.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Fiona Booth at the Hansard Society, or visit:
www.hansardsociety.org.uk
The project's own website is:
www.headsup.org.uk

Further information about the New Initiatives Fund and the wider work of The Electoral Commission can be found at:
www.electoralcommission.org.uk

We are an independent body set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties. For more information see: www.electoralcommission.org.uk

The
Electoral
Commission