

Northern Ireland elections website Queen's University Belfast

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 UK.

This evaluation report provides information about the New Initiatives Fund grant awarded to Queen's University Belfast to expand the Northern Ireland elections website at: www.ark.ac.uk/elections/

It highlights the aims and objectives of the grant, the achievements of the project and lessons learnt.

The grant

The existing Northern Ireland elections website was a comprehensive web-based information source hosted by ARK (itself a website used to archive social and political information on Northern Ireland). The information held on Northern Ireland elections included:

- summary statistical information for all levels of public election in Northern Ireland since 1973;
- full details about the most recent elections;
- information about constituencies and the importance of constituency boundaries;
- information on the political parties;
- information on the voting system used;
- links to a large number of relevant external web-based information sources.

There was a clear demand from the site's users for more information about the electoral system and past elections results. A New Initiatives Fund

grant of **£12,200** was awarded to implement enhancements to the existing website. These included:

- detailed data for local council elections 1973–1993. This mirrors the format already in place for local results 1993–2001. This was the biggest element of the project, consisting of tracking down, collating, and transcribing the data onto the website;
- data on spoilt votes – all Westminster elections (including by-elections) since 1970; the 1996 Forum and 1998 Assembly elections; and the 1993, 1997 and 2001 local government elections;
- the 1996 Forum elections – a full list of candidates cross-referenced with other elections.

The grant was awarded over a period of six months to facilitate the appointment of a Research Assistant, the sourcing of the information and the production of an evaluation report.

Aims and objectives

The main aim and objective of the grant was to ensure that the enhancements outlined above were up-loaded on to the website within the agreed timescales.

Target outcomes

The main target outcome was to provide a resource which would facilitate improved public and professional knowledge about elections in Northern Ireland. In order to evaluate the success of the updates the project team outlined five outputs against which the website updates could be measured:

- the number of hits on the new pages;
- feedback received through emails and an online feedback form;
- citations of the site in scholarly publications;
- citations of the site in the media;
- links requested from external sites.

Evaluation

Before the New Initiatives Fund grant was awarded, the Commission sought further clarification of the proposed evaluation criteria and the processes for measuring them. The project team provided the following assurances:

- a web statistics package would be used to identify hits from different users and multiple hits from a single user;
- it would be possible to track hits from those that are

using 'ac.uk', 'gov.uk' and '.edu' website links and therefore identify different profiles of website visitors;

- the online feedback tool would be a static page within the site – with links to it from each page;
- citations and links from other sites would be monitored through the use of standard search engines (Google for example), with monitoring being undertaken before, during and after the website updates were carried out;
- ARK would continue to maintain a publicity database which recorded all mentions of ARK and its constituent elements within the media.

Deliverables

The website

The temporary Research Assistant updated the website with the relevant information and, although a number of difficulties were faced in sourcing and ensuring rights to the information and unforeseen changes to election timetabling, the tasks were completed within the six month grant-term.

The website updates were publicised with an email announcement distributed to interested parties and the promotion of a 'Predictions Contest' for the 2003 election (attracting 187 entries).

Project and resource management

The resource allocation for the project included:

- three month salary for postgraduate to implement the project objectives, plus overheads: **£6,900**;
- consultancy payment (advice and supervision): **£3,000**;
- expenses: **£600**;
- equipment and stationery costs: **£1,700**.

The project was delivered within this financial scope and, based on the information available, the project was managed and resourced effectively. Despite facing challenges in the timing of the availability of information and barriers to accessing information, the project team identified problems and took action to address them promptly.

Furthermore, the project team was efficient in identifying a £1,500 underspend under the 'consultancy payment' budget head. The team suggested that these resources be utilised to fund the payment of a student to complete further work on the website. The Commission approved this expenditure.

How successful was the project?

Short-term evaluation

By reporting against the measurable targets it is possible to determine the success of the project in meeting its aims and objectives:

1. The number of hits on the new pages

The site as a whole had 22,247 visitors in November 2003, with

individual constituency pages, all of which had been upgraded using the New Initiatives Fund grant, getting 1,400 to 1,800 hits each across the month. This is approximately three times the level of activity in October 2003.

2. Feedback received through emails and an online feedback form

Emails: the feedback from the emails was very positive and included comments from politicians, journalists and academics. The following comments are indicative of the praise:

‘Your website has been incredibly useful’
(10 November, Journalist);

‘Can I just say that I think your website and information is a great resource for all’
(13 November, Academic);

‘Well done again on a brilliantly run site’
(18 November, Political Activist).

Feedback form: the results from the feedback form, designed in consultation with The Electoral Commission were generally positive. However, of the 23,000 visitors, only 40 replies were received. The results are outlined in the following tables:

How informative have you found this website?

Very informative	30
Informative	8
Not very informative	0
Not at all informative	0
Don’t know	1
Blank	1

How useful have you found this website?

Very useful	29
Useful	10
Not very useful	0
Not at all useful	0
Don’t know	1

The respondents were asked to provide information on what it was about the site they had found useful:

- 85% of respondents considered the website content had resulted in them being better informed about politics;
- it provided an in-depth knowledge of Northern Irish politics and its recent history;
- it provided access to objective statistics, rather than subjective opinions;
- it could be used as a benchmarking tool against which other political systems can be compared;
- it provided access to precise, detailed and accurate data.

The suggestions for improvements to the website, as identified by users, were addressed and implemented by the project team where appropriate. In addition, the project team challenged their

own ideas to find alternative solutions, including:

- the addition of charts to improve the aesthetic quality of the information presented and the ease with which can be accessed;
- changes to the signposting arrangements throughout the site to facilitate more streamlined user access;
- timely and proficient updating of the site as nomination and election results are announced.

The majority of those that responded were male, between the ages of 25–39 and residents of Northern Ireland. A notable number of respondents were residents of the Republic of Ireland and between the ages of 40–45. However, less than 13% of respondents were female, only 12% were under 24 and none were over 55.

3. Citations of the site in scholarly publications and media

Queen’s University Belfast published a media release advertising the site on 3 November 2003. There were explicit mentions by the *Irish News* on 10 November, the *Belfast Telegraph* on 11 November and *The Guardian* on 27 November.

Broadcast interviews by the BBC and RTE during the election campaigns also cited the website resources.

4. Links requested from external sites

The NIF-funded web-pages were linked to 220 external websites (mid-December 2003). This is actually fewer than the total number of links to the old site, which was 265 (January 2003). This is however an indicator of changes in website usage over recent years. Due to the number of people using search engines to navigate the internet the need to index resources has decreased.

Longer-term evaluation

The Commission is satisfied that project evaluation to date has been thorough. It was very important that a differentiation was made between ARK and NIF-funded web-page statistics and it is encouraging to note that the project team made significant attempts to do this – employing the use of specific technology and feedback methods to ensure that the information on which the evaluation was based was pertinent and relevant.

Although the feedback form generated some interesting comments, it appears to have been a rather under-utilised feature. The project team has since suggested that it would be better to construct a more

tailored survey to send to users and leading political party activists and commentators, preferably combined with face-to-face interviews. The team undertook such an evaluation in March 2004, which generated positive feedback from parties.

Conclusions

The Commission is satisfied that the project team successfully delivered its aim to update the website. Furthermore, the project team has undertaken a thorough analysis of the use of the website since the updates went live.

Although small in quantity, the quantitative and qualitative feedback information available would indicate that this project has been a success in the eyes of its users. Specifically, the number of site hits increased, with some of those that used the website (specifically the pages developed with the New Initiatives Fund grant) feeding back very positive views on its content. Although it would be imprudent to assume that these views are wholly representative of the 1,400–1,800 users of the web-pages in November 2003, they are perhaps indicative of public opinion.

Through the evaluation of this 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

- Specific and measurable outputs and outcomes;
- regular reporting against these outputs and outcomes to the Commission;
- effective use of resources and project management;
- the project team’s open attitude to suggestions for improvement and willingness to adapt, amend or add to the website’s provisions.

Lessons learnt

- Websites can be used to raise awareness of electoral issues across the UK. However, the websites must be sufficiently utilised to justify the expenditure and time taken.
- Timescales for delivery must be carefully forecast – with key risks being identified and mitigated at the earliest opportunity.
- Every effort should be made to ensure that methods of collating feedback are both accessible to the general public and easy to use.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please see: www.ark.ac.uk/elections/

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

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