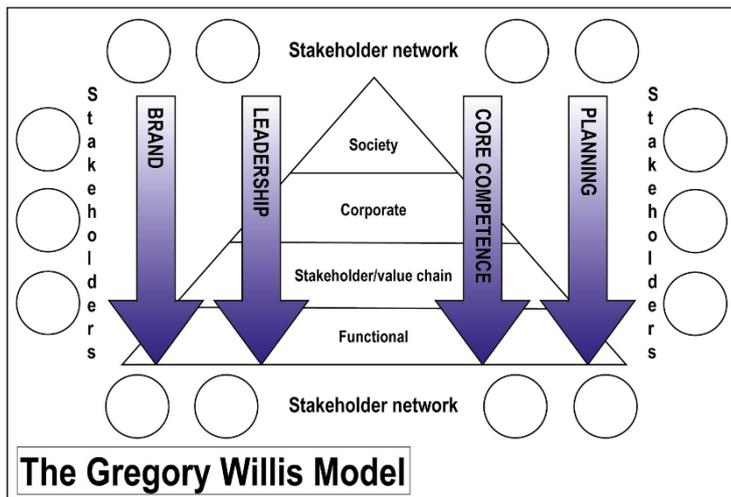


<b>Institution:</b> University of Huddersfield		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 17 – Business and Management Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Improving Leadership Learning, Practice and Diversity in the Government Communication Service		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Paul Willis	Professor of Corporate Communication	2017 - present
Anne Gregory	Professor of Corporate Communication	2014 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The communication profession neglects leadership learning for its staff members. Huddersfield Business School research sets out key priorities for communication leaders to enhance their behaviours and improve their practice. The work underpins a bespoke Masters programme delivered since 2014 to more than 200 leaders working in the Government Communication Service (GCS), the professional body run by the Cabinet Office representing 4,000 Civil Service communicators in central government departments, agencies and arms-length bodies. The research has improved the strategic influence and impact of those participating in the programme, enhanced how their organisations communicate, encouraged reflection and reflexivity in the work place, while also helping to increase gender diversity in senior roles. It is a significant contribution given GCS delivers communication which supports Ministers' priorities, enables the effective operation of the public service and ultimately improves people's lives.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The research was developed by Paul Willis and Anne Gregory, Professors of Corporate Communication at Huddersfield Business School. Anne joined the University in 2014 and Paul in 2017.</p> <p>The underpinning research has three aspects which inform the GCS Masters.</p> <p><b>The Gregory Willis model</b></p> <p>This model (3.1) clarifies the strategic contribution of professional communicators at four organisational levels: societal, corporate, value chain and functional. It proposes four attributes which characterise their work at these levels: brand understanding, leadership, communication as a core organisational competence and excellence in communication planning. The model then articulates four roles for the leader which frames the strategic importance of their role.</p> <p>The model's focus on stakeholders, accountability and governance acknowledges the complexity of the environment for senior communication practitioners. Its purpose is to help communication professionals articulate the contribution of their role to themselves, their</p>		



teams and to senior colleagues. It provides a 'mental map' to guide the practitioners' work, providing a diagnostic framework through which they can organise, analyse and audit their activities. This aspect of the research therefore impacts on how communication and leadership tasks are defined, while suggesting strategies for how communicators can improve their influence within organisations and be more effective in making change.

### Challenges facing GCS

The second aspect features Gregory's research on the purpose of government communication and the contemporary challenges facing GCS (3.2). This work incorporates background on the origins and philosophy of government communication in the UK, as well as changes to the Civil Service more broadly. The research provides the contextual lens through which the Gregory and Willis Model is framed for the communicators participating in the Masters programme. It allows them to consider their strategic contribution in the light of the multiple accountabilities associated with government communication, and to explore the implications of current GCS priorities such as behaviour change, digital communication and the emphasis on formalised planning to meet policy objectives.

### Principles and practice in leadership

The third aspect of the research highlights a different dimension. It features Willis' work on the disconnections communication leaders confront between principle and action (3.3). The research emphasises how this challenge requires communicators to develop contextual intelligence, through reflexivity and reflection, which heightens their awareness of the conditions needed for them to carry out leadership and/or strategic behaviours. This work offsets the normative aspects of the Gregory and Willis Model, showing that a focus on the personal can offer insights into wider social and political issues. This orientation is important given that much leadership development research in the communication field has ignored the existence and influence of power.

A further article by Willis (3.4) illustrates how a practical reflexivity is developed amongst participants on the GCS programme, designed to provide a bridge between learning and experience. The research highlights how a facilitation process allows Willis to explore with the communicators the conditions under which professional knowledge is enacted, or not, in specific contexts. This work highlights the symbiotic relationship between the research and the teaching (3.5).

### 3. References to the research

The research on strategic contribution, the context shaping government communication and the importance of reflexivity and reflection to leadership learning has been cited in international, peer reviewed journals. It is required reading for the Masters programme and is disseminated across GCS.

3.1. Gregory A. & Macnamara J. (2019). An evaluation U-turn: From narrow organisational objectives to broad accountability. *Public Relations Review*, 45(5).  
[doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.101838](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.101838)

3.2. Gregory, A. (2018). UK Government Communication: The Cameron years and their ongoing legacy. *Public Relations Review*, 45(2). [doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.08.0032](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.08.0032)

3.3. Willis, P. (2019). From knowing to doing: Reflexivity, leadership and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 45(3). [doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.05.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.05.001)

3.4. Willis, P. (2019). Retroduction, reflexivity and leadership learning: Insights from a critical realist study of empowerment. *Management Learning*, 50(4), pp. 449-464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507619856244>

3.5. Willis, P., & Gregory, A. (2016). Making the road while walking: Co-creation, teaching excellence and university leadership. *Stimulus Paper for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education*. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Available at: <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/29809>

#### 4. Details of the impact

The research underpins a Masters programme delivered to more than 200 professional communicators in the Government Communication Service (GCS). Alex Aiken, Head of GCS and the most senior communicator in the UK Government, promotes the work as “essential reading” for all government communicators and it is recognised for delivering a range of impacts, as outlined below. The research is referred to in the GCS Leadership Framework and forms part of the resources recommended to professionals to support their development (5.1).

##### **Improving strategic influence and personal impact**

The research (3.1) emphasises the importance of stakeholder insight and illustrates how this can influence communication strategy and policy. This learning is applied in the workplace by the communication leaders on the programme as illustrated in the following quote from a participant on the Masters course, “Gregory and Willis say that a good practitioner will need to be armed with new information and insight that can stimulate the discussion, as well as present new options... I was able to put this into practice during a meeting with the new Secretary of State... My recommendation was welcomed and quickly accepted, showing the value of undertaking insight work prior to key meetings” (5.2).

The research also highlights the type of insight which is strategically important in the context of government communication (3.1 & 3.2). Another participant notes how, “I hadn’t expected to discover in the model that communicators should bring the views of society into policy making and hold an organisation to account for its values. I’ve come to see this aspect of the theory as a useful framework when I need to highlight negative opinions that are challenging to policy makers, for example recently on (names high profile public policy issue)” (5.2). Another programme participant discusses how applying the Gregory Willis Model is “helping me realise where the strategy I am working on fits into their bigger work programme and to understand why they may be recommending a certain approach or way of working” (5.2).

##### **Informing how organisations should communicate**

The Gregory Willis Model (3.1) influences how the practitioners conceptualise their role which, in turn, generates communicative benefits for their organisation. One participant says “the principles which articulate the priorities of a communication leader have become part of my ‘muscle memory’...this way of thinking particularly helps in the discussions I have at board level about the strategic contribution of communication and the implications of different courses of action on the organisation’s reputation, relationships and wider strategic options” (5.5). Another notes how the model “is a powerful tool which is of most use when I’m having conversations with senior colleagues and articulating the communication priorities surrounding an issue and why the organisation needs to respond in a particular way” (5.3). The research also highlights the pervasive role of communication and how professional communicators need to work with others to address this challenge. One of the participants explains how they “used the academic research to refine my team’s role through creating a vision for stakeholder engagement in (name

of their organisation). Gregory and Willis state ‘it is neither desirable nor possible for the public relations function to be totally responsible for all the organisation’s relationship building and communications activity’. This helped me to convince my Communication Director that as our team got smaller in the restructure, we did not need to be responsible for all forms of communication and could push some into policy teams” (5.2).

### **Reflection and reflexivity**

The research (3.3, 3.4) underpins a key theme in the Masters which is the importance of being a reflective and reflexive practitioner. This is an important aspect of the programme as it helps to ensure the learning in the classroom is converted into action in the workplace. One of the leaders says, “although I was aware of the academic research in communication, the...course gave me the confidence and reflective periods to apply it in my work” (5.2). Others speak of how “building in opportunities for reflection during my working day is now a priority” and how it “helps me to prepare for important meetings, analyse the implications of strategic issues to our work, as well as thinking about my own personal effectiveness in different scenarios” (5.5). Another communicator notes the research’s focus on reflection was not only important during and in the aftermath of the course but “made even more sense as time has gone by and the scope of my leadership role has expanded” (5.3).

### **Improving gender diversity in GCS**

One of the female participants on the programme noted that “since the launch of the programme, we have also seen the emergence of more female directors of communication in GCS which isn’t a coincidence. I found being brought together in a group...and working with Paul (Willis) and Anne (Gregory) helped to provide a benchmark for what good looks like in terms of being a leader in our profession” (5.5). Another female participant, who is now a Director of Communication for a large government department said, “the programme was a game changer in terms of my Civil Service career. Before the course, I lacked the confidence to aim for the most senior roles... I was also surrounded by men in my leadership team reinforcing an impression that the upper echelons of the Civil Service were not for me” (5.4).

### **Summary**

All of the professional communicators reported that their leadership practice had improved, provided practical examples of the research’s impact, and highlighted its continuing relevance (5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5). The transformational character of the work was also underlined frequently with participants speaking of being empowered, stressing its “invaluable” impact (5.5) and explaining why the programme was an “important and symbolic development” in their careers (5.3). To summarise the impact in the words of one of the participants, the research helped her “to make the transition from skilled communication practitioner to senior leader” and “proved to be a pivotal moment” in her career (5.4).

## **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

5.1 Government Communications Service Leadership Framework.

5.2 Excerpts from reflective log assignments of Inspire Masters Programme participants. Detailing the impact the course had on their professional practice.

In addition to specific examples and illustrations from programme participants generated by the reflective journals, the case study also draws on a testimonials which highlight its impact:

5.3 Toby Nation, Director of Communication, Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs.

In addition to holding a senior position in Government Communication, Toby is an alumnus of the Masters programme and discusses how he has used the learning in his professional practice.

5.4 Rachel Carr, Director of Communication, Department of Health and Social Care.

**Impact case study (REF3)**

In addition to holding a senior position in Government Communication, Rachel is an alumnus of the Masters programme.

5.5 Poli Stuart-Lacey, Director of Communication, HMRC.

In addition to holding a senior position in Government Communication, Rachel is an alumnus of the Masters programme.