

# A critical re-think of public administration and management in continental Africa

**J O Kuye**

School of Public Management and Administration  
University of Pretoria  
South Africa

## **ABSTRACT**

*The essence of this article is to explore the importance and dominance of public administrations approaches in the innovation of strategic leadership styles in the teachings and in the viable re-think of the governance of the state. The discussion will further address the attributes, indicators and domains of what constitutes scholarship in the discipline of Public Administration. The article will also provide some overviews for future ramifications in the field of Public Administration in enhancing leadership skills in continental Africa. This article further suggests that a critical re-thinking of public administration as a discipline must take the form of a co-operative scheme of engagement.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Modern conceptualisations in the discipline of public administration dictate that it is the tool that guides the delivery process of public sector management. In presenting this theme, the article would first want to address some of the challenges in public administration. As a field of both academic and professional practice, public administration has always been light on theory as conceived of by social scientists. Social science theory consists of the development of concepts and ideas, the formulation of hypotheses, the collection of data to confirm or falsify hypotheses and the accumulation of knowledge by the exposure of findings to critical scrutiny and attempts at integration. In the currency of what governs the state, the thinking

around public administration dialogue discussions have changed into trans-disciplinary modes and approaches.

This article would like to propose that if the core business of public administration has to survive the intellectual fitness of time, then trans-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary research must play a vital role in the shaping of this new discourse. To this end, it can be argued that research in the field of Public Administration must adapt to the currency of events of society and should be prepared to engage in futures research that will shape the discipline and instil new dimensions to the debate of leadership, government and Governance. Research in Public Administration can play a strategic role in the reform of public organisations and agencies including programmatic issues and service delivery initiatives. Critical changes in the field of public administration and public policy have emerged over the last decade. Within the confines of the changes, are rapidly growing trends, which shape the discourse in the field. At the same time, several programs in both the undergraduate and graduate areas are shaping the course of new directions and the provision of new options in the discipline. However, the issues of boundaries and territoriality have plagued and continue to plague the synergy between the discipline and the professional sectors and between basic forms of research as against applied research.

Much could be said about the basis and justification for this criticism, but with the evolution of new demands on the discipline, it is incumbent on academics, researchers and practitioners in this field to re-tool the varied approaches to solving public sector problems and governmental issues without altering the theories and practices which governs the equation of balance in the doctrinaire of public administration.

## DEFINITIONS

These definitions have been configured to suit the framework of the discussions in this article:

- *Scholarship* – The collective quest for knowledge supported by a diverse inquiry of domains and delivered in a logical sequence as may be exhibited in teaching, research and practice.
- *Criterion* – Is an area, content, a level of activity and a set of agreed domains.
- *Indicator* – Is an observable, a measure, and an operational definition of criterion.
- *Meritocratic View* – Is the way institutions conform to professional and scholarly norms as defined by institutional strategic plans.
- *Socio-political view* – Is the degree to which the institution satisfies the needs of important collective constituents or stakeholders.
- *Individualistic View* – Is the degree to which the institution and school or department contributes to the personal growth of students.
- *Renaissance* – The challenges facing the rebirth and renewal of a nation or concept.
- *Challenges* – Within the concept of the African Renaissance, challenges would mean the revival or revitalisation of any impediments, which could constitute an obstacle towards development and innovation.
- *Leadership* – Is the ability to inspire and create confidence and support among the people who are needed to achieve organisational goals.
- *Public administration* – Is the management of individual and group efforts for the sustenance of the activities of the state.



- *Strategy* – Is a set pattern or plans carefully integrated to achieve organisational goals and objectives.

It should be noted that the availability of criteria and indicators as focal points in the assessment of scholarship in public administration and management programs must be by consensus from institutions and other stakeholders. If this is attained, then “quality” and “excellence” can be better viewed from a “criterion referenced” framework rather than a “norm-referenced” approach.

This article would like the readership to consider the issues of administrative reform and current changes that plague the global arena about public service motivation (PSM) of public servants. Too many a time we over concentrate on the innovative dimensions of the public service or sector without giving viable credence to the postulations of motivation. Public administration must not be dogged with the stringent regulatory ordinances alone but one that could adapt to the demands of society. The discipline on the other hand, must not abrogate its responsibilities in the enforcements of rules and regulatory frameworks.

Is it justifiable to state that while some social science disciplines, like economics and sociology, have paid significant attention to theory development and testing, they have fallen far short of the pure model of social science research? Is it also right to assume that a positivist approach to the conduct of research is the appropriate standard for comparison? Perhaps a better point of comparison for public administration is with other practice-oriented disciplines like architecture, education, engineering, law and planning.

Bell and Ongaro (2014:383) argues that “there should be an attempt to build a bridge between two areas of research that seem so far to have developed in parallel in the field of public management, without any real dialogue between the streams of research...” Robert Behn (1996) argues that the study of public management and administration ought not to imitate the research paradigm of the natural sciences. On a more serious note, the discipline of public administration cannot be dismissed as merely unscientific art. Rather, public administration and management is, in many ways, a combination of science and art similar to engineering. Behn went on to create a platform by suggesting that “Good public managers – like good engineers – have to be both scientists and artists. Effective public managers are both creative and analytical. They can be serious and methodical – but also inventive and spontaneous. In our haste to make public management more scientific, we ought not to get rid of the art. To ensure the proper balance – to get the right blend of science and art – we need a research agenda and a pedagogical strategy that can produce both (Behn 1996:121).”

Core research and a re-think in the theories and practice of public administration are pragmatic and relevant to decision-makers. This further drives the issue that there must be a balance between theory and practice. Practitioners, field researchers and a growing number of scholars in public administration, approach theory in a different way. They are interested in how the performance of public agencies can be improved and how they can gain relevant knowledge to promote such improvements. These types of research methodology consist of “inquiry” as the term is used by Lindale (1990). It consists of a varied, diffuse and interactive process of probing and the resolution of conflicting perspectives.

Academic specialists in public administration should be as attentive as possible to the needs of practitioners. They should not, however let practitioners’ concerns completely dominate the research agenda. Some academics constantly complain that the practitioner

community ignores their best scholarly efforts. I would contend that part of the problem lies with academic. Academic research can at times be too theoretical and abstract. In the case of public administration, it sometimes may not capture reality (especially in all of its complexity). Public administration research should lead to prescriptions, and it must not be morbidly pessimistic about what is possible. Also, its findings must not be communicated in indecipherable jargon and tonal nuances. This quagmire poses a challenge to the discipline of Public Administration.

## **IN DEFENCE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT**

Mosher (1978) portrays public administration as a term used to mean the study of selective practice of the tasks associated with the behaviour, conduct and protocol of the affairs of the administrative state. In other dimensions, it could mean the organisation and management of individuals and other stakeholders to achieve the overall agenda of government. While some may believe that it is a matter of contention or semantics, it could be classified as the art and science of the management of the affairs of government as applied within the confines of the bureaucracy. It is therefore plausible to contend that public administration is the co-ordination of group strategies to carry out the affairs of government through the application of organisational decision-making, and the consolidation of procedures and protocols to attain the objectives of government? All of these postulations indicate that the scope and purpose of public administration leave the reader with a curious intellectual appetite. In the same vein, we must also address the issues and tasks associated with the administrative state, the relationships between the bureaucracy and such institutions as legislatures, the executives, parliaments and judiciaries. A critical re-think about public administration is infused at this point with the burning question as to whether public administration is strictly confined to the carrying out of public policy?

Abbott (1988) suggests that public administration has gained a recognisable and identifiable acceptance in professional practice and the public sector. Abbott further suggests that leaders of the profession and academics also must recognise the need for independence and a base for training and certification. He further argued that because the universities are well placed to achieve that, it must echo “the values of the new professions” through the exposition of knowledge, dispensation of the principles of meritocracy and the provision of adequate utility. This independence of the universities in administering professional schools must have significant consequences for the profession. Assessing scholarship from within this framework must not only be within the purview of the liberal arts but should involve a greater concentration from the social sciences and humanities. The profession and the environment in which graduates from these schools will have to practice must influence the issue of autonomy of professional schools and the way in which teaching and research are conducted. In the case of public administration and management, the main attraction has always been the public sector. The interests of non-related stakeholders must not override assessing scholarship in the domains.

Friedson (1994:200) contends that “the relatively close intellectual relationship between professional schools of public administration and management and public policy and



the other disciplines has made it difficult for these professional schools to sustain their autonomy". Furthermore, Friedson (1994:200) notes that autonomy is necessarily based on a unique body of "theoretical knowledge, skill and judgement that ordinary people do not possess, may not wholly comprehend, and cannot readily evaluate". Frederick Mosher (1978) argues that public administration, as well as being a profession must be seen as a distinct field of study which will see considerable increase in research and in the education and training of public administrators and managers. Mosher (1978:8) suggests that a "theme of public administration has been its emphasis on the structure of formal organisations, and that "most efforts at administrative reform have included as their central element the modification of organisational structures". However, in today's complex bureaucratic structures, political power often takes precedence over logical and comprehensively thought-out agendas. Since the interpretation of public policy is rooted in the old formalisation as to what government chooses to do or not to do.

## **PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT IN "DEVELOPING NATIONS"**

As "developing" nations and new democracies question the efficacy of public administration and management practices, the onus is on centres of excellence, schools of public administration and management and public policy to provide meaningful and practical programs to address this challenge. Across the continent of Africa, several schools of Public Administration and Management including policy centres are being established. The intensity is great and the potential for producing graduates with the vital tools and expertise is increasing. The issues are different, the situations are complex and the players are also different.

Therefore, one cannot question the universality of the consistency in which these programs should be taught, but such programs must be contextually driven. Scholarship in public administration is therefore not about copying existing foreign programs, but the ability to draw from the strengths of these programs in addressing local needs. Public administration research must be driven by immediate issues and must be balanced by the ability to apply them to specific concerns and needs. Foreign solutions to local problems in the administration of the affairs of the state may not always yield the types of outcomes as expected. The curriculum dealing with theory and practice could have similar flavours and elements, but the way in which these programs are delivered must show sensitivity to local needs and adaptations.

Doerr (1984) in producing arguments for and against public administration, believes that much of the intellectual concerns have been focused on general but vital issues. Some of which are political accountability, the extensive and complex power and structures of the bureaucracies, administrative law and discretion, and the normative responsibility of public officials. In examining these issues, a comparative dimension of programs within North America and in some cases, developing nations were included. Intellectually, where managerial issues were examined, they tend to focus on a more general level dealing with meritocracy, personnel issues and legislative reforms and control spending (Lungu 1980; Mutahaba 1989). The era of the 1970s saw a grouping together of public administration and public policy.

Should schools of public administration, governance and leadership be encouraged to address the rapid need of society in order to become competitive and marketable in order to provide quality education and policy thinkers? In continental Africa it was incumbent upon schools of public administration and management to introduce into existing curricula the basic element of public choice theory in the application of economic styles of thinking to the analysis of political behaviour (Balogun and Mutahaba 1989). Most schools in the discipline have now begun intensively to teach and research the issues surrounding the building block of political action and self-interest. From an inter-disciplinary perspective, the aim of the public choice model is to explain collective decisions about what are often thought to be political matters in terms of the self-seeking behaviour of rational individuals. All of these inter-disciplinary approaches have led to a substantial increase in the quality of teaching and research, and in the nature of analytical content in public administration and management and public policy studies.

## Continental institutional setting

Current debates on public administration and management in Africa and especially in Nigeria and South Africa indicate that there is need to re-tool the discipline. Schools of “excellence” and “critical thought” must identify collaborative schemes to be in an adequate position for analysis and training. The mere exposition of theoretical concepts alone without a clear understanding of their applications creates *half-baked* graduates who are mere repeaters of theories to which no conceptual and practical understanding is grounded. This is the tendency with most of the emerging schools today. At the same time, it is suggested that selected schools of public administration and management should be encouraged at attempting to provide the linkage between well-orchestrated programming at the undergraduate levels to prepare a core for graduate schooling. It is only when these efforts are co-ordinated properly, can we be in a logical position to access true scholarship in the discipline.

In revisiting the whole debate on a re-think between public administration and management, Kettle (1992) and supported by Elmwood (1996:52) argues that “traditionally, public administration, like its private sector equivalent, was devoted to the organisation as the unit of analysis, how it was structured, what process and problems administrators had to solve; and how the entire process could work more efficiently”. However while both public and private administration has a lot in common, they differ sharply in terms of political authority and the delegation of functions.

In the era of reform, more especially, the challenges facing continental African renaissance as they may appear in South Africa and Nigeria, academia must not fail in its attempt to transform the way we define research and scholarship. In public administration and management, the emphasis is about the collective synergy between academic institutions, government and the public in general. These types of research must be driven by the issues, which impact, on the role of government in carrying out its mandate to the people. Assessing scholarship requires institutions to be able to determine what they expect of students and consequences of the general programme. In the case of Public Administration and Management, the indicators of this type of evaluation must indicate how well such institutions have fostered the success of students who are at the risk of failure.



Public Administration programming in Africa and South Africa should be non-anecdotal, be conducted systematically and periodically, and must include all students and stakeholders, and should be representative. Any criteria short of this are unacceptable. Therefore, a good assessment must be multi-dimensional in scope and should encompass an effective programmatic approach to disciplinary content (Fountain 1994). Critical re-thinking of public administration as a discipline must take the form of a co-operative scheme of engagement. Mhone (2003:1) forcefully argues that “Africa continues to be in the need to reorganise its inter-disciplinarity and hence the need to be more creative about how it is studied and executed. Presumably in Africa, we all want a ‘good public administration’”. He further noted that “Giving the current nature of debates pertaining to the role and status of government in Africa it is necessary to begin by defining the major concepts at stake”. Kuye (2009), in a similar vein, advocates that public policy targeting should also embrace the needs and administrative machinery of the state.

## **CONCLUSION**

One arena, which is always identified as a potential source of innovation, is the field of Public Administration and Management. In the face of apparently intractable social, political and economic problems, there have been repeated calls for academics and practitioners in the discipline to become more relevant, to step down from “ivory towering” and address the immediate issues of public concern and interest. Milward (1996) suggests that the discipline of public administration and management in promoting good governance should not ignore the fiscal structure within which public services are delivered. The discipline in its search for excellence must address the issues of performance and delivery in the era of the renaissance. In the quest to redefine public management theory, we must move from a generalised study approach of the norms and values in public sector organisations to one, which addresses the issues of the delivery of public goods and services.

In summation, all academic offerings that include teaching, learning, service and research, no matter what, the mode of delivery must be of high quality and scope that is comparable to the functions within each sector. To achieve excellence in scholarship, there must be a relationship between programs and institutions, and the methods of teaching, learning, service and research. Institutions must publicly articulate their definitions of excellence in their mission statements. At the instructional-delivery level, institutions must plan, prepare and deliver the curriculum in a way that fosters and supports student learning. With the issues of institutional quality management, institutions must continuously monitor their outputs and take action to improve or discontinue programs and activities that are considered substandard.

From a technological point of view, institutions should attempt to promote innovation in curriculum design both in teaching and learning strategies that exploit the creative and educational powers of technology to advance learning and knowledge creation and dissemination of prior agreed upon objectives. At the generic skill level, graduates of public administration and management must be fully equipped to demonstrate the relevant skills needed to promote viable understanding of the discipline.

Finally, in the quest for a definitive role of public administration in continental Africa, attention should be paid to comparative and historical analyses and dialogues, the



re-enactment of a new paradigm shift in African thinking, effective distribution of knowledge through sharing of information and best practices, the governance and under-development issues, the re-building of failed states and capacity building.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- Adamolekun, L. 1999. *Public Administration in Africa: Main Issues and Selected Country Studies*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- Abbott, Andrew. 1988. *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Divisions of Expert Labour*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Allison, Graham T. 1971. *The Essence of Decision*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Astin, A. 1991. *Assessment for Excellence*. Toronto: ACE/MacMillan.
- Aucoin, Peter. *The New Public Management: Canada in a Comparative Perspective*. Montreal: IRPP, 1996.
- Balogun, M.J. and Mutahaba, G. (eds.) 1989. *Economic Restructuring and African Public Administration: Issues, Actions, and Future Choices*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press.
- Barak, R.J. 1986. "The Role of Program Review in Strategic Planning". AIR Professional File, Association for Institutional Research, No. 26, spring, p. 8.
- Barzelay, M. 1999. How to argue about the new public management. *International Public Management Journal*. 2(2).
- Behn, Robert. 1996. Public Management: Should It Strive to be Art, Science or Engineering. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. 6(1):91–125 (January).
- Belle, N. and Ongaro, E. 2014. NPM, administrative reforms and public service motivation: improving the dialogue between research agendas. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. 80(2):382–400, June.
- Doern, Bruce G. 1986. Doctoral Education for Public Policy and Public Administration: The Carleton Integrated Stream. *Canadian Public Administration*. 29(3):474–483 (Fall/Autumn).
- Doerr, Audrey. 1984. Research Workshop in Canadian Public Administration. *Canadian Public Administration*. 27(4):642–59 (winter).
- Fountain, Jane E. 1994. Comment: Disciplining Public Management Research. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 13(2):269–277.
- Friedson, Eliot. 1994. *Professionalism Reborn: Theory, Prophecy, and Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harmon, M.M. and Mayer, Richard, T. *Organizational Theory for Public Administration*. (Boston: Little Brown & Co), p 19.
- Houston, D.J. and Develan, S.M. 1990. Public administration research: An assessment of journal publications. *Public Administration Review*. 50:674–81.
- Kettle, Donald F. 1988. *Government by Proxy: Managing Federal Programs*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1993. Public Administration: The State of the Field. In Finifer, Ada W. (ed.) *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*. Washington, D.C: American Political Science Association.
- Kettle, Donald F. and Milward, Brinton H. 1996. *The State of Public Management*. Baltimore. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kuye, J.O. 1992. *Issues, Trends and Options: Mechanisms for the Accreditation of Foreign Credentials in Manitoba*. Manitoba, Canada: Government Printer, Winnipeg.





- Kuye, J.O. 2004. Continental policy targeting and the Nepadization process: Issues, Trends and Options. *JOPA*. 39(4.1), November .
- Kuye, J.O. 2007. The role of public administration in leadership and governance: A review of civics, citizenship and political education. *JOPA*. 42(7), November.
- Kuye, J.O. 2008. Development Initiatives and global governance: A continental perspective. *JOPA*. 43(4.1).
- Kuye, J.O. 2009. Public Policy Targeting and educational reforms: issues, trends and options for a developmental state. *JOPA*. 44(3.1), October.
- Kuye, J.O. 2010. Unplugging the leadership quagmire: The case for developing nations. *JOPA*. 45(1.1), June.
- Lane, Frederick S. 1978. *Current Issues in Public Administration*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Lindblom, Charles E. 1990. *Inquiry and Change*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Lungu, G.F. 1980. Africanization and the Merit Principle in the Zambian Public Service. *Journal of Administration Overseas*. XIX(2):88–99.
- Lynn, Laurence E., Jr. 1994. Public Management Research: The Triumph of Art over Science. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 13(2):231–259.
- Mamdani, M. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Cape Town: David Phillip.
- Mayhew, L.B., Ford, P.J. and Hubbard, D.L. 1990. *The Quest for Quality*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mhone, G. 2003. The Challenges of Governance, Public Sector Reform and Public Administration in Africa: Some Research Issues. *DPMN Bulletin*. X(3), May.
- Mosher, Frederick C. 1980. The Challenging Responsibilities and Tactics of the Federal Government. *Public Administration Review*. 40:541–548.
- Mukandala, R. (ed.) 2000. *African Public Administration: A Reader*. Harare: AAPS Books,
- Nzewi, O. and Kuye, J.O. 2007. The developmental state and conceptual interpolations: A comparative policy-targeting for South Africa within a global context. *JOPA*. 42(3), August.
- Overman, E. Sam and Boyd, Kathy J. 1994. Best Practice Research and Post bureaucratic Reform. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. 4(1):67–84, (January).
- Peters, B.G. 1992. Public Policy and Public Bureaucracy. In Ashford, D. (ed.) *History and Context in Comparative Public Policy*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Tan, D.L. 1986. The Assessment of Quality in Higher Education: A Critical Review of the Literature and Research. *Research in Higher Education*. 24(3):223–265.
- Villella, G. 2001. Towards a theoretical coming together of the administrative sciences. *International Review of the Administrative Sciences*. 67(1), March.
- Yorke, D.M. 1986. Indicators of Institutional Achievement: Some Theoretical and Empirical Considerations. *Higher Education*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Young, K.E., Chambers, C.M., Kells, H.R. and Associates. 1983. *Understanding Accreditation: Contemporary Perspectives on Issues and Practices in Evaluating Educational Quality*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weiss, Janet. 1994. Public Management Research: The interdependence of Problems and Theory. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 13(2):278–285.
- White, Jay D. and Adams, Guy B. 1994. *Research in Public Administration: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, Thousand Hills: Sage.
- Wilson, James Q. 1989. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies do and the Way They do it*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wilson, James Q. 1994. Reinventing Public Administration. *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 27(4):667–673.