

THE STATE OF RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Schools of Public Management and Administration must re-align curricula content to meet the test of academic and professional innovation. Academic innovations must re-live the currency of practice and academic decorum. This paper argues that the re-alignment of curricula details is the best recipe to test the efficacy of programme development and discipline stability.

INTRODUCTION

Modern concepts of Public Administration have synergy with interdisciplinary paradigms. As learning strategies are diversified, there must be a move away from mechanistic paradigms in Public Administration into those of elaboration and collaborations in the discipline. In presenting this theme, the issues and challenges facing research in Public Administration must be understood. As a field of both academic and professional practice, Public Administration has always integrated theory and practice in the quest for new discovery and the acquisition of new knowledge. This approach, in some instances, differs from conventional social research paradigms.

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. Most Public Administration writing does not generally conform to the positivist model of social sciences. Public Administration as a discipline has moved in the direction of collaborative ventures and trans-disciplinary approaches. What are the issues facing basic versus applied research in public administration?

TRANS-DISCIPLINARY AND INTER-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

With the expansion of the interdisciplinary approach towards research, territories and boundaries are broken down and unnecessary borders are removed. Some of the key factors shaping research in Public Administration include an elaboration of concepts and the utilization and adoption of findings from other disciplines. Thus, trans-disciplinary research utilizes the expansion of the interdisciplinary approach towards participation as a research team thereby enhancing collaboration across disciplines.

Research in the field of Public Administration must adapt to the currency of events of society. At the same time, it should be prepared to engage in futures research that will also shape the discipline and instil new dimensions to the debate of leadership 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, trends are growing, 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 disciplines. However, the issues of boundaries and territories 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 written about the basis and justification for this criticism. However, the article contends that the following two points of departure for intellectual scrutiny are important. Firstly, 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. Secondly, the assumption that the positivist approach to the conduct of research is the appropriate standard for comparison is at least debatable, it may be inaccurate. Perhaps a better point of comparison for Public Administration is with other practice-oriented disciplines like Architecture, Education, Engineering, Law and Planning. Robert Behn (1996) argues that the study of Public Management ought not to imitate the research paradigm of the natural sciences. But neither should Public Management be dismissed as merely unscientific art. Rather, Public Management is, in many ways, a combination of science and art similar to engineering. Behn (1996:121) writes:

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 the haste to make Public Management more scientific, the art should not be omitted. To ensure the proper balance – to get the right blend of science and art – a research agenda and a pedagogical strategy one needed that can produce both.

There has been an enormous cultural spill over from developing and developed societies and specialists in Public Administration. Some of these embrace contextual behav-

journalism, while others attempt to pursue research, which is pragmatic and relevant to decision-makers. Since various governments and crown corporations commission Public Administration research, it raises the question as to what would academics do without these commissioned studies and reports? It is within this confine that the question as to whether there is a balance between basic and applied research in the discipline should be addressed. Critical to this position, is imperative to examine the importance of both.

BASIC AND APPLIED RESEARCH

Basic research involves the conceptual construction of a research problem through the use of theoretical models. The application of the results or findings from basic research is what could be denoted as applied. Conventional wisdom suggests that there is a need in Public Administration for both basic and applied research, while at the same time recognizing that this distinction should not be over-simplified. The difference between the two activities comes down to asking some important questions. Political scientists and other social scientists that study bureaucracies seek to explain the underlying dynamics and interrelationships among various factors, such as theory and practice. Practitioners, 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. Their research methodology consists 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. What then is the efficacy of both types of research?

Neither applied nor basic research should be assigned a higher status. 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. Academics constantly complain that the practitioner community ignores their best scholarly efforts. Part of the problem lies with the individual. Some critics have argued that Public Administration research is, at times, too theoretical and abstract. They suggest that it does not capture reality (especially in all of its complexity); and that it does not lead to prescriptions. They further contend that it tends to be morbidly pessimistic about what is possible. Also, too often, it is communicated in complex and indecipherable disciplinary jargon. This quagmire poses a challenge to the discipline of Public Administration. To this end, it must be attempted to ascertain the significance of disciplinary scholarship and practice.

In examining the challenges facing the discipline in the 21st century, and the need to evaluate and quantify what type of "scholarship" is needed to address the issues of the modern bureaucracy, one is faced with addressing the balance between good governance and an adequate disciplinary programming. Some fundamental questions are being asked about how governments are organised, the interplay between government and the public service and the roles of public servants in the development and management of their various ministries to achieve excellence.

It is important to examine what constitutes scholarship and the indicators of the quality of the research conducted in the field of Public Administration. Greater collaboration between the public and private sectors, are considered to achieve quality of disciplinary programming in the academic community. Several debates have been waged on the role of Public Administration and Management in shaping the performance and delivery of public programs and services. One might surmise that in order to understand the craft of the disciplinary programs needed into the next century – approaches to Public Administration and Management, turf or territorial barriers, implications of theory and practice and the interdisciplinary dimension of Public Administration and Management have to be addressed.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT – A DIALOGUE

Public Administration is a term used to mean the study of selective issues 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 (Mosher, 1978). While 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 public institutions.

Is it incorrect, therefore, to contend that Public Administration and Management 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 and Management leave the reader with a curious appetite. In the same vein, the following issues must also be addressed:

- what are the tasks associated with the conduct of the administrative state?
- what are the relationships between the bureaucracy and such institutions as legislatures, executives, parliaments and judiciaries?
- is public administration strictly confined to the carrying out of public policy?

Institutions of higher learning do not have the sole purview to intellectual discourse but are only one of the channels of communication in the broad spectrum of choices. Therefore, when questions of the impact of theory and practice are discussed, one must not shy away from the critical premise which questions how do public officials know what governments want of them? Public administration and management, over the years, has gained a broader acceptance in different stake-holdings in developed and developing nations. (Abbott 1988:207).

Public administration has gained a recognisable and identifiable acceptance in professional practice in the public sector. Public Administration and Management has also shaped teaching and research in university programs and studies. Abbott (1988:207) suggests that leaders of the profession and academics must recognise the need for independence and a base for training and certification. He further argues that because 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 has 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 and that the 20th century running its course into the 21st century will see considerable increase in research and in the education and training of public administrators and managers.

Schools of Public Administration and Management must emphasise pragmatic reforms in the way theory and practice must be crafted in their educational programming. 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.

As we 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 skills 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 therefore is not about copying existing foreign programs, but the ability to draw from the strengths of these programs in addressing local needs. It is argued in this paper that from a tangential point of view, research must be driven by immediate issues and should be balanced by the ability to apply them to specific concerns and needs. The curriculum could have similar flavours

and elements, but the way in which these programs are delivered must show sensitivity to local needs.

Programmatic Approaches

Doerr (1984) argues that intellectual concerns should be focused on both general and other vital issues. He further contends that some are political accountability; the extensive and complex power and structures of the bureaucracies; administrative law and discretion; and the normative responsibility of public officials (Doerr, 1984). 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. At the graduate level, there was an emphasis placed on the intellectual issues dealing with research and teaching. These influences and new directions in the way in the discipline is taught did not emerge entirely from intellectual engagement, but from changes reflected in societal demands and the growth and development of the size of government and the state.

Balogun and Mutahaba (1989) argues that it is interesting to note that schools of Public Administration and Management were forced by societal needs to address the rapid need of society in order to become competitive and marketable in order to provide quality education. At one point, the emphasis was on managerial skills with the ability to understand the interplay among accounting, financial management and organisational behaviour. But in doing that, there was a real need to embrace such important issues as collective bargaining and public-private sector interface. In the area of Economics, public choice becomes one of the newest models of public policy-making. 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 & 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 interdisciplinary 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 interdisciplinary approaches have led to a substantial increase in the quality of teaching and research, and in the nature of analytical content in the Public Administration and Management Discipline and policy studies.

At this junction, it is important to examine other schools of thought. Ellwood (1996:51) examines the controversial position "that the output of the great gelatinous field that calls itself Political Science has at the same time everything and little to offer public management scholars." He further explores other viewpoints which suggest that Political Science has everything to offer "because politics is at the heart of public management and because political science more than any other academic field is centred on the study of political behaviour, processes, and institutions". Still on this debate, Ellwood (1996) ponders the

views of others who believe that Political Science has little to offer public management “because the field is much better at setting out the constraints faced by those seeking to analyse and improve public management than it is at helping those who would improve management practice”. In viewing the critical issues here, one is forced to accept that within Political Science, there is the rebirth of political economy, with the broader interpretation and analysis of the role of the state in relation to the complex structure of the modern state. All of these soon came into contact with the broadening work being done on bureaucracy in Public Administration and Management with sectoral emphasis on public policy. Doerr (1984) suggests that some observers have argued that Public Administration, despite its curriculum changes, has paid too little attention to management. What then are the issues that must drive scholarship in the Discipline internationally and nationally? To this end, it is imperative to examine the issues confronting the debate on Public Administrative and Public Management.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION OR PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

If the prior assertion that Public Administration, despite its curriculum changes, paid little attention to management issues, then one must be forced to distinguish the issues, which drive change and reforms in the two sectors – teaching and research. In examining the situation in Africa in general, Adamolekun (2004) in a World Bank Report argues that some schools of Public Administration and Management still lack the rigour to offer the types of managerial courses needed to prepare the continent for the new millennium and at the same time be prepared to address the challenges facing the discipline of Public Administration.

However, some institutions have continuously revitalised their curricula to accommodate this concern. Despite attempts to consolidate expertise and scholarship in the discipline, there still exists a world of difference of opinion over issues such as: what constitutes analytic rigour in Public Administration and Management? How should the turf or interdisciplinary boundaries between public policy and management and politics and Public Administration be addressed? Should scholarship in the discipline be defined by pedagogical balance? All of these issues need to be addressed if the challenges of intellectual rigour are to be addressed and be prepared to become competitive into the next decade.

With respect to research, there are still mixed signals. If one examines the study of choice of policy instruments – exhortation, taxation, regulation, spending and public enterprise, one is then faced with dealing with the critical issue of what types of features that are required for in the management of policy decisions. All of this raises the question as to what is needed in the teaching and research of the new schools of Public Administration and Management in the 21st century. In developing nations, the emphasis should be on the formal acquisition of skills in policy analysis and the evaluation of existing methodologies in order to understand their efficacies and expediences. Creating programs in Public Administration and Management without understanding these are bound to fail or at the very least, produce second-rate programs with poorly trained graduates. Schools of Public Administration and

Management must be autonomous and free standing to make those vital decisions needed to explore the interdisciplinary dimensions of quality delivery of subject materials.

Schools dedicated to the study of Masters of Public Administration; Masters of Public Policy and masters degrees in leadership must continuously validate their curriculum. The pedagogical approaches must change to be able to address the needs of the challenges facing the 21st century and beyond. Schools of Public Administration and Management must address the issues of action or applied research as against the conventional or traditional approaches to academic research. Practitioners must be involved irrespective of their locations. Academia alone does not have all the answers. There is a special and peculiar dimension to the teaching, research and the co-ordination of these types of programs. The time has arrived when collaborative research initiatives should be ventured into in order to add both basic and applied flavour to the debate.

The Institutional Setting

In revisiting the whole debate between Public Administration and Management, Kettle (1992) and supported by Elmwood (1996:52) argue 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 have much in common, they differ sharply in terms of political authority and the delegation of functions.

The critical issue at stake is the *how* and *know-how* of preparing students for viable and competitive career positions after the completion of their studies. Some students may view the undergraduate degree as a terminal point in their studies. Others may choose to pursue postgraduate degrees in specialised fields of study. Whatever the course of action taken by these students, the onus is on institutions to capture a viable market chunk in the placement of their graduates from the discipline. What then are the skills needed to have a cutting-edge in the market place?

In the era of reform, more especially, the challenges facing the renaissance in South Africa, academia must not fail in its attempt to transform the way research and scholarship are defined. In Public Administration and Management, the emphasis is on the collective synergy between academic institutions, government and the public in general. 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 the 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; 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). Scholarly research has as much to do with what is wrong with practitioners, as it does with what is wrong with scholars. Some practitioners have a low tolerance for careful analysis of problems and with ambiguous findings.

Whereas social scientists want to take organizational reality apart for analytical purposes, public managers need to synthesize their data and impressions in order to reach broad, balanced and often intuitive judgments about what will work in a particular context. More and better ways to capture, classify and disseminate the ideas and activities of experienced public managers are required.

Through programme and disciplinary reviews, universities and institutions of higher learning determine which academic programs or clusters of subject material are effective. It is also important to gauge whether the *student* population is learning, grasping or benefiting from the programme. These could be achieved by assessing the degree or diploma using the following questions as sets of criteria:

- are the students learning the vital and critical body of knowledge and skills needed to achieve the program objectives and goals?
- what really are the program and discipline goals?
- is the curriculum coherent, current and consistent?
- how effective is the level of instruction in enabling student-learning abilities?
- are the resources adequate to support the production of student learning?
- what constitutes quality and effectiveness in the delivery of Public Administration specific programming in South Africa today?

The concepts of *quality* and *excellence* as observed within the parameters of Public Administration and Management should be synonymous with the conceptual usage of the terms *quality* and *scholarship* interchangeably. Using the theoretical framework and typologies created by Yorke (1987) and Tan (1986), the assessment of scholarship of Public Administration programming will be centred on the six questions generated earlier as yardstick for the measurement of scholarship. Important features that are observable in South Africa and in Africa with respect to Public Administration programs, are the processes of goal expansion.

From single purpose institutions or programs, the expanded proliferation of multi-site and multi-disciplinary programming in the discipline are experienced. However, it should be noted that for any institutional programme to survive in the era of the renaissance, clear-cut objectives must be well elucidated. What really should be the focal objectives of Public Administration in South Africa and on the continent?

OBJECTIVES OF AN ASSESSMENT OF RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

In gauging the quality of scholarship in the Public Administration discipline, the following position statements are important. The ability to:

- Identify and define criteria and indicators of quality, excellence and scholarship for target student populations in the program and also for the larger community.

- Identify and define criteria and indicators and domains for academic staff and directors of schools of public administration and management.
- Identify, quantify and define specific criteria and targeted indicators for discipline-specific content.
- Define the roles and indicators of quality and excellence for institutional delivery of programs in public administration and management disciplines within the era of change and transformation.
- Describe *exemplars* of quality and excellence in departments and schools of Public Administration and Management within specific geographical clusterings.
- Contribute to the development and refinement of the concepts of *quality* and *excellence* in disciplinary contexts.

These programme configurations should be formulated to equip the student with specialised skills in their areas of concentration. The programme should offer a wide range of interdisciplinary combinations and education, which are supported by a skills-based internship and research. This could be a one-year intensive degree programme. The intent is to attract and meet the needs of graduate students with high standings. These are by no means exhaustive of the array of options but are only selected permutations and combinations utilised as examples.

THE FUTURE OPTIONS

Having various interpretations of the research challenge in Public Administration, it is important to examine the issue of what should be on the research agenda in Public Administration. Even as more is being written and read, less is known of what is needed to know to be able to guide and to evaluate the widespread and fundamental changes taking place in the public sector. The point can be illustrated by reference to the post-bureaucratic reform thesis by Barzelay (1992).

In Public Administration, it could be noted that the post-bureaucratic paradigm suggests that public organizations dedicated to clear missions imbued with the entrepreneurial spirit, will be more effective, but the critics insist that adherence to law and compliance with internal rules necessary to ensure integrity, fairness and accountability. Similarly, decentralized and fluid organizational structures are said to be necessary to support the gathering of intelligence, better-informed decision-making and be responsive to outside developments. However, decentralization may produce policy fragmentation and inhibit overall organizational learning.

Finally, treating citizens as customers supposedly empowers the general public, but critics insist that it leads to an impoverished concept of citizenship which dis-empowers the public in terms of setting the agenda and policy frameworks of government. These are deliberately stark contrasts, but they serve to highlight the need for research and better-informed debates about the normative and practical implications of recent public service reforms. It is necessary to debate *i.e.* both how success is defined and how it is measured. The importance of adequate research in Public Administration cannot be overstated.

Intellectual discussion is good up to a point, but within the comparative contexts, it should be able to stretch the analytical capability of the academic and the practitioner communities well beyond their limits. Given the limited resources available to the study and practice of Public Administration, there is the need for creative trans-disciplinary and multidisciplinary collaborations among research councils, which sponsor research. Real progress can be attained in this regard through the application of theoretical concepts in practice and in action research. Schools of Public Administration and Management in Africa must work together in this spirit of collaboration and elaboration.

The most serious obstacle to collaboration is not rivalry among organizations or financial limits, although these problems do arise, but rather finding talented clusters of individuals with the time to devote to these initiatives in addition to their regular responsibilities. Through collaboration, one should aim to produce *practical theory*. Harmon and Mayer (1986, p. 61) describe a practical theory as “one that either illuminates possibilities for action that would not otherwise be apparent or stimulates greater understanding of what the person has already been doing.” Theories provide not only mental engagement with a situation; they can also be a source of novel insights. Administrators work with implicit theories, which assist them to understand and to sustain their worlds. Outside theories can assist them to reflect critically on their area of work. There will always be more than enough important theoretical and practical issues to deal with. The trend therefore is to use collective energies, available time, talent and resources as productively as possible. The synergy has moved from a mechanistic public administration paradigm to one of collaboration, elaboration and transformation of policy initiatives.

If scholarship is about teaching and research, then effective instructional programming must have common characteristics with contextual flexibility. One must first focus attention on student learning and the ability to communicate with the broader public. In the case of Public Administration, it is mostly with the public sector. One must focus on best practices in pedagogy, curricular design, and instructional modalities.

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, and address the immediate issues of public concern and interest. Milward (1996) suggests that the discipline of Public Administration and Management, in promoting scholarship, should not ignore the fiscal structure within which public services are delivered. The discipline of Public Administration, in its search for excellence, must address the issues of performance and service delivery. In the quest to redefine public management theory, one 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.

All academic offerings that include teaching, learning, service and research, irrespective of the mode of delivery must be of high quality and scope that is comparable to the

functions within each sector. To achieve excellence in research and scholarship, there must be a relationship between programs and institutions, and the methods of teaching, learning, service and research application. 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 skills level, graduates of Public Administration and Management must be fully equipped to demonstrate the relevant skills needed to promote a viable understanding of the Discipline. Regular and continuous assessment of inputs and outputs should be built into institutional strategic plans. Schools of Public Administration and Management must initiate flexible-driven leadership management programming which should be the catalyst that will shape the issues of the 21st Century and beyond.

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