

An undergraduate curriculum analysis of Public Administration in selected higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

Public Administration Education has been a contentious issue as the discipline developed and struggled to find its own identity and theoretical framework. The article argues that Public Administration Education has been shaped by its historical influences and that the interdisciplinary nature of Public Administration poses specific challenges to its teaching. Public Administration, as a social science, finds its application in various political, social, economic and physical environments. The reality is that some common characteristics in the practice of public administration can be discerned, but this is not sufficient to create a theory. The implication of the above is that institutions of higher education, although led by South African Qualifications Authority registered qualification outcome, interprets the discipline based on their own peculiarities – leading to fragmentation and non-consensus as to what constitutes the discipline of Public Administration.

In this article, the authors argue that teaching Public Administration does not reflect any true discipline related inquiry. Rather, institutions of higher education react to the practice of public administration in teaching the theory of Public Administration. The authors argue for a balance between theory and practice to be evident in Public Administration Education. This article will explore, using inductive reasoning, the content

and context of teaching Public Administration in undergraduate degree programmes. Selected institutions of higher education will be used. The article concludes with a framework which could inform future curriculum selection for the teaching of Public Administration.

“a fateful question seems posed: does Public Administration, by becoming everything in general, thereby become nothing in particular?” (Dwight Waldo)

INTRODUCTION

The argument can be made that Public Administration emerged out of the concern that politics corrupts and that administration inherently strives to serve. Citizens require effective and efficient service delivery and practitioners require scholars to provide answers to administrative challenges. What makes the teaching of Public Administration unique is the notion of *public*. However, the domain of what constitutes public is no longer a given. Administration is also a concept not easily defined and leading to different conceptual understandings. For some administration means getting things done and for others administration refers to the taking charge in order to get things done. Whichever conceptual understanding will have a definitive impact of what constitutes Public Administration Education.

In this article the history of teaching Public Administration will be highlighted in an effort to ensure a common understanding of the development of the discipline. However, the article’s main thrust is to make the case of Public Administration Education creating the balance between theory and practice. With a lack of a conceptual theory to guide the development of the discipline, this becomes an increasingly difficult task. The reality is that Public Administration Education is meant to have a positive impact of the daily lives of citizens, but due to the complex nature of the discipline, the positive impact is not felt and therefore, the importance and relevancy of Public Administration Education is undermined and schools and departments teaching Public Administration continue to fight for their right of existence.

The article will argue Public Administration Education within the context of the bachelors of administration undergraduate degree offered by selected departments and schools of Public Administration/Management. The following will be investigated:

- UNISA: Department of Public Administration and Management BAdmin degree offered in the College of Economic and Management Sciences with a mixture of Public Administration, Accounting, Auditing, Business Management, Economics, Industrial and Organisational Psychology, Statistics and Law (Commercial and Labour).
- University of KwaZulu Natal: School of Public Administration and Governance BAdmin degree offered at the Westville Campus only and comprising subjects such as Public Administration, Public Management, Economics, Human Resource Management, Management, Marketing and Supply Chain Management
- University of Pretoria: School of Public Management and Administration BAdmin degree with specialisation in Public Management or Public Administration. The Public Management specialisation offers faculty wide subjects including Economics, Business Management, Industrial and Organisational Psychology, Politics and International Relations. The Public Administration specialisation is a pure Public Administration degree with a focus on the generic administrative functions.
- University of the Free State: Department of Public Management BAdmin degree with compulsory courses in Public Management, Municipal Management, Business Management, Economic Systems and Industrial Psychology.

From the above the argument is made that the BAdmin degrees offered at various South African higher education institutions have a strong management focus. The developmental nature of the South Africa government necessitates a strong emphasis on management competency and the following discussion will illustrate that the management focus of Public Administration Education has been evident ever since the discipline was conceptualised as a specific area of study.

A further deduction is that public administration and public management is evident in both the content (as will be proven later in the article) as well as the name of the selected academic units. For the purpose of this article, the authors propose that the difference between administration and management be acknowledged as it also relates to the central argument put forth in the article, namely that Public Administration includes a cognitive ability to theorise and Public Management is focused on ensuring that a particular skills set is taught. By including one of both as academic identity a specific preference or direction is implied.

HISTORY OF TEACHING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Before endeavouring to describe how Public Administration Education developed, the question should be asked ‘what is education?’ Aristotle stated

that “nobody knows whether the young should be trained at such studies as are merely useful as means of livelihood or in such as tend to the promotion of virtue or in the higher studies” (SAQA 2000:3). In answering the question, one could also argue as to what the role and place of theory in education should be. If the result of education is the attainment of a particular set of skills, then the theory which led to the development of that skill set becomes less important. However, should the result of education be the attainment of cognitive abilities to enhance a particular skill set, then the theoretical underpinnings of that discipline becomes integral in the teaching thereof. Is education reproduction or is it the development of the mind and intelligence to understand and theorise?

In South Africa, public administrators are educated to become professional experts devoted to public service delivery. Bowman and Plant (1982) maintain that education should make provision for the balance to be created between *doing* public administration (the administration thereof) and *being* public administrators (leading the administration). Inherently, this reinforces the earlier submission, that education should balance skills and intellect (cognitive ability), that education should balance theory and practice. Ventriss (1991:4) highlights that the content of Public Administration Education should be approached by taking the following into consideration:

- relationship between scholars and practitioners;
- the need for common intellectual culture among public administration scholars; and
- the lack of an integrated approach for the analytic, managerial and policy-knowledge perspectives central to the public administration curriculum.

The reality is that practitioners look towards scholars to provide answers to administrative challenges. However, a lack of understanding and communication between scholars and practitioners leads to situations where these two parties become competitors and critics negating the original intent of education in a developmental state, which is creating the balance between theory and practice. Greene (2005:50) maintains that Public Administration Education has developed through the following paradigms which gave rise to specific schools of thought:

- the classical school in which the principles of administration were taught (1900-1940);
- the behaviourists which comprised an empirical period where behaviour was studied (1940-1970);
- the administration-as-politics school (1950-1970) which placed Public Administration back in the folds of Political Science, but as a second rate citizen;

- the administration-as-management school (1956-1970) which focused on using economic principles to predict human behaviour with the subsequent emerging of the subfields of comparative and developmental administration;
- New Public Administration (1986-1990s) which stressed organisational humanism, policy advocacy, participatory bureaucracy and client-focused service delivery;
- Public Administration as Public Administration (1970-current) with the establishment of professional associations such as the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) with a renewed focus on professionalism and creating accrediting standards for Public Administration Education; and
- the refounding movement (1980-current) which has emerged as result of Gaebler and Osborne's *Reinventing Government*, privatisation and public choice theory with an emphasis on public accountability and equity.

The basic curricular structures and emphases for Public Administration Education emerged during the first paradigm and are evident even today (Rabin, Hildreth and Miller 2007:724). The argument that a public administration student becomes a public servant who is expected to be knowledgeable about the administrative function, systems, policies and processes is still held today, even though this argument was presented in 1887 when Woodrow Wilson called for the scientific and systematic study of administration. The first Public Administration curriculum in the United States of America was taught at the Johns Hopkins University between 1884 and 1896 and comprised foundation courses in politics, economics, history and law. The curriculum was however not emulated elsewhere and was soon replaced by a more practical, applied and efficiency-minded administrative management framework. The creation of the Society for the Promotion of Training for Public Service in 1914, as forerunner to the American Society for Public Administration called for professionalism and an enhanced knowledge base which led to the increase in public administration programmes offered by higher education institutions (Rabin *et al.* 2007:725-726).

Ellwood (1985:6) maintains that the curriculum developed during this period and based on the POSDCORB (planning, organising, staffing, direction, coordination, reporting and budgeting) formula would become the fundamental definition for public administration curriculum development and placed an emphasis on teaching management as a series of skills. During the 1920s and 1930s two specific universities had a formative influence on the development of the curriculum, namely the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University and the School of Citizenship and Public Administration at the University of Southern California. The Maxwell School absorbed the activities conducted by the Training School of the National Institute for Public

Administration who was headed by Luther Gulick and thus bringing practical application as the foundation for Public Administration Education. The founders of the Maxwell School, George Davenport, Luther Gulick and William Mosher, all believed and promoted an educational philosophy that built on administrative professionalism to combat political corruption and administrative inefficiency. The School of Citizenship and Public Administration at the University of Southern California developed both an undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum focusing on the prevailing norms of efficiency and effectiveness by introducing business techniques as part of Public Administration Education.

From the above can be argued that the close relationship between practice and theory is what makes Public Administration Education unique and also what hampers its recognition as an independent scientific discipline. Hanekom (1983:41) concurs that the although Public Administration might have been evident in what Socrates, Plato and Aristotle taught, and even though the Kameralists in Germany argued for the recognition of Public Administration, the discipline originated in the United States of America with Woodrow Wilson's *Study of Administration*. Thornhill (2006:794) states that Lorenz von Stein is considered to be the founder of Public Administration in Europe although Public Administration was deemed to be a form of administrative law. He acknowledges that the study of Public Administration in Europe gradually faded in favour of the study of Administrative Law.

The practice of public administration is, however, as old as human beings themselves and is guided by the political, social, economic, scientific and technological factors evident in a society. Hanekom (1983:42) argues that the vulnerability of the discipline to external factors leads to a blurred understanding of the domain of public administration. The study of Public Administration (and thus the teaching thereof) is considered to be for the purpose of ensuring that the administrative requirements to the delivery of services are understood and applied, which implies that the study is influenced by the practice – an undeniable fact and challenge for Public Administration Education.

THE LOCATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION

Thornhill and Van Dijk (2010) concur with Cloete (1967:4) that Public Administration is inter-disciplinary and as such finds its location as part of social and management sciences. This perhaps has the greatest impact on the development of a possible curriculum for the teaching of Public Administration. Since the discipline does not have measurable boundaries, the content becomes flexible and is influenced by the practice of public administration. Within the developmental state context, the teaching of Public Administration is not only

concerned with ensuring the transfer of discipline-specific knowledge, but also with the minimum skills and competencies required for a public administrator to function effectively and efficiently. This is not peculiar to the teaching of only Public Administration, since the same is expected for any student graduating in any social or management science degree e.g. as accountant or as social worker. The difference lies in the fact that in most social and management-related fields, the existence of professional bodies and their impact on curriculum development contributes to delineating the field of study. In Public Administration, this is not the case.

Since Public Administration is not seen as a professional qualification (which implies a qualification accredited by an accepted professional association), every person active in the practice of public administration (whatever his or her academic background) will have an opinion about what should be taught in the discipline. Consequently, the diverse public sector becomes the source for trying to determine a homogenous teaching curriculum for Public Administration. Public Administration does not have an exclusive subject specific language, its concepts are defined in terms of the practice thereof and as such deductive reasoning becomes the order of the day. Cloete (1967:6) maintains that the lack of subject specific language means that no underlying theory exists to inform the teaching of Public Administration. In addition to the above, those who study Public Administration are not concerned with enhancing the theory thereof, but is more concerned with understanding the practice thereof. Unfortunately, without the discipline specific theory, the curriculum can become a product of individual whim or practitioner focus.

The reality is that the acceptance of Public Administration as a professional degree requires a body of knowledge enhanced through scientific investigation based in the understanding of a particular theoretical framework. Mosher (1975) contends that "Public Administration has cross-interests with virtually all other social sciences. In fact, it would appear that any definition of this field would be either so encompassing as to call forth the wrath or ridicule of others or so limiting as to stultify its own discipline." Authors such as Stone and Stone (1975) and Bowman and Plant (1982) agree that the interdisciplinary nature of Public Administration Education is disappointing, because as the role of government becomes more complex, so does the teaching of the discipline. This pedagogical diffusion leads to Public Administration becoming a safe haven for scholars from all differing disciplines and academic programmes becoming a "disoriented educational octopus, with appendages moving in all directions, lacking a sense of normative coherency" (Ventriss 1991:8). The argument is that interdisciplinary study is good, but a fragmented study is not. Fragmentation leads to the discipline losing substantive worth and scholars exhibiting only a limited understanding of the link between administration and the public. Greene (2005:50) argues

that the tension created by the interdisciplinary nature of Public Administration Education has been evident since Public Administration developed its own reputation, created its own professional associations and journals and pursued its own interests. However, the existence of an own reputation by no means guarantees that there is consensus as to what the reputation should be. Ventris (1991:10) maintains that the conceptual understanding of the importance of the public to the teaching of Public Administration is what makes the discipline so vulnerable to any field finding itself a home within the academic departments and schools of Public Administration.

The above becomes evident when looking at the four selected universities and the location of their departments of Public Administration (and/or Public Management) as well as the qualification of their academics (doctoral, masters, honours and bachelors degrees).

Table 1: Location/qualifications pertaining to departments and schools of Public Administration/Management

Institution	Faculty/ College	Department/ School	Doctoral degree	Masters degree	Hons/ B degree
UNISA	College of Economic and Management Sciences	Department of Public Administration and Management	DAdmin DLitt et Phil DPhil PhD (Public Affairs) DCom PhD (Economics)	MAdmin MPA MA M Tech	BAdmin + Hons BA + Hons BTech BSoc Sci
University of KwaZulu Natal	Faculty of Management Studies	School of Public Administration	DAdmin	MAdmin MM (P&DM) MPA	BAdmin +Hons BSoc Sci BA + Hons
University of Pretoria	Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences	School of Public Management and Administration	DAdmin DPhil	MAdmin MA MPA	BAdmin +Hons BA + Hons
University of the Free State	Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences	Department of Public Management	DAdmin DTech (Public Management) PhD (Public Management)	MAdmin MA (African Studies) MPub	BAdmin + Hons BA +Hons BPub + Hons

From the above the following arguments are made:

- B Admin degrees have a strong management focus and all departments or schools are located in the faculties or colleges of economic and management sciences or management studies.
- All departments or schools seem to have a strong focus on management as evident from the names of the academic units. Thus, the focus on management specific subjects is expected.
- Faculty members come from a variety of different backgrounds although the degrees are either situated in social sciences or management sciences. Without a clear theoretical framework for the discipline it is to be expected that the focus of Public Administration Education becomes the product of the individual academic backgrounds of faculty members and the teaching of their respective courses will be aligned to their academic orientation e.g. scholars from social sciences may focus on a more philosophical or abstract understanding while management scholars focus on the skills that are required in performing the public administrative function.

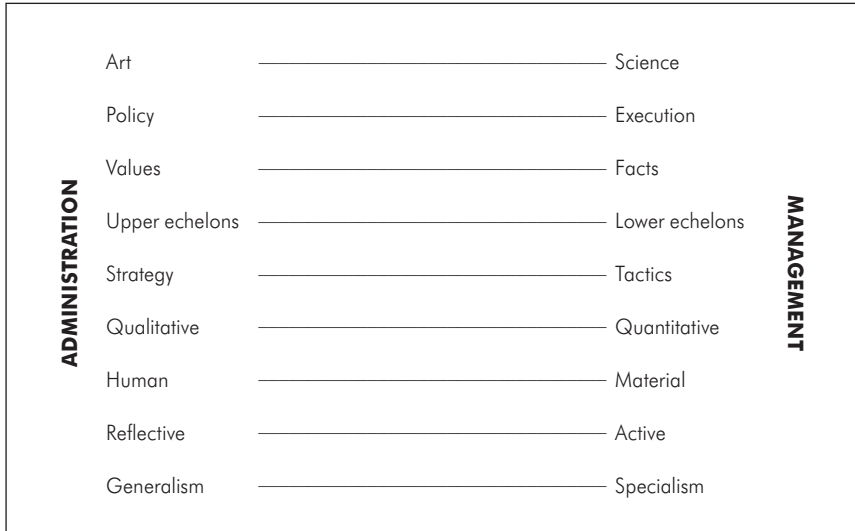
The following section will highlight the specific content of Public Administration Education. The teaching of Public Administration as Public Management will also be described although the argument that practice has led education should be evident from the above discussions.

TEACHING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The argument proposed and supported in this article is that teaching Public Administration should strive to create the balance between theory and practice. The lack of a conceptual theory makes this endeavour a difficult and challenging exercise. Hodgkinson (1978:4-5) conceptualised administration by arguing that administration and management should be seen as two ends of a continuum. Administration presents the higher levels on the continuum (the more philosophical, abstract and theoretical), while management relates to the lower levels, which includes the universal functions pervasive in all public organisations. The continuum is presented in Figure 1.

From the figure it becomes apparent that administration related to the aspects dealing with the formulation of purpose, the value-laden issues and the human component of the organisation, while management relates to activities which are routine, definitive, programmatic and susceptible to quantitative measuring. While the above might be contentious, the value for the teaching of Public Administration lies in the identification of what might be required from a curriculum in terms of developing both cognitive and practical skills. The reality is that Public Administration Education needs to address requirements

Figure 1: Conceptual continua for the definition of Administration



Source: Hodgkinson, C. 1978. *Towards a Philosophy of Administration*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. p.4.

for both scholars and practitioners. Woodrow Wilson (1887) states that “the object of administrative study to discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible cost either of money or of energy” (Greene 2005:48).

The selected higher education institutions focus on both Public Administration and Public Management in the name of their academic units as well as the content of their degrees, with the exception of the University of KwaZulu Natal. The following section describes the content of their Public Administration and/or Public Management modules with the aim of inducing a possible theoretical framework for Public Administration Education.

From the above table the following arguments are proposed:

- There is consensus between departments and schools of public administration and/or management as to what should be inherent in the teaching of a B Admin degree, namely a focus on the public management functions. As to what constitutes the public management functions the generic functions proposed by Cloete seems to still act as guideline for curriculum development.
- The curriculum of Public Administration includes a focus on public management and specifically on ensuring that a particular skills set is taught e.g. public financial management, public policy, public human

Table 2: Compulsory modules in selected B Admin degrees

Institution and degree	Module descriptions
<p>UNISA B Admin</p>	<p>First year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The nature, content and scope of public administration • The structuring and functioning of public services <p>Second year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundations of public administration • 1 elective chosen from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Protection services ◦ Creation of wealth ◦ Welfare and social services ◦ Culture and education ◦ Environmental affairs <p>Third year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 electives chosen from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Public management skills ◦ Public human resource management ◦ Public policy ◦ Organisational studies in the public sector ◦ Public financial administration and management ◦ Reflective Public Administration ◦ Ethics in public administration and administrative justice
<p>University of KwaZulu Natal B Admin</p>	<p>First year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemporary Public Administration and Politics • Introduction to Public Management <p>Second year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Local Government • Introduction to Public Sector Financial Management • Introduction to Public Policy Management • Introduction to Public Sector HR Management <p>Third year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Sector Performance Management • Development Policy and Project Management • Public Service Delivery: Principles, Approaches and Processes • Organisational Change and Leadership
<p>University of Pretoria B Admin (Public Management)</p>	<p>First year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Public Administration Theory • Constitutional framework for public Administration <p>Second year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Management Functions • Public Administration Research Methodology <p>Third year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethics in public administration • Comparative public administration

Institution and degree	Module descriptions
University of Pretoria B Admin (Public Administration)	First year: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Public Administration Theory • Constitutional framework for public Administration • Public Resource Management (Decision making and public policy) • Public Organisation Studies • Public People Management Second year: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Management Functions • Public Administration Research Methodology • Public Resource Management (Financial Management) • Public Organisation Studies • Public People Management Third year: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethics in public administration • Comparative public administration • Public Resource Management (Project Management) • Public Practices (WIL module)
University of the Free State	First year: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Public Management Second year: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Financial Resource Management • Public Policy Management • Introduction to the study of Municipal Governance • Municipal Management Third year: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macro and Micro Organisational Analysis • Human Resource Management • Current issues in Local Government • Municipal Financing

resource management and project management. The politics/administration dichotomy does not seem to feature in the development of the Public Administration curriculum. In all cases the study of Politics is encouraged, but synergy between the curriculum of both disciplines is not evident.

- The curriculum of Public Administration is not theory led and students are not introduced at the undergraduate level to the developments in the study of Public Administration. Students are thus not taught to deliberate on the domain of their study and modules do not reflect an inclination towards the development of abstract, theoretical, cognitive/thinking skills. A possible exception here is the module *Reflective Public Administration*

offered by UNISA although only as an elective. It is clear that although Public Administration is considered to be a social science, the basis of social scientific thinking, namely the study of Philosophy, is not emphasised as an integral part of Public Administration Education.

The reality of teaching undergraduate students a particular skills set and not focusing on why the skills are important or where it originated from leads to students being able to do the job, but not be the job. The argument made at the beginning of the article that a balance should be created between *doing* public administration and *being* public administrators is hereby enforced.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

“...public administration as orientation and literature, as research, activities, concepts, and techniques, has grown so large and heterogeneous that to think of accommodating it as a sub discipline of *anything* is *prima facie* absurd” (Waldo 1968:7-8). The article argues that the circumstances which characterised the Public Administration Education conversation in the 1960s are still evident today. Public Administration is a discipline but without a universally accepted theoretical understanding. The boundaries of what constitutes the public are fading and as such the content of what is taught is ill-defined. Public Administration and Political Science share a history and cannot be taught in isolation, but this does not mean that the one is subordinate to the other or should be absorbed by the other. It simply implies that both disciplines have the right of existence since both are indispensable to the effective and efficient functioning of the state. The bureaucratic nature of the function of public administration is no longer seen in a negative light, but rather places the emphasis on the administrative reality of the public administration function and as such on the necessity of contributing to a professional public administration capable of addressing the complex challenges of the day.

Ventriss (1991:5) maintains that specific factors which impact on Public Administration Education have not been addressed, and include:

- the lack of appropriate communication between scholars and practitioners;
- the pedagogical ambivalence of the impact of practice on theory;
- the tension created through the interdisciplinary nature of Public Administration which could lead to fragmentation of the discipline; and
- the lack of an integrated conceptual framework for the content of Public Administration (an ill defined discipline which leads to an ill defined curriculum).

The South African developmental state attempts to address the above through the promulgation of the *Public Administration Management Bill, 2008*, clause 16(a) which calls for senior management members to teach at institutions of higher education. The proposal seeks to develop a closer working and communication relationship between practitioners and scholars. However, by involving practitioners in the teaching of Public Administration the emphasis once again falls on development of a skills set without understanding the necessity, development or theoretical context thereof.

The involvement of practitioners during the development of curriculum is an accepted academic practice. The rationale for the inclusion is to ensure alignment between practice and theory. However, with an emphasis on practice the balance between theory and practice is not promoted. The argument that public administrators are not recognised as a profession means that their input focuses on government agendas and not on the promotion of the public administration function.

The Wikipedia Online Dictionary (2010) describes a profession as a vocation founded upon specialised education. Furthermore, specific requirements are set for the establishment of a profession, namely:

- full-time occupation;
- national and/or international association regulating and overseeing the members as well as accrediting the education and/or training; and
- members submit themselves to codes of professional ethics, which means that not everybody can or may belong to a profession.

Should Public Administration be able to establish itself as a profession a single qualification will have to be introduced, promoted and protected. Although national and international professional associations exist (such as ASSADPAM, NASPAA and IASIA), these associations do not function as accrediting bodies to institutions of higher education, they do not enforce minimum educational standards for undergraduate degrees and they also do not promote professionalism through a comprehensive and compulsory code of ethics. With the absence of a profession, the creation of a uniform undergraduate curriculum becomes impossible and institutions of higher education have discretion in the conceptualisation of an undergraduate curriculum.

Mention should be made of the decisions ratified during the 2010 Annual Conference and General Meeting of the International Association of the Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA) accepting standards of excellence for postgraduate academic programmes. These Standards of Excellence for Public Administration Education and Training identify institutional; programme development and review; programme content; and programme management and administration criteria upon which schools and

departments of public administration/management may obtain accreditation for their postgraduate qualifications. The participation of academics from the University of Pretoria, University of KwaZulu Natal and University of the Free State ensures that undergraduate programmes will also benefit from the manner in which professionalism is strived for in, at this stage, postgraduate academic offerings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article argued that curriculum development in Public Administration should strive for reflecting a balance between theory and practice. It seems as though the emphasis of practice in current B Admin degree curriculum leads to students who are able to, for instance, compile a public budget, but not necessarily interpret or understand the relevance of public budgeting in public administration. A closer relationship between practitioners and academics are necessary, but academics should agree on what the theoretical necessities of their discipline are to ensure that the discipline is protected and recognised for its scientific contribution. Should practitioners look to scholars for answers to their challenges, scholars should accept their responsibility for ensuring that cognitive skills are integral in Public Administration Education.

Specific challenging areas for the discipline include its interdisciplinary nature and its lack of professional recognition. For the South African developmental state the promotion of Public Administration as a specific area of study is undeniable and a future area for research should focus on the multitude of undergraduate degrees all professing an emphasis on Public Administration. The impact of this fragmented academic offering on the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline should be thoroughly investigated in order to contribute to the professional recognition of the discipline.

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