New development: Adapting university education for changing expectations of public services leaders and managers—guidance for designing and delivering MPAs

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Substantial sums of money are spent in the UK funding Masters of Public Administration (MPA) programmes. In the current financial climate, learners and employers are seeking evidence that courses provide relevance, value for money and return on their investment. New guidance has been developed by government and academic groups to set a benchmark for excellence in content and delivery. UK MPA courses already attract a large number of international students and this new guidance should add value for overseas participants as well as UK students.

This guidance for designing and delivering MPA programmes has been approved by three key stakeholder bodies—the Public Administration Committee (PAC) of the Joint University Council, the Public Management and Policy Association (PMPA), and the Public Administration Specialist Group of the UK’s Political Studies Association (PSA). The guidance benefitted from contributions by staff of the National School of Government, and Government Skills. Why is the development of this guidance timely, what was the thinking behind it, and what are the principles that should be followed in designing and delivering MPAs? As will be seen, we give a lot of attention to the needs of the civil service and the new skills agenda for central government, because this is an important recent development, but the guidance has been drafted for central government, regional bodies, local government, and all other public services organizations.

The changing public services context

Many of today’s public service leaders joined their departments, agencies and organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, in the days before financial management, computers and rolling news bulletins. The pace of change grows inexorably, the demographic challenges become more and more acute, public expectations continue to rise, and economic globalization, worldwide recession and climate change are problems on not just a national or regional scale, but truly global.

These challenges impose new and greater demands on the public servants of today and tomorrow. For example, and put crudely, the Whitehall civil servant is now expected to be:

• A traditional ‘Whitehall mandarin’ with all the skills of reconciling the irreconcilable, working with ministers and parliament and operating in the high-octane goldfish bowl of the Westminster village.
• A practitioner of the new public management (NPM), with financial management, performance management and project management skills.
• A modern manager skilled at working in partnership, and in multi-agency teams, demonstrating stakeholder management skills and an understanding of complex adaptive systems, with frontline experience and, to be topical, an understanding of behavioural economics and ‘nudge’ theory.

So it is not surprising that government departments and other public service organizations are constantly looking for ways to develop the skills of their managers, and future leaders.

The role of higher education in developing higher level skills for civil servants

The recently launched Skills Strategy for central
government (Government Skills, 2008) is aimed at driving up professional skills standards. The strategy seeks to modernize practices beyond NPM ideas (Skålén, 2004). Civil servants need new skills, for example working with complex multi-agency partnerships. And it is important to recognize the diversity of today’s civil servants. They are likely to specialize in one of over 20 professions within the modern civil service (Civil Service, 2010). Some professions within government are well-established such as lawyers but others, such as procurement and programme and project management, are relatively new. The policy and operational delivery professions are specific to government. Newer professions are working hard to negotiate their boundaries and define their professional identities.

Higher and further education can help deliver the professionalization of government. There are three areas where collaboration between government and the higher education sector could have a big impact:

- **Identifying specialist functions, skills and knowledge.** Government heads of professions are responsible for defining and updating professional competence and standards. Research carried out by higher education institutions can support this work.

- **Designing and delivering qualifications, courses, and other continuing professional development (CPD).** Programmes must represent good value for money and reflect the current and future needs of government departments and professions. Many universities could explore the potential to increase the involvement of employers and professions in the design, delivery, assessment and evaluation of courses.

- **Building professional communities.** Professional networks are essential for transferring good practice and helping individuals feel part of a wider community (Horton, 2006). Higher education offers a unique opportunity for individuals from different departments, professions, agencies and public and private sector organizations to come together to share ideas through forums, networks, alumni associations and other groups.

The development of the new guidance for MPAs demonstrates one of the ways the government sector and the higher education sector can work together on this professionalization agenda.

**Curriculum design for MPAs**

In designing a curriculum for an MPA programme there are two main drivers—the (academic) disciplinary considerations of public administration, and the requirements of employers and the employing organizations within which successful graduates will make their careers. These two drivers are entirely compatible since the discipline of public administration, while grounded in political science theory with input from the business schools, is nothing if it is not practical and therefore of use to public sector employers. Finally, course designers need to assess how the mode of delivery of the course best serves the interests of the course members and employers.

The academic content, although contestable at the margins, is fairly straightforward. Most MPAs contain public administration (theories, models, historical developments) and public policy studies. Most courses use case studies and models to explore the relationship between elected officials and career bureaucrats, professional groups and civil society, that is, government in the age of governance.

There is, however, plenty of scope for a differentiated approach—some MPAs have a heavy mathematical, economic content, while others explore public administration more as social policy and concentrate on ‘softer’ qualitative methodological training. Some MPAs give a lot of attention to public leadership and public management—this is often where the business school input is strong. It should be noted that there are MPAs that are successfully delivered by combining both a business school and social science stance. In all cases, the outcome sought is a cohort of graduates better suited and prepared to deliver the public services for which they are responsible. So MPA course designers need to also pay heed to the disparate backgrounds of the students, including the many who will already have professional qualifications and be seeking to ‘move across’ into management—for example engineers wanting to become managers.

Employers from the UK and internationally vary in their content needs: some seek a project management element, arguing that all senior managers must know how to control and lead projects. All want some kind of financial training, not to turn managers into accountants (it is more straightforward simply to hire accountants) but they do need to ensure their managers understand the language of finance and accountancy in order to be able to project manage competently and oversee these important areas of accountability. Another popular requirement is for a dissertation and/or work-based project that takes some aspect of the public leader or manager’s job and researches it. Increasingly, work-based reports are valued for the
opportunity to link theory and practice and because they can be of direct and continuing use to the employer.

Delivery of MPAs can take several forms. In some cases the traditional structure of modules delivered at set times in a classroom over several weeks prevails. But the nature of the content delivered and the student body have allowed some innovative degrees to be developed. These make use of distance learning, blended learning, case studies delivered via web-based learning that can be accessed at home or in the workplace, modules delivered in the workplace and intensive teaching of modules telescoped into three–four week blocks, with teaching in the middle week, assessments handed in shortly thereafter and feedback following quickly after that. In other words, a sequential process that allows employers to release managers for several days at a time spaced apart by several weeks. Many UK employers have argued that this is much less disruptive than traditional delivery patterns and allows them to sponsor managers on a part-time or modular basis; some employers like this option because it is easier to plan cover for their absence.

International students

The international market is hugely important for many UK universities when designing an MPA programme. Overseas students contribute £4 billion a year in fees according to the UK Council for International Student Affairs, or about 8% of the total income for UK universities (Williams and Shepherd, 2009). The most recent Patterns of Higher Education Institutions in the UK report (Ramsden, 2009) reveals that in 2007/08 international or non-EU domiciled students made up 10% (229,640) of overall student numbers (2.3M approximately). Over a 10-year period (1998/99 to 2007/08) the international student market almost doubled (an increase of 96%). The most significant suppliers of international students for postgraduate courses are China and India (18,275 and 17,920 respectively). Clearly, not all of these represent the MPA market, but the potential for attracting international students cannot be ignored in designing a programme, despite the more complex visa regulations which now apply and have the potential to impact negatively on the overseas market (Newman, 2009).

The design of the curriculum for international students needs careful consideration. The first concern is language. Practice varies widely across postgraduate courses with universities asking for IELTS scores of 6.0 upwards. The MPA guidelines have not specified a language threshold, but the component parts of the IELTS test may be an important element of the selection process. If the programme requires strengths in one or more aspects of language (listening, reading, writing, speaking) then institutions may set a minimum overall standard but require a higher score in, perhaps, writing skills.

There is also a debate as to whether the MPA programme should be aimed at those looking for career preparation and/or career acceleration. A mixed local market (no previous experience and post-experience) and a similar constituency of international students present a significant challenge in one MPA student body. The new MPA guidance prefers the same learning outcomes for both local and international cohorts, with or without experience, but the challenge will be to adapt curriculum design, delivery mode, teaching, and assessment strategies to meet the needs of a diverse student audience—easier said than done. The ideal MPA student body may well be a mix of post-experience local and international MPA students with the opportunity for transnational teaching and learning.

Guidance for designing and delivering MPAs

We finally turn to the new guidance, first outlining how it came to be produced and some of the intentions behind it. At the PAC’s York University conference in September 2008, it was decided to set up a working group and produce a statement of guidance. It was to build on the discussions at the conference workshops led jointly by the PMPA and the National School of Government. These workshops included contributions from the cabinet secretary and from staff of Government Skills.

It was decided that the guidance should be expressed in an inclusive way, aimed at helping new providers of MPAs and other masters’ programmes in public policy and public management, and providing a way of opening up and sustaining a dialogue between bodies such as PAC, the PMPA, the Public Administration Specialist Group of the PSA, the National School of Government, and Government Skills. The working group began its work in December 2008 and along the way involved participants from the PAC, the PMPA, the Public Administration Specialist Group of the PSA, the National School of Government, and Government Skills. The aims for the new guidance were:

- To increase the quality of postgraduate programmes in public administration and management.
• To increase their credibility within the practitioner and academic communities.
• To encourage the future development of postgraduate programmes so as to better meet national, regional and local employer needs.
• To focus on the UK situation and also to underpin the international standing of UK programmes in public administration and management.

The full statement of the guidance can be found at www.juc.ac.uk/mpa.aspx. Figure 1 sets out the general requirements of an MPA.

**Next steps**

Universities have to keep adapting what they do to new circumstances. The MPA is no exception to this rule. The working group felt that the best way of doing this is by universities engaging with government organizations and employers. This was also seen as the best way to build the credibility of MPAs in the UK.

It is important that the MPA guidance continues to evolve and we will be inviting more university MPA providers to engage with the process of refining and developing the statement. In particular, it is clear that the future development of the guidance would benefit from the contributions of a new network emerging around the idea of a UK-MPA website and portal. This is a network of UK MPA, and MPA-like, programme providers that has been established for a couple of years, involving around 30 UK higher education institutions. Although as yet little more than an email circulation list and occasional national meeting, this network does symbolize how fast the MPA provision scene has and is changing in the UK. Plans are being made to set up an ‘MPA-UK’ website portal to provide easy access to the range of UK courses for national and international potential students and employer. How to connect this MPA-UK network—which has not been formally part of the discussions about the MPA guidance—to the discussions reported here remains to be resolved.

At some point in the future, when further progress has been made, the UK stakeholders will need to engage their counterparts in Europe. This can be done more fruitfully when there is a well-developed point of view in the UK, which we will need if we are to debate effectively the variety of ideas about postgraduate education for civil servants and public services leaders to be found in Europe, where, for example, some countries approach this from a more legalistic perspective.

In the future, also, there will be a need to consider how the issue of accreditation is best addressed. There are already accreditation systems in existence in Europe and the USA. In the case of Europe there is the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA), which has links with the IAS’ European Group for Public

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**Figure 1. UK MPAs (see www.juc.ac.uk/mpa.aspx)**

The MPA is a course that:

• Aims to contribute to the development of greater professionalism in public services leadership and management.
• Is designed to prepare people for careers in public services leadership and management and/or to help people accelerate their careers if they are already in leadership and management positions.
• Is intellectually challenging and places a high priority on personal development (which includes learning how to think critically and how to be reflective).
• Helps individuals be more effective by fostering skills in evidence-based decision making, interpreting and applying policy agendas, anticipating future trends in public services, and adapting actions and activities to suit specific public services contexts in order to support government (central, regional and local) in the development and delivery of policy goals.
• Is an interdisciplinary programme offering an appreciative understanding of the key elements in the field of study of public administration and public management and their interrelations.
• Includes opportunities to explore key concepts across institutional boundaries within the public sector.
• Uses student-centred teaching and learning activities.
• Explores the relationship between theory and practice and does this, where appropriate, through the use of action learning methods.
• Has at least one substantial work-focused project concerned with practical outcomes in terms of improvement and/or innovation in public services, and which may in some course specifications form the core of the MPA.
• Is designed and evaluated with the involvement of public services employers and which is supported in its delivery by employers through the provision of guest speakers, access to organizations for purposes of work-based learning, and visits to public services organizations. In some circumstances teaching and assessment on the course will be organized and provided by a team comprising university academics and public services practitioners.
Administration (EGPA), and was set up just over 10 years ago. This offers a system of voluntary accreditation of academic public administration programmes. The relevant accreditation body in the USA is the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), which recently agreed a new set of standards for masters’ degrees. The key challenge at this stage will be to see what kind of balance will be struck between using accreditation as an improvement tool of interest to all MPA providers, and using accreditation to reinforce reputational advantage. How this is done could be very important for the practical value of UK MPAs and the degree of adaptability and innovation among MPA providers in the UK.

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