

## **Adapting University Education for Changing Expectations of Public Services Leaders and Managers: New Guidance for Designing and Delivering MPAs**

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Guidance for designing and delivering Masters in Public Administration (MPA) programmes has just been approved by three key stakeholder bodies - the Public Administration Committee (of the Joint University Council), the Public Management & Policy Association, and the Public Administration Specialist Group of the UK's Political Studies Association. The Guidance benefitted from contributions by staff of the National School of Government and of 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 those in public services leadership roles today joined their departments, agencies and organisations 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 globalisation, 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) a traditional 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;

b) a practitioner of the New Public Management, with financial management, performance management and project management skills, and an understanding of concepts such as delivery chains, levers for change and Gantt charts;

c) 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.

It is not surprising, therefore, that government departments and other public services organisations are constantly looking for ways in which they can develop the capacity of their organisations to succeed in the new world, and the skills of their managers, and future leaders, to lead those organisations with vision and integrity, always focused on delivering better outcomes for the citizens of the UK.

### **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 modernise practices beyond New Public Management 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 veterinarians; but others such as procurement and programme and project management (PPM) 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 HE sector could have a big impact:

a) identifying specialist functions, skills and knowledge

Government Heads of Professions are responsible for defining and updating professional competence and standards. Research carried out by HE can support this work.

b) designing and delivering qualifications, courses, and other CPD

Programmes must represent good value for money and reflect the current and future needs of government departments and professions. Many universities are exploring the potential to involve employers and professions

in the design, delivery, assessment and evaluation of courses (don't many universities already do this as part of their course design?)

c) 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 organisations to come together to share ideas through forums, networks, alumni associations and other groups.

The development of the new Guidance on Masters in Public Administration demonstrates one of the ways the government sector and the HE 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 organisations 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 leavened with a soupçon from the business schools, is nothing if it is not practicable 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; the elements consisting in most MPAs of comparative public administration (theories, models, historical developments) and public policy studies, in that policies are the raw material if not always the output of administrative activity (wording is a bit clumsy in this sentence?). With most courses using 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, still plenty of scope for a differentiated approach, with some MPAs having 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. In this the 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 both UK and internationally vary in their needs for different aspects of content; 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's more straightforward simply to hire accountants or contract out for those skills) 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 class-room 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 3-4 week blocs, 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 blocs of several days at a time spaced apart by several weeks. Many UK employers have argued this is much less disruptive than traditional delivery patterns (sp: 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.

### **MPA and the international market**

The international market is, of course, hugely important for many universities when designing an MPA programme. Overseas students contribute £4bn 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). There has been a rapid increase in the number of international students attending UK universities during the last decade. 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 training (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 (see below) 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 (bold and lower case for consistency?)**

We finally turn to the new Guidance, first outlining how it came to be produced and some of the intentions behind it.

At the Public Administration Committee's York University conference in September 2008, the Committee agreed 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 Public Management and Policy Association (PMPA) and the National School of Government (NSG). These workshops included contributions from the Cabinet Secretary and from staff of Government Skills.

The working group was established and early on identified the following assumptions for its activity:

1. The guidance should be expressed in an inclusive way.
2. In the university world, the guidance should prove very useful to emerging providers of MPAs and other Masters programmes in public policy and public management.
3. The guidance should offer a way of opening up and continuing a dialogue between bodies such as PAC, the PMPA, the Public Administration Specialist Group of the UK's Political Studies Association, the National School of Government (NSG), and Government Skills.

The working group began its work in December 2008 and along the way involved participants from the Public Administration Committee, the Public Management and Policy Association, the Public Administration Specialist Group of the UK's Political Studies Association, the National School of Government, and Government Skills. The working group activity identified the following aims for the guidance:

1. To increase the quality of postgraduate programmes in public administration and management
2. To increase their credibility within the practitioner and academic communities
3. To encourage the future development of postgraduate programmes so as to better meet national, regional and local employer needs, and
4. 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 using the link shown at the bottom of the article. In the box below is reproduced just Section 1 which sets out the general requirements of a Masters in Public Administration (MPA).

The MPA is a course that

1. Aims to contribute to the development of greater professionalism in public services leadership and management.
2. 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.
3. Is intellectually challenging and places a high priority on personal development (which includes learning how to think critically and how to be reflective).
4. 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.
5. 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 (see below for indicative content of an MPA).
6. Includes opportunities to explore key concepts across institutional boundaries within the public sector.
7. Uses student-centred teaching and learning activities.
8. Explores the relationship between theory and practice and does this, where appropriate, through the use of action learning methods.
9. 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.
10. 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 organisations for purposes of work-based learning, and visits to public services organisations. It is envisaged that in some circumstances teaching and assessment on the course will be organised and provided by a team comprising university academics and public services practitioners.

## 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. 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 fruitfully with 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 (reword: 'fruitfully' appears twice).

[LINKS TO WEB SITES]

## References

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