

Professionalising the Civil Service: The Masters in Public Administration

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Background

There have been debates about how to professionalise Civil Services since the inception and growth of the British Civil Service throughout the last three centuries, but the debate has been stronger in the period since World War II when it became clear that the Service needed to become more responsive to technological and social change (Hennessy, 1989). In many respects civil services today are more professionalised than at any time in their history, including accountants, economists, statisticians, engineers and a range of other professional groupings amongst their ranks. Despite this, arguably the core business of government, supporting Ministers in the exercise of power, is still seen by some as the domain of the 'gifted all rounder' with a variety of views about whether such sensitive business requiring highly tuned personal skills can be systematised, professionalised and taught. The issue is particularly relevant in a world in which power is increasingly shared between governments and non-government actors (Bryson and Crosby, 1992) and in which governments – and therefore civil servants – are expected to be more politically aware and sensitive to the needs of people who live in a service-oriented consumerist society. The teaching of public administration therefore is central to the success of administrations and the societies that they serve.

The University of Ulster has been delivering a Masters in Public Administration (MPA) for over 15 years attracting in-service practitioners from a range of public sector and third sector organisations (civil service, non-department public bodies, local government, health trusts, agencies and voluntary/community organisations). There is a large, part-time postgraduate market for in-service professionals but numbers on the programme were declining. Currently 215,780 people work in public sector jobs in Northern Ireland, some 30.9% of total employment (Department of Employment and Learning, 2013); so why a declining market for postgraduate education? In part this is a reflection of the tougher economic climate and the burden of fees shifting from public sector employing organisations to individual students. Employers also found it much more difficult to release staff for the standard afternoon and evening per week over a 3-year period to complete the masters programme. It also highlights the lack of clarity within public sector bodies as to their training and education needs at a time when the public sector is in a state of flux with constant reforms such as the *Review of Public Administration* (Knox, 2012) and *Transforming your Care: A Review of Health and Social Care Northern Ireland* (2011). Typical of one large employer in the public sector is the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) which has 28,000 employees across 13 government departments and provides an in-house *Policy Skills and*

Development Programme through its Centre for Applied Learning (CAL). In September 2012 the Policy Champions Network within the NICS agreed on a collaborative model between CAL and the University of Ulster to deliver, on a pilot basis, one module from the MPA programme of postgraduate education and training for experienced civil servants.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the conception and implementation of a collaborative approach to public sector professional learning which seeks to explore some of the most sensitive and important relationships between power, politics and policy. Specifically the paper will consider 3 key issues. First, it will set out the pedagogic debate that exists within the discipline of public administration on links between theory and practice and how this translates into the content and delivery of an MPA programme. Second, it will outline how, as a result of this pedagogic debate senior NICS civil servants became an integral part of the design and delivery team for the new Masters programme. Third, the paper will consider how the first cohort of students responded to this collaborative provision and the impact which it had on their professional working experiences. Taking these factors into account, the paper will consider the scope for using this model as a basis for a new level of professionalisation of the civil service around the core business of governments, the exercise of power.

The pedagogic polemic

Public administration scholars have grappled with pedagogy from many years. Essentially there are two schools of thought – those who hold the view that public administration should retain its academic credentials as a social science subject and teach programmes accordingly. The second view is that public administration has by the nature of the subject a vocational orientation and should therefore be taught with this in mind; in other words the purpose of public administration education is to ‘shine a light on the dark arts of government’.

One of the most respected scholars in the field, Richard Chapman, raised the problem of teaching public administration in a comparative study on the United Kingdom, USA, Canada and Ireland as far back as 1978. In each of these countries he found uncertainty and concern about the nature of the subject: ‘there is no agreement whether it should primarily be concerned with producing new academic theories or with solving the problems of the practical world’ (Chapman, 1978: 48). This debate continues today in the discipline. Barberis (2012: 89-90), for example, claims that ‘many who teach the subject have been unable, even if it were their wish, to resist the clamour to offer programmes of study that are vocationally relevant’. He argues that public administration should rekindle and nurture its traditional academic roots and ‘resist the allure of training or of any attempt to torture its syllabuses to the apparent needs of the workplace’. While he accepts that it can have a vocational dimension, this is not the strength of academia. Public administration training, he

suggests, is 'best left to those inured with the genius of the workplace' and academics should resist 'the temptation to have it serve purposes for which it is ill suited'.

This somewhat purist view of how public administration should be taught is at odds with guidance issued by the Joint University Council, Public Administration Committee (2010) on what an MPA should comprise by way of design and content. This includes the following:

- An MPA should contribute to the development of greater professionalism in public services leadership and management.
- It should include opportunities to explore key concepts across institutional boundaries within the public sector.
- Use student-centred teaching and learning activities.
- Explore the relationship between theory and practice and does this, where appropriate, through the use of action learning methods.
- 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.

There seems to be little room for equivocation here as to the vocational or applied dimension of teaching public administration.

At the root of this debate is, however, a belief that the academic and vocational dimensions of public administration are mutually exclusive. This split does not occur in other highly professionalised, knowledge-based occupations such as medicine or law. In those cases there is a close relationship between the history and philosophy of the discipline which encasulate its values, the technical knowledge and expertise necessary to apply the discipline and the practice and regulation of the discipline. If we are to be serious about the professionalisation of public administration, therefore, we need to ask why this same professional continuum does not seem to apply in the exercise of power and whether a more systematic and explicit approach could allow such an approach to be developed.

The changing role of the civil servant

Running alongside this debate on pedagogy is a significantly changing context for those who work in public administration where governments across the world are struggling to deliver innovative solutions in the midst of changing societal expectations, rapid technological development, the increased dispersal and sharing of power across people and organisations and mounting pressure on resources. In Northern Ireland, these international trends are exemplified and exacerbated. First, there is a devolved power sharing government in Northern Ireland which demands public officials with different competencies. Many civil servants lacked skills in policy formulation because of their reliance under direct rule on the

'read-across' of policies from Westminster. The changing needs of the Northern Ireland Civil Service under devolved government require officials adept at operating within a power-sharing environment, accountable to locally elected ministers, and able to serve political masters from across the breadth of the political spectrum whose ideologies are often quite different in matters of public policy. In short, the 'new' civil service needs to accommodate a shift from being an administrative system to one where the policy making arena is much more responsive to locally determined priorities. They need to be able to: offer policy options to politicians; to guide and support ministers towards primary and secondary legislation; and, to assist the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver their *Programme for Government* goals. This is a very different landscape to that which existed under direct rule from Westminster.

Aside from the wider political context the day-to-day responsibilities of civil servants have changed. The job of the civil servant has become one of a network manager dependent on the resources of other actors over which he/she has limited authority. Civil servants now operate in a shared power structure and there is no single authority where strategic decisions can be unilaterally made (Bryson and Crosby, 1992). This one example provides the rationale for a different pedagogic approach to delivering the MPA programme which takes into account a new political context for participating officials. The new role ascribed to civil servants challenges conventional public administration approaches which strongly emphasises political decision making and goal setting as important factors. It therefore demands a different understanding of the role of the civil servant in modern public administration, one of network manager, in any education and training programmes (Klijn, 2005). The debate within the Northern Ireland Civil Service reflects a wider discussion about civil services internationally. As one UK review noted the Whitehall civil servant is expected to be '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' (Coxhead *et al* 2010).

A new framework for learning

The two factors discussed above, an emphasis on vocational education and training and the changing role of the civil servant, prompted a rethink within Ulster's MPA. This coincided with some radical thinking as to the nature of training that took place within the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Much of the NICS education and training had shifted from external provision across a range of disparate providers (Universities, colleges of Further Education, professional bodies) where individual civil servants were left to do their own market research on courses offered to internal training. One example is the *Policy Skills and Development Programme* delivered in 5 modules over 15 days through the Centre for Applied Learning and endorsed by the Institute of Leadership and Management. Whilst well received by programme participants, the Policy Skills and Development Programme was

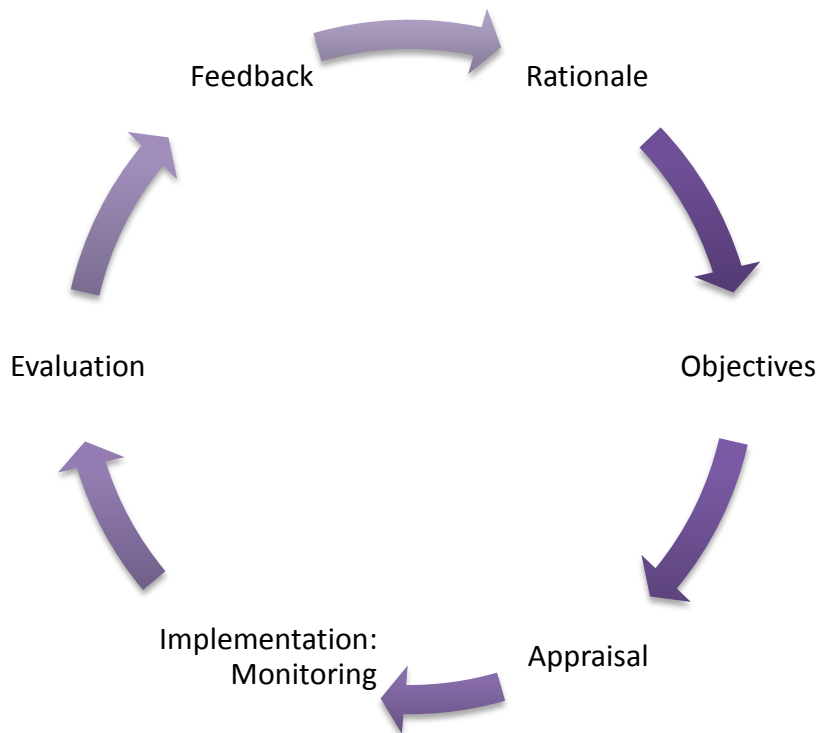
seen as an internal training programme which could benefit from theoretical perspectives, critical reflection and a pathway into a higher education qualification.

Discussions between academics delivering the pre-existing MPA programme and senior civil servants acknowledged the need for a new framework for learning. Academics needed to maintain a foothold in the academic research and literature to conceptualise public administration through a theoretical lens; practitioners needed to engage in reflective practice which would enhance their day-to-day policy roles. Each needed to 'speak the language' of the other and, as a result, achieve mutual benefits in the form of civil servants who would act as reflective practitioners. The most obvious way to do this was to co-design a pilot module (entitled *Applied Government*) in which theory met practice. Co-design and production seemed entirely appropriate as a concept which is drawn from the field of public administration where according to McCulloch (2009: 171) 'the student, lecturers and others who support the learning process are viewed as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise focused on the production, dissemination and application of knowledge, and on the development of learners'.

Two examples illustrate how in the design and delivery of the module academic theoreticians and practitioners 'collided' to offer a new framework for learning – first, in how policy making in the public sector is formulated, implemented and evaluated; and second, in how power is exercised in shaping public policy.

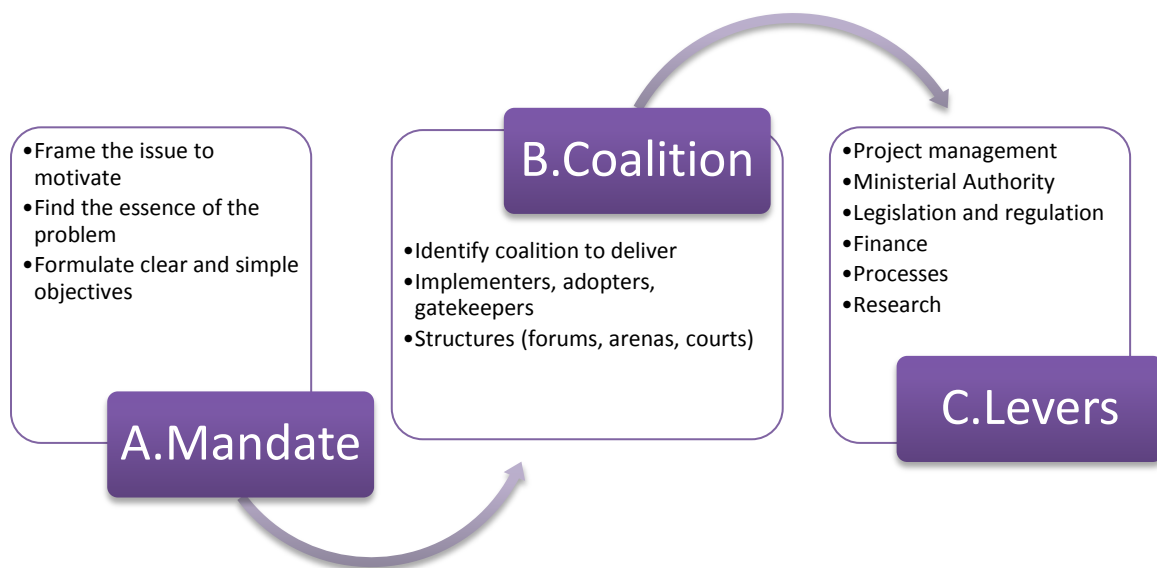
The traditional approach to public policy making is seen as cyclical process where the process begins with a clear rationale as to why a new policy should be introduced, objectives are set, the policy is implemented, monitored and evaluated into a review feedback loop - see figure 1 (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2003).

Figure 1: Traditional policy making cycle



This whole approach has been criticised in practice for failing to recognise the realities on the ground. Senior civil servants in Northern Ireland therefore developed an alternative framework for learning (McMahon, 2013). No longer was policy making viewed as a static, sequential, cyclical process but rather a delivery-oriented approach to assist officials in meeting the needs of ministers in a devolved government setting. The new approach set out by civil servants was a three stage paradigm for delivery in government which reflected real world experiences as follows: securing a mandate for change; building a coalition to secure change; and pulling the levers of power depicted as a model entitled: *Power, Policy and Politics* (see figure 2).

Figure 2: A new policy making paradigm – power, policy and politics



The second example illustrates a very different conceptualisation of how academics and practitioners see the role of power and public policy. Typically, academic theories on power and public policy locate the debate within the Lukes’ three dimensions of power (Lukes, 1986; 2005): (a) the community power debate which argues that power is concentrated in the hands of a small elite group that control policy processes; (b) important issues are kept off the political agenda by powerful interests who reinforce social attitudes and manipulate decision making procedures; and, (c) there are unequal power relationships despite the appearance of consensus (Caaney, 2012).

By contrast, civil servants working in government operate in what they describe as a shared power world in which government shares authority with a range of people and organisations. This requires a new way of looking at policy development and implementation where public policies are co-designed and co-produced with those people and organisations that deliver and use public services. The role of civil servants is to exercise a much more pluralist approach by reaching consensus between competing interests in support of the Minister.

These two examples typify the ‘theory meets practice’ challenge which informed and enriched a new framework for learning in the MPA programme.

Operationalising the new framework for learning: theory meets practice

The starting point for new and creative ways to operationalise the new learning approach described above was one pre-existing module on the MPA programme entitled *Applied Government*. Senior civil servants and academics worked together to restructure the module in a way which combined academic theory and practice. Practitioners at the highest level in the NICS (Deputy Secretaries) participated in the module as guest speakers in

delivering content which was now informed by the reformulated academic/practitioner model *Power, Policy and Politics*. The module ran during the academic year 2012/13 and we captured below the experience of participating students.

Some 25 postgraduate students participated in the pilot module ranging across the public sector: civil servants, and employees from local government, the health service, non-departmental public bodies and the voluntary and community sector. Four thematic areas emerged from the evaluation of the module as follows:

- (a) **Content:** All students agreed (40%) or definitely agreed (60%) that the module was very useful for their work. The range of speakers offered students perspectives from other organisations or departments which they would not otherwise have been exposed to. This enhanced their understanding of the plethora of bodies which constitute the public sector. As one student noted: 'it was very useful to get inputs from, and insights into, the work of senior civil servants and interesting to work with a group from a wide variety of backgrounds'. Specifically students made reference to the value of learning about techniques associated with successful policy making.
- (b) **External speakers:** The mix of academics and practitioners worked well. All students agreed (24%) or definitely agreed (76%) that staff delivering the module made the subject interesting. Some participants were surprised by the frankness and openness of senior civil servants and their willingness to posit controversial views in order to stimulate discussion. Typical of the comments were the following: 'I found the course extremely informative. The style and candid delivery was excellent and helped to make theory 'real'. I found the techniques which were taught to be very useful. This module should be made available to the wider policy making community'. Involvement of senior civil servants also provided students with a full range of practical and topical examples to illustrate key points of learning.
- (c) **Intellectual stimulation:** one potential consequence of a composite academic and practitioner offering is that the former is 'dumbed down' in a bid to create a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice. All students agreed (32%) or definitely agreed (68%) that the module was intellectually stimulating but at the same time had a practical orientation. This balance is difficult to achieve and there is some learning for the module providers (discussed below). Typical of student reaction on this point was the comment 'real life cases studies and interaction with other students challenged my perspectives'.
- (d) **Overall quality of the module:** Students also offered constructive criticisms (below) but in the round were highly complimentary of the module. As one participant remarked 'the content, design and delivery would be difficult to improve. Having completed a first degree in Public Management some years ago, I found the module 'applied' and having more personal impact on me. Make all policy makers undertake the module!' All students were satisfied (24%) or very satisfied (76%) with the overall quality of the module.

There were also some important reflections and key learning points for those delivering the module. First, although senior civil servants began with an entreaty for Chatham house rules to apply, but inevitably opened up as they ‘warmed’ to their topic. This was a direct result of the willingness of students to engage with them and the level of interest expressed in their work. Although senior officials are well used to giving presentations, these can often be fairly formal and necessarily constrained by the parameters of their jobs. It was visible to the outside observer that they felt liberated by an academic environment which encouraged interaction and removed the barriers of deference normally associated with their status within the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Moreover, feedback from civil servants indicated that while understandably apprehensive to begin with, the overall experience proved highly stimulating for them. Such has been the success that they have willingly volunteered their services again and other senior colleagues expressed an interest in becoming involved.

Second, more thought needs to be given to the overall coherence of a module which combines academic content and practitioner inputs. This is captured by comments from one student: ‘I think the classes focused largely on practical matters and examples which were very useful. However given that the assignments focus much more on theory, at the moment the assessment feels dislocated from the class materials, interesting as they were’. External speakers, by dint of the time they can commit to their inputs, can fail to appreciate the wider conceptual framework of the module. The student experience can then become one of a revolving door of high quality, but nonetheless, disparate speakers who fully capture their attention but are then left wondering how it all connects to the module assessment.

Third, there is a danger that multiple inputs on a module squeezes out enough time for student interaction. Each visiting speaker provides a full account of his/her topic and collectively time for reflection and critique may be reduced because speakers come prepared to ‘fill the allocated slot’. As one student noted: ‘I would have liked the opportunity for more interaction with other course participants, to learn from the experience of others and discuss common issues. Perhaps this could be achieved by a workshop session. It should include an element of how you intend to implement learning back in your job’.

We summarise the shift from the pre-existing MPA provision to the new model in table 1.

Table 1: Professionalising the civil service

	Traditional MPA academic programme	Applied MPA programme
Characteristics	Educational course Theoretically informed	Education and training Vocational learning
Modules	Designed and delivered exclusively by academics	Co-designed and delivered – academics and senior

		practitioners
Examples of MPA content	<p>Policy making cycle conceived as policy formulation, implementation and evaluation</p> <p>Theoretical conceptualisation: three dimensions of power</p>	<p>Messy shared power world</p> <p>Civil servant as network manager with no single authority where strategic decisions can be made unilaterally</p> <p>Model of working practice structured around concepts of <i>Power, Policy and Politics</i></p>
Critique	<p>Lacks practical focus but locates participants' experience in wider theoretical context – allows time for reflection on working practice</p>	<p>Focus on problem solving in a shared power world</p> <p>Normative approach to the 'here and now'</p>

Conclusions

Given the success of the pilot module the Northern Ireland Civil Service has now supported 26 applicants from 13 government departments to attend the Postgraduate Certificate Programme in Public Administration in the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy (in the academic year 2013/14) The Postgraduate Certificate Programme comprises 4 modules (Public Administration and Governance; Strategic Leadership; Applied Government (above); and, Policy Analysis) and makes up the first stage of the Masters in Public Administration. This development has offered the opportunity for the NICS to influence the content and delivery of the Certificate Programme, although moving to a full co-design process must await the implementation and evaluation of their extended involvement in this programme. Even in this short-term collaborative development between academia and practitioners, there are important reflections on the process.

- Committed individuals in both organisations are critical to the collaboration. Although there may be institutional buy-in it is the efforts of key staff which makes the idea of collaboration move from concept to implementation.
- There must be a robust underpinning theoretical rationale and frame of reference within which the design of the module/programme takes place. The introduction of the *Power, Policy and Politics* rubric provided an essential intellectual pathway in rethinking the relevance of what was currently on offer in the MPA programme. A theoretical underpinning also creates a milieu for research informed teaching.
- Since the programme delivered is not a bespoke provision for the NICS, cognisance needs to be given to the wider student body in a way which can enrich what is on offer through a breadth of participation.

- High quality external speakers provide an academic programme with much 'real world' credibility and hence enhance its marketing potential. Yet their inputs need to be managed in a way which provides a coherent student experience and demonstrates a natural link between theory and practice that become an important mechanism for facilitated learning sessions.

More generally, given the policy community that is Northern Ireland, this type of collaborative arrangement provides academics who are researching in the field of public administration and policy direct access to senior officials, in either a different context or as a new contact. Given the new research emphasis on 'impact', collaboration around teaching can open up avenues that would not otherwise exist. Academics and practitioners then become accessible to each other. It also helps break down stereotypes of the other: academics are cloistered in ivory towers; and officials lack an awareness and appreciation of research. Hopefully this will provide the basis for a new form of professionalisation of the civil service in the modern, shared power world.

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