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### **Introduction to special issue: Curriculum design in public administration education: Challenges and perspectives**

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# Introduction to special issue: Curriculum design in public administration education: Challenges and perspectives

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This special issue for *Teaching Public Administration* (TPA) has emerged from a special joint panel of the Public Policy and Administration Group of the UK Political Studies Association and the Public Administration Committee (PAC) at the latter's conference at Northumbria University in September 2019. The theme of the panel was *Curriculum Design in Public Administration Education: Challenges and Perspectives*. We were pleased to be part of stimulating and insightful conversations about the diversity of approaches for teaching public administration and to learn from the experiences of the presenters. The panel discussions led to further conversations about how to teach the modern student of public administration, especially in the context of the internationalisation agenda, which affects university and programme strategies the length and breadth of the UK and beyond. We were also keen to bring together other papers in this issue that talk to such developments from an international perspective. With this in mind, we are very pleased that the articles by *Kinsella* and *Waite*, and *Baracskaý*, are also part of this special collection of articles.

We, as guest editors, are very grateful to the Editors of the journal for their support in helping us bring this edition of TPA together. We all have a shared interest in exploring, and understanding, how public administration education can continue to be part of the academic curriculum in the UK and overseas, including how educators can respond to the challenges of the student growth agenda (in terms of international student recruitment and the associated changes to delivery models and culturally sensitive content), the need to maximise the employability and graduate attributes within public administration programmes, and how to open up opportunities for students to be partners in their education (in a sustained fashion and not in a tokenistic way).

Interestingly, most of the discussions around this special issue topic happened before the COVID-19 pandemic and, in fact, most of the papers were published online ahead of print during the pandemic itself. In many senses the pandemic has elucidated just how important public administration is for the future of the social sciences. The role of public administrators has been in the spotlight during the pandemic – not just in terms of public service leadership and the need to be resilient – but also in terms of how to organise the structures of government at multiple levels to deliver unprecedented initiatives e.g. such as economic support (e.g. furlough schemes and the 'levelling up' agenda) as well as the

national rollout of the vaccine programme. The post-pandemic context will require public administrators to continually adapt how they undertake their work during the recovery period and beyond and we all, as public administration scholars, have our part to play to make sure what we teach public servants is fit for these turbulent times.

Fuertes's article considers the role of past crises, such as the global financial crisis, to suggest how public service ethics, and the ability to navigate through ethical dilemmas, needs to have a greater presence in public administration programmes. Fuertes make a convincing case to maintain that the teaching of ethics and public value are crucial and does so by examining the necessities, merits, and difficulties of embedding ethics and public value concepts in the curriculum. The conceptualisation of professional ethics and ethical codes regarding the role of professional organisations, and on the format that ethics teaching should take, is, according to *Fuertes*, a future research agenda worth pursuing.

Our own paper – *Moseley and Connolly* – considers the role of inquiry based learning (IBL) as a pedagogical strategy in order to empower students to own their learning and to allow them to be resilient and flexible. We look at IBL, and the critiques of it, from different perspectives. A key theme of the article is about how teaching IBL with postgraduate international students – who often have to assimilate complex theories and concepts in a second language and within a short space of time – have often been educated in contexts with a more didactic traditions of education. We argue that there can be a tension between some of the teaching and learning methods that are being promoted nationally and the needs of an increasingly diverse international student body. Reflecting on our own experiences as teachers of international students on public administration programmes, we suggest ways in which this type of approach could be assimilated within the broader set of pedagogical practices used with international postgraduate students.

*Baracska* develops the international perspective of the special issue further by offering several examples, arguments and reflections about how to design course structures and content in American public administration which raise the global awareness of students so that they can understand the value of diversity and cultural competences. *Baracska* draws on the importance of comparative public administration to help shine some light on how to shape pedagogical strategies to expose students to the intricacies of different cultures, nations, governments, and policies through the learning journey.

Empowering students to be partners in learning has, and continues to be, a major driver which shapes the approaches to teaching in higher education. *Elliot et al.* unpack this issue from the perspective of co-design and co-production. The authors argue that meaningful implementation of co-production and co-design in the teaching of public administration relies on being serious about the sharing of power. The willingness to undertake co-production and co-design requires the means to make it happen and, they argue, so much comes down the motivations of educators to be able to experiment and have the confidence to not see themselves as the didactic educator.

Empowering students through the co-design process is, among other things, also important for the employability of students. This is the main focus of *Kinsella* and

*Waite's* overall thesis, which is that educators (or 'instructors') should promote skills development in terms of *inter alia* problem solving and communication. This is crucial for students of public administration more generally but, also, skills development for employment needs to be sustained throughout programmes. From reading across the papers by *Elliot et al.* and *Kinsella* and *Waite* there is clearly a case to be made for a co-productive approach to skills development. The final position put forward by *Kinsella* and *Waite* is that we need to bring governmental stakeholders into the learning space not just to help educate students through the experiential learning of, say, national and local government officials, there is also a need to understand how to develop the softer skills (such as working across organisational networks). Soft skills cannot be underestimated in their importance given that those students who transition from public administration programmes into public services need to lead, manage and navigate complex policy networks.


With skills development and soft skills in mind, educators of public administration face the challenge of being able diversify their assessment strategies and keep pace with the demands of work-related learning. *Judge* provides a compelling account of how policy writing (or writing for policy) – such as briefs/memos – is a common requirement within employment but it cannot be assumed that writing complex information using short and summative language is by any means a simple task. From an assessment design perspective, *Judge* sets out a heuristic framework derived from the extant literature on policy writing assessments to help educators make choices about how to design policy briefs.


To conclude, the articles in this collection, by adopting different perspectives, make important contributions to understanding teaching and curriculum development for the contemporary public administration student. So, how can we navigate the turbulence of current times in public administration programmes? We suggest that, as an academy, we could do worse than reflecting on how we design our curricula, through adopting co-productive approaches (*Elliot et al.*), but also to understand the utility of varied and practice-focused assessment strategies (*Judge*) and applied pedagogical approaches (*Moseley* and *Connolly*) which help to equip the modern student to be globally engaged and culturally sensitive (*Baracska*) in order to bolster their soft skills for employment (*Kinsella* and *Waite*) but, while doing so, we can reflect, continually, on how we are equipping students to be the ethical public servant of tomorrow (*Fuertes*).

We hope that you enjoy this special issue.

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