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Chapter 8

British public administration: The status of the taught discipline

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British public administration (PA) has a history of debating its identity and future standing within the academy (for example, Chandler, 1991, 2002; Hood, 2011; Liddle, 2017; Rhodes, 1995, 1996; Rhodes et al., 1995). Perhaps then, it is not surprising that discussions often glorify the past, catastrophise the present, and advocate a return to more traditional and purer forms of the discipline. In contrast, alternative lines of argument emphasise PA's need to modernise and deliver a curriculum which more effectively addresses the complex and 'wicked' challenges the sector must address. This chapter explores how this tension manifests in current PA provision within British higher education (HE). It reflects on the development of the discipline, its relationship with teaching, its internal debates, and current challenges.¹ Following a brief history of PA teaching in Britain, the chapter illustrates current thinking on the requirements of good PA educational provision. The third section of the chapter briefly sets out the method employed to identify and analyse taught postgraduate PA programmes in British universities. Analysis is then presented, and the chapter concludes by suggesting that the taught discipline is developing slowly but needs to incorporate a better balance between traditional and non-traditional subjects. Though PA shows some signs of flexibility and responsiveness in its current educational offer, it is yet to fully recognise the need to place a number of contemporary issues at its fore.

<a> THE NATURE OF BRITISH PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

"In the establishment of public administration as an academic subject, Britain is still an under-developed country" (Ridley, 1972, p. 65).

British PA is perhaps unique, in how its system of government is lauded across the world. Yet those charged with the management of government are treated as enthusiastic amateurs (Fulton Report, 1968, cited in Greer & Jarman, 2010: see also Fry, 1969). Such assessment of

¹ It avoids discussion on the intricacies of British geopolitics and understands Britain to include all parts of the UK.

the UK Civil Service has a long trajectory with the Fulton Report (1968), describing it as being based on the cult of the amateur with no specific education or formal training.² The Report led to the formation of the Civil Service College (latterly renamed the National School for Government),³ which only operated between 1970 and 2012. Since then, a private limited company acquired the name ‘Civil Service College’ along with many of the training resources of the old National School for Government. It now operates as a private business offering training to the civil service and other parts of the public sector. During its 42 years of service, as part of the UK Government, the Civil Service College enjoyed no more than a fleeting engagement with universities (Chapman, 1980). Indeed, Sir William Armstrong of the UK Government’s Civil Service Department noted that “as far as I know, British administration and the Civil Service has regarded itself as not requiring academic insights or advice” (cited by Chapman and Munroe, 1979, p. 3). Considerable efforts were made by the Joint University Council’s Public Administration Committee (PAC)⁴, particularly following publication of the Fulton Report, to establish stronger links between universities and UK Government. There was even reference to “cautious optimism” (Chapman & Munroe 1979, p. 3) and yet only seven years after establishment of the Civil Service College, it was noted that “the future [of this relationship] appeared very uncertain” (p. 4).

The UK Civil Service has changed dramatically over time (Greer & Jarman, 2010), and arguably, wider public services even more so. Yet, there has been a reticence to support the continuing education of those employed in public service, in respect of requirements for educational qualifications in PA. Key institutes such as the Civil Service College and the Royal Institute of Public Administration (RIPA)⁵ have either been allowed to fold or have been sold to the private sector. It is notable, for example, that questions were raised about the value and effectiveness of the Civil Service College soon after its inception, and that significant funding cuts followed (Chapman, 1982). Similarly, the RIPA, which was established in 1921, received its first government grant of £6,000 only in 1949 yet at the same time a grant of £150,000 was given to the newly formed British Institute of Management (Chapman 1978). The British Institute of Management continues today as the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) whilst the RIPA folded in 1992, having failed to receive

² The Fulton Report made recommendations for the modernisation of the Civil Service.

³ The Civil Service College was created to develop an efficient and educated administrative class (Mackenzie, 1979).

⁴ The Joint University Council (JUC), a Learned Society and its Public Administration Committee (PAC) provide an oversight of higher education focused training and seek to influence government policy and practice (Chapman, 2007).

⁵ RIPA The Royal Institute for Public Administration (RIPA), later titled the Royal Institute of Public Administration (1922-1992) was a professional body promoting the civil service profession and the study of PA (Nottage & Stack 1972).

government support which would have enabled its continuation (Chapman, 1992a). Notwithstanding this, there have been moments when teaching PA has seen a rise in demand (Rhodes, 1996), however, a certain disdain for academic qualifications in PA has endured. As a result, training, even education, has predominantly been delivered by consultants and practitioners.

At the same time, the quality of instruction provided by management consultants and practitioners who are not actively engaged in PA research has long been questioned. As noted in 1974, “The quality of much of their teaching is poor and the material often inadequate and outdated, partly the result of physical and intellectual isolation from those who teach and write about PA in the universities and polytechnics” (Wright, 1974, p. 73). Similar comments could be made today about civil servants and other public managers studying MBA courses that are devoid of public policy and administration content (see Chandler, 1991).

The poor standing of PA teaching in the UK has always been in stark contrast to countries elsewhere. Ridley’s (1972) comparison of PA teaching in the UK, Germany, and France, highlighted the latter two countries’ traditions of teaching PA, dating back to the 1800’s. In a similar vein, particular comment has been made of contributions made by the *École Nationale d’Administration* in Paris and Strasbourg (Mackenzie, 1979). Similarly, the discipline’s origins date back to Prussia in 1727 (Fry, 1969) and Sweden in the late 1700’s (Molitor cited by Fry, 1969), with the first book on PA published in France in 1808 (Molitor cited by Fry, 1969).

<a>A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH TEACHING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Many histories of British PA have been written, often with a focus on key institutions such as the Royal Institute for Public Administration (RIPA) (Chapman, 1993; Shelley, 1993; Rhodes, 1995, 1996; Rhodes et al. 1995), the Public Administration Committee (PAC) of the Joint University Council (Chapman, 2007), and the National School of Government (previously Civil Service College). What links many of these analyses and commentaries is a preoccupation with definition and semantics, a lamenting of former glories, and an unease with forces for change.⁶ Indeed, a cursory review of this literature would leave an optimist somewhat disillusioned. References point to the end of Whitehall (Wilson & Campbell,

⁶ For a more positive perspective on the health of PA, see Hood (2011).

1995); the Civil Service (Chapman, 1992b); the Whitehall model (Wilson & Barker, 1995); the deprivileging of the Civil Service (Hood, 1995); intellectual crisis (Boyne, 1996); decline (Chandler, 1991, 2002); decay (Elcock, 1991); discontent (Ridley, 1972) or demise (Greenwood, 1999).

These reviews date back over a number of decades and repeat many of the same themes and concerns. For example, an early commentary bemoaned that “the Civil Service has never shown much or even any interest in university courses in the subject either for first or higher degrees” (Robson 1975, p. 193). This analysis was based on 25–35 years of experience but similar grievances have been raised in the five decades since and this context sits in stark contrast to a number of other countries (as noted above) where national and regional governments are the primary source of students for PA programmes and often work closely with their local universities to both support staff development and inform policy making and practice. This has, to a large extent, never been the case in Britain where universities have typically had to look elsewhere and be adaptive to attract students, directing their focus to local government, local public sector, and more recently, the international market (Fenwick & Macmillan, 2014).

Alongside frustrated narratives focusing on the decline and demise of the discipline are definitional debates and diagnoses of the causes of apparent decline in the teaching of PA. Discussions have typically centred on the use and meaning of PA, public management, public governance, and other variations (reflected partly in Elcock, 2004; Carmichael, 2004). For some, these terms relate to distinct approaches, for others they represent wholly different foci, yet others use them more interchangeably. Such debates are not as prominent in other subjects, such as business administration (or business management). Whereas the fractious nature of discussion around nomenclature within PA has led to a plethora of differently titled programmes and modules, and even confusion about what constitutes an MPA or a DPA (Jones, 2012), MBA’s and DBA’s sit comfortably alongside MScs in business management.

Several explanations seek to diagnose PA’s apparent decline. Chandler draws attention to how deregulation and the introduction of mass education launched a marketisation of the sector (2002). He goes on to suggest that many smaller ‘niche’ programmes, such as PA were casualties of this change which instigated the competitive large courses that so many educators are familiar with today. Liddle also highlights the marketisation of HE and its

impact on PA (2017) pointing to the rise of the Business School within UK academia. With others, she argues that such developments have squeezed PA out in favour of business orientated subjects (see also Chandler, 1991, 2002; Elcock, 2004; Fenwick & MacMillan, 2014; Jones, 2012) and injected a strain of ‘new right’ philosophy into the teaching of PA (Liddle, 2017).⁷ Following from this, is a more generalised suggestion that the location of PA teaching in departments predominantly focused on other subjects has diluted the subject and introduced new perspectives (Johnston Miller, 2012; Jones, 2012).

Additionally, it is noted that for many, public administration is not considered an attractive career option (Ritz & Waldner, 2011; Shand & Howell, 2015) and despite the increasingly complex nature of government, student populations show a reticence to study it (Johnston Miller, 2012). This may be exacerbated by a failure to include PA within curricula at secondary school level (Jones 2012). Finally, it is suggested that government policy towards academia, the civil service, and the wider public sector has contributed to its demise, (Elcock, 2004; see also Liddle, 2017). Yet these varied diagnoses focus on external factors. Few have considered internal factors such as the philosophy, concepts, and pedagogy of British PA itself.⁸ Of course, PA is not alone in facing significant threat over the last thirty years (often driven by external forces). Where a difference may be noted is in its response. When Rhodes (1996) characterised the British PA of the 1950’s – 1970’s as insular and unreflective he could as easily have been referring to the 1990’s – 2010’s. Whilst many academic subjects have experienced a cultural or postmodern turn, PA has largely held on to modernist assumptions of rationality and progress. In fact, it could be argued that changes to the British university sector, particularly driven by the Research Excellence Framework(s) – which assesses research quality across British universities – and associated push to demonstrate ‘international’ excellence (Hood, 2011), has led PA to become increasingly methodologically reductionist and less relevant to practitioners (Pollitt, 2017).

<a> SHIFTING PRIORITIES IN THE TEACHING OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

PA education in Britain was first introduced in 1968⁹ and within the decade, seven institutions delivered PA programmes (Jones, 2012). Exclusively focused on the post

⁷ See Chandler (2002) for an overview of the debate on new right values and PA.

⁸ Johnston Miller draws attention to a number of internal factors that may have had a negative impact on the discipline. First, PA scholars have neglected the discipline and failed to nurture and develop junior scholars (see Hood, 2011, see also Johnston Miller, 2012). Second, a failure to establish the accreditation of PA through a learned society has limited the discipline’s ‘voice’ and devalued it as a unique and important subject of study (Johnston Miller, 2012).

⁹ Sheffield Polytechnic was the first institution to introduce a PA undergraduate degree (Jones, 2012).

experience market, these degrees, initially aimed at civil servants, trained public sector workers in managerial skills, placing a focus on traditional PA topics, and introducing theoretical and epistemological perspectives towards the end of the 20th century (Rhodes et al., 1995). More recently, a significant voice within the academy has argued that PA programmes have failed to keep abreast of and address crucial changes in society. As a result, it is suggested that current and future public sector leaders may well be leaving higher education ill-equipped to address the needs of their communities. Indeed, Sabharwal, Levine and D'Agostino (2018) highlight the importance of preparing future public sector leaders to effectively serve a diverse citizenry. White and Rice advocate for practitioners having a greater appreciation of demographic change and the diverse environment in which they live (2015). Over a decade ago, Page, Oldfield and Urstad (2008) argued for the inclusion of equality and diversity in the education of public sector managers. Focusing on Britain, Johnston Miller and McTavish exposed the failure of PA curricula to include gender, women, or feminism (2011). Highlighting the impact of such omissions on student learning, they argued for programmes and pedagogy that equipped women to manage the masculine discourse and practice so dominant in the public sector. Scholars also lobby for a more international perspective in PA teaching. Jreisat argues that modern-day public-sector leaders must possess cross-national analytical skills (2005) and Basheka makes a case for a broader PA curriculum that incorporates indigenous traditions and structures (2012). Manoharan, Mirbel and Carrizales convincingly argue for a more comparative approach to teaching PA (2018) and Matzslita calls for a decolonised PA that provides opportunities for students to reflect on their background (2020).

While PA's failure to reflect and evolve is addressed elsewhere in this chapter (see Rhodes, 1996, 2010), it's well recognised multidisciplinary and pluralistic (Raadschelaers, 2008, 2010; see also Johnston, 2012)¹⁰ nature suggests it should be open to more expansive perspectives and ideas. Building on previous analyses that have assessed the provision of PA in higher education (see Johnston Miller & McTavish, 2011; Johnston Miller, 2012; Jones, 2012), the remainder of this chapter explores the extent to which the modern-day PA curricula in Britain has progressed beyond a traditional and rationalist focus. It places particular emphasis on programme content and the extent to which the academy has sought to broaden the curricula and deliver programmes that seek to address modern day challenges.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive overview on PA's multidisciplinary, refer to Johnston Miller (2012).

<a> IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF PROGRAMMES

Research was funded by the Joint University Council's Public Administration Committee to identify current PA programmes and their content. It was conducted in three phases between January 2020 and September 2021. Research comprised an initial review of the literature and two separate reviews of programme provision: all work was internet based.¹¹ Given the demise of undergraduate PA education in Britain,¹² the focus of this work is postgraduate taught programmes. These are typically vocational in nature, providing specialist degrees or MBA level qualifications specialising in the public sector (Fenwick & Macmillan, 2014). Initial scoping identified key search terms including PA, public management, public services, public sector, and public policy, though final search terms were confined to MPA, public administration (PA) and public management. While debate concerning the distinctions between PA and public management continue, these semantics are not pertinent to the research. The Which Guide to University and Colleges¹³ structured the research which utilised university search engines to identify taught postgraduate programmes. This was supplemented by programme searches through Google.

All programmes were categorised in terms of delivery mode, duration, target cohort, key marketing, and whether optional modules were offered. Assessment of programme content was captured through descriptions of programme narratives and core and optional modules. Traditional PA content was identified as that which focused on 'the study of the public sector,' 'institution, structures and decision-making processes,' 'policy formulation and implementation,' and 'the role of the people involved' (Jones, 2012: 126). Less traditional PA content was categorised in reference to discussion elsewhere in this chapter (Basheka, 2012; Jreisat, 2005; Manoharan, et al. 2018; Matzslita, 2020; Sabharwal et al., 2018; White & Rice, 2015). Modules explicitly referring to comparative, international and or global perspectives, social equity and diversity – characteristics protected in the Equality Act 2010 – were categorised as non-traditional.

<a> FINDINGS

¹¹ A number of programmes were streamlined or cut during the preparation of the chapter; a number of new programmes were identified.

¹² Only De Montfort University offers an undergraduate programme: BA Hons in Public Administration and Management.

¹³ Now [TheUniGuide](#).

Thirty programmes taught across 16 universities and one management school were identified. A number of universities offered more than one programme and a number of offers were derivatives of the same programme (see Table 8.1). Twenty were taught within what are termed as the research intensive ‘Russell Group’ universities. Eighteen were titled as MPAs and eight MPAs with a speciality were identified. Of the seven institutions teaching PA in the 1970s¹⁴, three still deliver MPA programmes. Compared against research for the PAC in 2008 (see Johnston Miller & McTavish, 2011), seven universities had discontinued eight MPA courses.¹⁵

One pure public management MSc and two public management programmes integrated another subject (all at the same university). Finally, one MA in Public Leadership and Management was included in the analysis, given its central focus on public management. The majority of programmes were listed as campus-based and in line with the subject’s vocational status, over two thirds of programmes offered part time study, as an option or the only method of delivery. The dominance of part time programmes appeared to suggest strong links with the public sector, or an ability to attract these professionals. Two programmes offered a degree apprenticeship. While one programme offered a placement option, another took a specifically applied context and a small number offered capstone options which provide for an ‘integrated educational experience’ that is practice orientated and theory based (Reid & Miller, 1997). One department offered microcredit qualifications to supplement formal qualifications.

While part time programmes generally marketed to experienced professionals, a number of those offering full time or both study options also did the same, while others took a more catch-all approach to recruitment. By virtue of set government funding requirements, both degree apprenticeship programmes required applicants to possess public sector experience, though one did not articulate this.

Table 8 1: University public administration & public management programmes

University	Degree	Delivery	Full Time / Part Time
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¹⁴ Glasgow Caledonian University; DeMontfort, University; Manchester Metropolitan University; Robert Gordon, University; Sheffield Hallam University; Teesside University; University of Glamorgan.

¹⁵University of Greenwich; University of Liverpool; University of Manchester; University of Newcastle (two programmes); Open University; Robert Gordon University; University of Warwick.

Birmingham, University of	MPA	Campus	FT&PT
Birmingham, University of	MPA Finance	Campus	PT
Birmingham, University of	MPA Human Resources	Campus	PT
Birmingham, University of	MPA	Online	PT
Birmingham, University of	MSc Public Management & Leadership	Blended	PT
Birmingham, University of	Degree Apprenticeship & MSc, Public Management & Leadership	Blended	PT
Birmingham, University of	MSc Public Management	Campus	FT
De Montfort University	MA Public Leadership & Management	Blended	PT
Exeter, University of	MPA	Campus	FT&PT
Huddersfield University	MPA	Campus	PT
Manchester Metropolitan University	MPA	Campus	FT&PT
Leeds, University of	MPA	Campus	FT&PT
London School of Economics (LSE)	MPA	Campus	FT*
North West Wales Management School	MPA	Online	PT
Nottingham, University of	MPA	Campus	FT&PT
Portsmouth, University of	MPA Degree Apprenticeship	Campus	PT
Portsmouth, University of	MPA	Online	FT&PT
Southampton, University of	MPA	Campus	FT
Teesside University	MPA	Campus	FT&PT
Teesside University	MPA applied	Campus	FT
University College London (UCL)	MPA Public Administration & Management	Campus	FT&PT
Ulster, University of	MPA	Campus	FT
West Scotland, University of	MPA	Campus	FT
York, University of	MPA	Online	PT
York, University of	MPA (International Development)	Online	PT
York, University of	MPA (Public Policy & Management)	Online	PT
York, University of	MPA (Social & Public Policy)	Online	PT
York, University of	MPA	Campus	FT&PT
York, University of	MPA (Public Policy)	Campus	FT&PT
York, University of	MPA (International Development)	Campus	FT&PT

Notes: * LSE, full time programme is 2 years in length.

Sources: above-mentioned university websites.

While six programmes failed to provide any notable programme narrative, the remaining 24 followed similar paths, tending to start with an explanation of how society needs professionals with the appropriate qualifications and skills to navigate challenging times. Following this, many then referred to the skills and tools provided by their postgraduate programme. The majority listed the different fields involved in the syllabus such as

sociology, government, economy, and research methodologies. A small number detailed their distinctiveness, in terms of the institution (part of a specific institute and rankings), academics involved in the programme (staff qualifications and or research expertise) learning opportunities (field trips, internships and learning experiences). Interdisciplinarity was used as a strategy to merge narratives, instead of articulating a single distinctive theoretical approach. Finally, many programmes highlighted employability options and potential employers in private, public and third sector organisations. This was especially clear in programmes that were not tailored to post experience applicants. All programmes failed to shape a narrative around specific societal problems where an MPA can make a difference, though a number made minor reference to this. Without exception, programme marketing failed to acknowledge that successful public sector working is contingent on collaboration. All narratives were individualised and focused on prospective student success.

Eleven programmes comprised core modules only, 16 offered options and three were unclear on programme content beyond broad topic coverage. In a number of cases, option topics were social science as opposed to PA-based, perhaps reflective of PA's broad appeal and spread across disciplines (Jones, 2012).¹⁶ Public administration and public management focused programmes did not appear to significantly differ in context; justifying the authors' position on terminology. Traditional PA topics (Jones, 2012) constituted the majority of core modules across all programmes, though a number of programmes that did not offer options included non-traditional modules. Of the 27 programmes that detailed specific modules, comparative or globally focused modules were the most common form of non-traditional content, 21 programmes offering this, 11 as core. A number of programme narratives stressed a global or comparative approach, irrespective of module content. Seventeen programmes offered modules that explicitly or implicitly addressed social equity, seven as core. Only seven programmes offered modules that addressed diversity and only was a core subject. In contrast to findings by Johnston Miller and McTavish (2011), three programmes offered a module on gender. It should be noted that a sizable portion of non-traditional modules appeared more social science as opposed to PA focused.

Programme locations differed, the majority were based within departments or schools associated with politics, however a number did not state a location. While this may be an

¹⁶ Possibly also a reflection of programme streamlining during the Covid-19 pandemic.

indication of how, unlike most social science-related disciplines in HE, British PA is nomadic in nature, it may indicate the host's department lack of support for the subject (see Elcock, 2004, Liddle, 2017)¹⁷ or a catch all approach to recruitment.

<a> CONCLUSIONS

The history of British PA provides significant insight into the current state of teaching. Despite concerns and grievances highlighting the impact of external pressures such as a lack of government support and the role of business schools in undermining the educational offer of PA, it remains a significant presence in HE. As a discipline, PA's resilience, flexibility and innovation is clearly demonstrated in the ongoing delivery of programmes to domiciled students employed in an increasingly fragmented public sector and overseas students who are largely post-undergraduate. An additional measure of PA's health is the extension of its educational reach. Multiple universities now offer sector specific programmes, for example to health professionals or the police. Others offer derivative programmes, such as those in public policy, a specialism that while allied to PA, does not focus on the mechanics and processes of the public sector. As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, PA is both 'multidisciplinary' and 'pluralistic.' Therefore, a strong case can be made for including it within more generalised HE studies, for example politics and business management programmes.¹⁸ Yet equally, the identity of taught PA must be protected, whether as part of a broader programme or as a full PA degree located within other discipline. Indeed, this challenge is particularly stark in business schools where greater efforts must be made in ensuring that PA students are equipped for careers in the public service services.

To conclude, our research shows that PA, as a subject, continues to evolve, though the pace of change is slow. While programmes are placing a greater focus on less traditional topics, the pace of demographic and social change, the prevalence of intractable wicked issues and the global nature of challenges faced by the public sector suggests that more progressive topics deserve a central positioning within taught programmes. Significant revision of programme content may however pose a challenge, particularly for post experience programmes, given the public sector's reticence to modernise. Importantly, such change may

¹⁷ Both Elcock (2004) and Liddle (2017) refer to Business Schools' lack of support for PA programmes.

¹⁸ Ridley forwarded an argument for an interdisciplinary approach to teaching PA (1972), see also Jones (2012).

also serve to highlight the heterogeneity of PA students' real and perceived learning needs, given the subject's vocational nature and the discipline's ability to attract both post experience and post undergraduate students. This will require the discipline to reflect on what it teaches and why.

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