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**Public Administration:**  
**What is it, why teach it and does it matter?**

**John Fenwick and Janice McMillan**

**Abstract**

*What is understood by 'public administration' in the contemporary UK Higher Education setting? Is it still being taught and, if so, why? These questions initially appear to be fairly straightforward but any review of the topic quickly poses some rather more tricky areas of enquiry. This paper will focus upon three central questions. First, some persistent issues surrounding public administration as a field of research and enquiry provide a problematic start for any discussion: what is meant academically by 'public administration' and does it retain any scholarly meaning, or any disciplinary base(s) that warrants its location in University departments? Is it distinct from public policy and public management or can it now be wholly subsumed within these more readily understood (and more marketable) categories? Secondly, there are difficult issues around public administration as a field of practice in a highly turbulent public sector world. Public administration (especially in its received meaning from the continental European tradition) was predicated upon stability, structure and law. Contemporary UK public administration is built upon flux and uncertainty. Thirdly, the pedagogic aspects of teaching this elusive area raise significant additional issues, compounded by the differences between teaching a practitioner audience of 'public administrators' (perhaps allied to work-based learning delivery) alongside, or in place of, an academic social or political science audience. Business Schools have grown as the main site for such teaching. Differentiated modes of teaching have proliferated while the focus of what is taught has grown more elusive. 'Teaching public administration' starts to look like quite a rich and contested area of academic activity.*

**Keywords:** Public Administration, Public Management, MPA

**Introduction**

This paper is concerned with our understanding of what the term 'public administration' means today: what is it, and why teach it? Long associated with an essentially descriptive tradition bound up with processes, institutions and stability, and mainly focussed upon the UK, public administration now

appears to have evolved into something else, propelled by unrelenting change in the world of public sector and public service practice, sweeping changes of political direction and the development of new theoretical approaches in both political science and business and management. Public administration has been swept along, or perhaps swept away, in a process of global change. We will seek in this discussion to draw conclusions about the utility and currency of something called public administration.

In order to do this we will consider the contemporary relevance and meaning of public administration in three distinct senses:

- first, the nature of Public Administration as a scholarly area of enquiry and research, including its possible differentiation from public policy and public management and its incomplete reconciliation with debates about governance;
- secondly, the meaning of public administration as a field of practice, most readily characterised as the study of ‘what public administrators do’ – a somewhat problematic notion in a world where the boundaries of the public sector and the scope of a specifically public realm of administration are no longer easily defined; and
- thirdly, the relevance of Public Administration as a focus of teaching and learning and of undergraduate and postgraduate programme provision at universities in the UK, including the pedagogic implications of teaching public administration to practitioners through management development and work-based learning as well as those enrolled in full or part time university courses.

### **Public Administration as a field of academic enquiry and scholarly research**

The intrinsic function of public administration is the governance of society. Public administration exists to realize the governance of society. The purpose of public administration is to govern, and thus government and governance are the core concepts that help us to organize the study of Public Administration. (Raadschelders 1999, 288)

Our first problem is that the scholarly meaning of Public Administration is not self-evident. The old descriptive model of Public Administration as institutional and settled practice, deriving from theories of bureaucracy and the European tradition of central administration, and generating an academic subject devoted to the study of such processes, would convince few people today. Contemporary academic enquiry is concerned with trying to understand, or at least trying to chart the course of, unprecedented flux and uncertainty in every realm of public sector provision and its administration. It is not obvious that debates about governance have necessarily shed further light on public administration. Frederickson's analysis of the concept and application of governance in the academic field "formally known as public administration" (Frederickson 2004, 5) revealed multiple and often contradictory notions embodied in the catch-all terminology of governance. As fashionable reworking of old ideas, as imprecise descriptor of a whole series of different processes or as value-laden critique of old Public Administration, Frederickson felt that 'governance' has not always assisted our understanding; yet he also felt that governance remains the most useful single concept available to us if it is used with precision. "...governance scholars must settle on an agreed-upon definition, a definition broad enough to comprehend the forces it presumes to explain but not so broad as to claim to explain everything" (2004, 17-18). Thus governance can advance our understanding in going beyond Public Administration, even though, analytically, it has not always done so thus far.

Related to debates about the scholarly utility of governance are the demarcation lines between Public Administration, public management and public policy. These are not settled and on one level might be thought to be unimportant – after all, one or other of these scholarly affiliations may simply be chosen to fit the individual academic's institutional location or career aspirations rather than being adopted for any substantive academic reason. Indeed Frederickson appeared to find this particular terminological debate irrelevant, as in his opening footnote. "The phrase "public administration" is used here only as a convention. The phrase "public management" could have been used, and would have had the same meaning" (2004, 2 fn).

Yet there is more to be said. Going back to Dunleavy and Hood's seminal paper on the differences between old Public Administration and new public management (1994), it is striking that they said so little about Public Administration in its received sense. Through a lens fashioned twenty years ago their focus was upon what was then a new public management (NPM) and their insights about NPM retain a contemporary relevance, particularly in their elucidation of 'alternative futures' for public management. Their advocacy of the then-neglected "intermediate possibilities" (between public bureaucracy and markets) remains instructive (Dunleavy and Hood 1994, 15). The rise of the third-sector provider of public services under both New Labour and the Cameron coalition, for example, is an excellent example of such 'possibilities', and something quite far removed from old-style Public Administration and its earlier terms of debate.

Even further back, Gunn (1988) set out incisively the distinction between the 'public administration' perspective (wherein the running of government and the public sector is fundamentally different from private sector business management) and the 'business management' perspective (wherein those running government have a lot to learn from private business management), proposing a 'third approach' termed 'public management' which combines elements of public administration and of business management. This paper, published during the Thatcher era amidst what seemed to be the stark academic and practical choice between 'state' and 'market' (eg, Loney et al 1987), was of course highly influential. For our immediate purposes it said something that remains crucially important: Public Administration and public management are not the same thing. If this was true in 1988 it is certainly likely to be true today.

What do these substantive differences look like and are they fundamental in delineating a new/different area of study or are they just a new way of describing change within the old systems of administration? There has been much debate over the years about the 'identity crisis' of Public Administration (eg Rhodes et al 1995, Raadschelders 1999). The discussions have a long history and

demonstrate a fundamental aspect of Public Administration as a field of study – the inexorable link with practice. Convention holds that Public Administration denotes the discipline and public administration the practice but is it really possible to separate the two?

We might consider the debate to be rooted in the doctrines of the Thatcher era (as mentioned above) but within the *The Journal of Public Administration* (a forerunner to *Public Administration: An International Quarterly*) there was early discussion of the difference between the administration of business and public affairs (Stamp, 1923). In his address to the Society of Civil Servants Sir Josiah Stamp states that “I should hesitate very much, therefore, to subscribe fully to a little suggestion ... that there is a science of business administration, and that public administration has to achieve it and get up to that level. I must say I have not myself observed that science” (1923, 159). It is interesting, if only as an indication of fashion, that Stamp does not engage with the concept of `management` but rather refers to the organisation of business as `business administration`. Stamp outlines the main differences in business and public administration, commenting that these are “the features or what we might call permanent deep-rooted differences in the very nature of the task” (1923, 159)

- for public administration: implementation of Acts of Parliament to the whole population to which they apply
- for business administration: “goods not sold according to the standard of an Act of Parliament; there is no actual compulsion upon a business firm to render service except along the lines of least resistance” (1923, 165)

More recent ‘takes’ on this debate remain powerful in arguing the difference between public and private management (eg, Boyne, 2002) and in showing the currency of the discipline of public administration even if this has changed out of all recognition (Hood, 2011). Some commentators seem to see a linear path from old Public Administration, through NPM, to governance (eg, Eliassen and Sitter 2008). An interesting argument within all this is that the ‘administration` of public goods and services still exists but has taken on new tools of production and distribution. Public `management` is

about the use of these mechanisms - partnerships, outsourcing etc - not the fundamentals of the need for provision itself. So from this perspective public management is a new way of doing Public Administration rather than being a concept unrelated to it. Public Administration therefore still exists, indeed flourishes, in both theory and practice.

For Kelly and Dodds (2012: 200), while public administration does maintain a focus upon the day-to-day world of its practitioners,

“...it is now also notable for its theoretical and methodological heterodoxy and interdisciplinarity. This broader approach has been applied to the investigation of government and the practice of governance, including intergovernmental relations, policy development, decision making and implementation, management processes such as accountability mechanisms, and, indeed, the interface between the public and private sectors.”

We would suggest, incidentally, that the question of how and why Public Administration might be differentiated from public management has latterly been somewhat fudged by the superficially attractive option of emphasising international Public Administration, reflected in the marketing of Public Administration courses to overseas audiences (discussed below), the conscious move away from the tradition of descriptive British Public Administration and, not least, the current focus of the eponymous academic journal. However, rendering Public Administration as something ‘international’ may merely serve to confer a spurious depth and legitimacy without addressing the nature of what Public Administration is seeking to do as an academic area of enquiry. Indeed, international Public Administration may amount to little more than accounts of what public administrators do in different countries, countering the historical interest in British public administration with something equally parochial, albeit set in a wider number of national settings than before. Where such studies are truly comparative the focus is more productive but ‘international’ doesn’t necessarily move us forward in identifying any academic core of Public Administration.

So – what are contemporary academic researchers of Public Administration doing: what are their distinctive objects of study, their characteristic tools of analysis - and does Public Administration have discrete integrity as a distinct area of academic enquiry? We may find ourselves here in a groundhog

day, revisiting the choices of perspective made available from politics and from business. Scholars from political science and from business and management, with the varying theoretical tools at their disposal, certainly remain interested in what contemporary public administrators do – but Public Administration does not thereby become a coherent subject area in its own right. To pursue this from another direction, we therefore move the focus of our discussion to the practice of public administration.

### **Public Administration as a field of practice**

There is an obvious sense in which public administration has currency as practice, for it may simply be used as a term for what public administrators do and the arrangements for oversight of it, reflected, for instance, in the review and scrutiny work of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC). In an earlier era of political and administrative stability, where the boundaries between public and private sectors were well-defined, and the rules and processes of the public sector organisation could plausibly be described by the tenets of bureaucracy, an interest in what public administrators do was unremarkable in academic terms. The pattern was set. We could study ‘public administration’ through studying actors and institutions in local or central government and could even hope, as scholars, to inform the practices in which we had an academic interest. This was the tradition within which UK public administration grew.

Yet today it is much more difficult to sustain a view of public administration as ‘what public administrators do’. Indeed it is difficult to know who public administrators are. In local government we would not get very far by focussing only upon those employed directly by the local authority: in some places that would amount to very few people indeed. Thus ‘public administrators’ would now have to include those employed by Capita, Kier, Balfour Beattie or some of the many others involved in ‘public administration’, if ‘public’ it can still be said to be. In addition to the difficulty of knowing who public administrators are it is certainly much more difficult to know what they do. The

predictable world of public sector stability has been replaced by flux, instability and uncertainty. The very boundaries of what constitutes the public sector are fluid and are becoming impossible to define with any precision in UK local or central government or the NHS (Fenwick and McMillan, 2010). In this context the role of the public administrator as a “trustee of the public good” (Rhodes 1994, 15) becomes ever more important but ever more difficult to realise.

A further aspect of focussing upon public administration as a field of practice is that such practice can be studied from a wide variety of disciplinary bases, including politics, organisational analysis, business management, urban geography, sociology or history and, within each discipline, from a variety of different theoretical traditions. This could be seen as strength or weakness. Practice may be enriched by input from such a great body of scholarship. Yet the claims of public administration to be an academic area in its own right are weakened further if public administration simply becomes an activity that scholars from other subjects choose to study, akin to studying, say, supply chain management or advertising.

Public administration as a field of practice also entails consideration of education and training for public administration – an aspect to which we now turn.

### **Public Administration as the focus of teaching programmes and pedagogic activity**

“Degrees in Public Administration have disappeared, but the academic discipline remains. The subject matter has moved on” (Jones, 2012: 130)

At undergraduate level in the UK, Public Administration has steadily declined as an identifiable degree programme and by the 1990s was not widely offered (see Rhodes et al, 1995). It is today no longer offered as a single-subject degree programme at any UK university, having “...disappeared from undergraduate at the seven institutions where it was originally taught, as well as elsewhere across the UK” (Jones, 2012: 126). Yet the characteristic concerns of Public Administration have not disappeared, indeed they have grown as the public sector passes from one turbulent change to another.

For instance, De Montfort University maintains a BA Public Administration and Management which explicitly links Public Administration to politics and “global affairs”, while Plymouth University runs a BSc “Public Management and Business”. Targeting overseas students, Exeter University offers a “pre-Masters Diploma” in Public Administration. Glasgow University offers a suite of four-year undergraduate (MA) programmes wherein ‘public policy’ is teamed up with a variety of other subjects. Where Public Administration does still feature at undergraduate level it is largely called something else or allied to business-related programmes or to politics. ‘Public administration’ is not seen as an attractive title for an undergraduate programme. It seems that those with an interest in teaching such matters are increasingly under pressure to make the content and course titles ‘sexy’ even though this may detract from the core concern of the subject with how societies approach distribution of services for the common good. The problem may of course simply lie in the unfashionable word ‘administration’ when compared, for example, to management. The issue can be portrayed by the very business terminology with which Public Administration is increasingly linked. To school-leavers and their families and advisers, ‘Public Administration’ has become an obsolete term with little meaning: it is not a brand, it is not readily marketable and is not self-evidently the kind of subject (if subject it is) against which one would be obliged (in England) to borrow a large amount of money for an uncertain benefit. The new managerial vocabulary describes the problem well.

It is at postgraduate level that Public Administration has maintained a presence in University teaching programmes, in two principal ways. First, it may constitute part of a specialist course such as the distance Masters in Public Administration and Development at Birmingham University, a programme that “provides public managers and administrators with the key skills they need to operate in the public sector in a developing or transitional country context”. (There is of course an academic journal with the same name). Secondly, and more significantly, Public Administration resides in a number of MPA programmes that plug into the appetite for MBA level qualifications but specialise in the public sector. The MPA may in particular appeal to international students and their sponsors. In marketing terms, there is already a general (if not necessarily accurate) understanding of the nature of an MBA.

It becomes relatively easy to transfer this recognition to some received understanding of what an MPA is likely to be. This overcomes at postgraduate level a fundamental branding problem of undergraduate Public Administration.

Academic staff involved in the management of postgraduate Public Administration courses gave us some useful insight into their thinking. One programme leader at a post-1992 university saw it as a dying discipline as there is no longer the same State to administer: the world has simply moved on. He would see a modern-day MPA as ideally including business elements such as HRM and also the study of law, to reflect the nature of the changed world: preferably taught from a business school base, with specialist input from political science/public policy where needed. As for recruitment and marketing, his own social science department is about to run a Masters in Public Policy in parallel with an existing MPA, with the only significant difference being at specific module level. All his current applications for the MPA are from overseas students. A senior academic at a pre-1992 institution also reported that their MPA recruited well from international students and added that the MPA programme also “allows staff to teach their research areas”. This latter point is important, and potentially brings together two of the three fields of public administration we have discussed in the present paper. Indeed the third element of our discussion – public administration as a field of practice – is also alluded to by this respondent: “all the students have to have public sector management experience. They see it [the MPA] as having a positive impact on their careers. Nearly all the students are sponsored by their governments who have specifically chosen this course for its relevance to ‘real world’ issues.”

In response to a question about the withering away of the subject at undergraduate level, it was noted, consistent with our discussion in this paper, that “it has been absorbed into politics courses and also business studies degrees at UG level. You often find it as a module or as part of public policy. At PG level the CPD aspect is important”. This final point again emphasises an important dimension – public administration as a field of practice - wherein public administration is linked to professional

development and the world of work as a public sector manager. So does Public Administration have a future as a programme of study? The answer was an unequivocal “definitely”.

Several aspects of interest emerge from these views, expressed by Public Administration academics involved in running and teaching MPA programmes at quite different institutions.

First, it is clear that Public Administration as a postgraduate subject and programme, represented here in both cases by the MPA, differs from the now defunct undergraduate programmes in terms of typical recruitment, student professional experience and relationship to other subjects including business and politics.

Secondly, it is evident that the target market for a full-time programme is amongst international students, normally funded by their employers. One respondent added, however, that managers from UK organisations including the police and the NHS are targeted for part-time modular attendance, a twin pattern of recruitment which, in the authors’ own experience, is likely to be repeated in the case of MBA and other related postgraduate courses.

Thirdly, the relationship between Public Administration, public management and governance – as discussed in the first section of this paper – does not seem to be quite settled yet. Asked whether Public Administration has been subsumed within public management, one reply was “in the UK, but not elsewhere”. This seems consistent with the pattern of overseas recruitment.

MPA provision has recognition amongst applicants from overseas: Public Administration has some currency at this level, for this audience. The important question arises, however, of what exactly is it that applicants recognise here: what do they think they are going to get? The content of such programmes is kept under review, but of course this applies to all postgraduate programmes. Perhaps the characteristic focus of MPA programmes may specifically be starting to change in response to continuing economic crisis in the countries where the programmes are offered (Oldfield and van den Berg, 2013). Indeed, Diamond and Liddle (2012) make a powerful case for reassessing Public Administration (both as model of decision-making and as subject of teaching provision) in the wake

of the global financial crisis. The parlous state of the international economic order warrants more than a footnote in any debate about the future of Public Administration: it is central to Public Administration in all three of the senses we have been discussing.

As for the preferred location of Public Administration within the university structure, practice varies. Where such programmes are based within business schools rather than social and political science departments this does not necessarily address the problem of whether Public Administration has a core disciplinary identity as a foundation for teaching. Indeed it may compound the problem, as 'business' is itself a university teaching subject without a distinct or single disciplinary base. 'Business' as a teaching area draws – just like Public Administration - from a number of different disciplines. Interestingly, the emphasis of some of these disciplines based within Business Schools is itself subject to change: from administration/management to development and now back to administration /management. A pertinent example is the growth and importance now placed on 'human capital' and 'human stock' where individuals are viewed simply as an organisational asset to be controlled through the outcomes of statistical modelling or performance techniques.

Chandler's spirited defence (1991) of the breadth and depth of the Public Administration curriculum, in contrast to the narrow focus of 'business studies', has been overtaken by the scale of developments in subsequent years, not least the recruitment of social scientists (perhaps with critical perspectives) to the expanding business schools and the disappearance of university departments dedicated to Public Administration. Indeed, it is likely that the move of Public Administration into business schools has as much to do with job opportunities for the academics concerned as it has to do with any pedagogic or curricula factors.

Does it matter that Public Administration is increasingly taught in disparate ways, in different places? 'No' in term of its breadth - but 'yes' in terms of identifying an elusive core discipline. Perhaps the critical strand of Public Administration is stronger this way and may thus have more to offer the disparate audiences as differential parts rather than as a whole. Indeed within many university teaching and learning strategies there is a growing emphasis on programme focus rather than what

may be considered traditional disciplines. This is both as a response to employers` desires for graduates with generic skills and as a way of attracting students to these programmes to ensure their viability – in this way such disciplines as economics (itself now disappearing from some Business Schools as distinct area of study) and sociology are facing similar issues of identity.

It may even be that the debate is moving beyond the semantics of administration, governance and management into the new brand semantics of leadership – a vast area of debate we do not propose to explore here but which warrants attention in further research (see for instance Briggs and Raine, 2013).

Finally, the teaching of Public Administration may be considered as an element of in-service training, management development and work-based learning. This is unlikely to be termed ‘Public Administration’, and indeed it may not even be termed ‘teaching’ by those engaged in it, but in fact it constitutes one of the original meanings of the term: the training of public administrators. Such training is not necessarily carried out within or by universities. Private providers, consultants and management development trainers may all be engaged in this aspect of public administration. Indeed, and often overlooked, even where university staff are involved in delivery of such de facto public administration they may be employed as dedicated ‘management development’ staff rather than Public Administration academics (Fenwick and McMillan, 2014). In this specific context, ‘why do we teach Public Administration’ is a question easily answered: it is because public sector organisations or their partners commission us to do so, and then they pay us. There is no mystery about what this is, or about why we teach it. Yet of course this management development/training approach entirely sidesteps our initial concern with the academic core of Public Administration which, as scholars, we cannot dismiss so easily.

## **Conclusion**

Is Public Administration a term that anyone recognises any longer as being meaningful for research, for practice or for teaching? Unless we confine ‘Public Administration’ to being an aspect of formal legal and procedural governance – a set of rules and a description of practice, closer to the European

tradition of placing Public Administration alongside law - it has little contemporary meaning. And such a formal procedural definition of Public Administration, although it would have meaning, would no longer be at all accurate. It doesn't describe a currently knowable world. We (academics working in the field of Public Administration) seem to think we mean more than the received definitions of public administration allow but we rarely spell out what more is meant, possibly because we do not truly know. Perhaps we need to confront the brutal truth that Public Administration is a term defined by an age that has passed.

Whether this really matters, however, is a question yet to be answered. Universities, and Departments within them, are under constant commercial pressure to provide attractive and profitable programmes. Public Administration may be sexed-up to sound like something else but its core concerns remain. Public Administration under other names and embedded in other disciplinary settings is thriving, not diminishing. The strength of the discipline may indeed now reside in the fact that it is not easily definable, not easily pushed into Arts, Politics or Business faculties: the important point is that the content still matters wherever it is taught and under whatever guise it appears. Indeed one could argue that it is fundamental to all disciplines - even those considered to be at the heart of pure science and explained through the quest for and promotion of universal laws. Even such disciplines are practiced by human beings in social settings, they are ultimately human activities influenced by Public Administration concerns. The quest for a clearly positioned, pure, bounded study and application of Public Administration may act as its death knell but that may not matter while the core concerns of the subject are still so vital. After all – what's in a name?

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### **Authors**

Professor John Fenwick, Professor of Leadership and Public Management, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (corresponding author). [john.fenwick@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:john.fenwick@northumbria.ac.uk)

Dr Janice McMillan, Reader in Public Management and HRD, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK.

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