

# The Status of Public Administration Teaching in the UK

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# **The Status of Public Administration Teaching in the UK**

## **Abstract**

The changing status of public administration as a taught subject in the UK offers a cautionary tale for anyone with an interest in the proper functioning of democratic government. In this editorial we discuss how teaching public administration in the UK has changed over time. We draw attention to some immediate challenges which highlight the need for greater investment in capacity and skills development, particularly relating to ethics and the philosophy of public service. We then discuss three key developments in the teaching of public administration: increasing postgraduate provision; the introduction of higher and degree apprenticeships; and the establishment of the Leadership College for Government. Our conclusions set out how; despite disinterest from practitioner organisations, disregard from universities and disaffection from many academics; the rejuvenation of the JUC Public Administration Committee offers an exciting opportunity to rebuild bridges between the theory and practice of UK public administration.

**Keywords:** UK public administration; teaching public administration; postgraduate provision; higher and degree apprenticeships; leadership college for government

## **Introduction**

The teaching of public administration in the UK could be described as at best multifaceted or fragmented. It suffers from a combination of disinterest from practitioner organisations, disregard from universities and disaffection from many academics. Whilst public

administration research flourishes in terms of funding, publications and all-important impact, the teaching of public administration remains something of a poor cousin. A reading of the British public administration literature confirms that this status is not new but is a long-standing source of frustration for those who believe it warrants greater attention. Yet there are many reasons to celebrate the multifaceted nature of teaching public administration – not least of which is the continued presence and strength of the UK Joint University Council for Social and Public Administration (the JUC).

The JUC was established in 1918, as a learned society with the aim of “the co-ordination and development of the work of social study departments in Great Britain and Ireland” (JUC, 1935 as cited by Chapman, 2007, p. 8). Since then it has, through its Public Administration Committee (PAC), been the leading voice for public administration (PA) in UK. Alongside the annual conference, national representation on key committees, societies and funding bodies, the PAC provides funding for members to conduct research or host events and publishes two academic journals – *Public Policy and Administration*<sup>1</sup> and *Teaching Public Administration*<sup>2</sup>. In a challenging environment, the PAC provides a crucial network for PA educators and researchers in the UK (Elliott, 2018). As the representative voice of universities that teach and research PA, it facilitates shared practice and teaching innovation across the UK and internationally through its relationship with international networks including the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS).

Arguably, the most comprehensive overview of PA education in the UK was undertaken on behalf on the PAC almost 50 years ago (Chapman, 1973). The Chapman Report outlined the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ppa>

<sup>2</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/tpa>

state of PA education, training and research programmes across UK schools, colleges and universities. Since then, many more commentaries have followed (Chandler, 1991; Chandler, 2002; Chapman, 1982; Elcock, 2004; Fenwick & McMillan, 2014; Greenwood, 1999; Johnston Miller, 2012; Jones, 2012; Ridley, 1972; Robson, 1975; Wright, 1974). In line with the perspectives set out in Chapman's work, common themes articulated in these contributions are those of decline and decay. But what we find is that despite these death knells, the PA community in the UK remains strong and teaching of PA continues to adapt, flex and innovate.

This editorial proceeds as follows. The next section provides a brief history of UK PA as a taught discipline. This is followed by an oversight of the current political context including public service standards and behaviour. From this, the status of PA teaching in the UK is addressed. The editorial concludes on an optimistic note, outlining how practitioners and academics can work together to ensure that the craft of PA remains intact across the UK.

### **A Historic Perspective on Teaching of Public Administration**

The development of UK PA as an educational discipline has been richly detailed (Chapman, 1973; Chandler, 1991; 2002; Chapman, 1982; Elcock, 2004; Fenwick & McMillan, 2014; Greenwood, 1999; Johnston Miller, 2012; Jones, 2012; Ridley, 1972; Robson, 1975; Wright, 1974). Inextricably connecting research practice and training from its conception, the discipline has consistently sought to develop and promote good professional practice through education (Farrell et al., 2021). Yet despite historically strong practitioner links, the discipline has, throughout its existence, been beset with identity questions (Rhodes et al., 1995) as well as a fragile and capricious relationship with practitioners (particularly in the Civil Service) (see, for example, Robson 1975). Debates have proliferated around the curricula, teaching and pedagogy of public administration fuelled in part by developments in the higher education (HE)

sector and in part by developments in the subject itself; impacting both has been the changing political environment.

As a discipline, the well documented shift in focus from Traditional PA to New Public Management (NPM) and then New Public Governance (NPG) (Rhodes, 1997) challenged the basic tenets of PA (Jones, 2012), thus ‘blurring [its] academic and epistemological boundaries’ (Farrell et al., 2021, p. 119). This embedded a vulnerability within the field, encouraging allied disciplines to question PA’s modern-day relevance (Farrell et al. 2021; see also Farazmand, 2012; Hafer, 2016; Rutgers, 1998), and the extent to which its past stability could comfortably coexist with its new-found instability and flux (Fenwick & McMillan, 2014). One outcome was the introduction of differently titled teaching offers in UK universities (Jones, 2012) including public policy and public governance programmes. Indeed, it has been widely documented that after rising to great heights, the teaching of UK PA went into decline (Chandler 1991); decay (Elcock 1991); or demise (Greenwood 1999). Such stories of woe may not have been borne out, as suggested in this editorial, but there is a sense within the discipline that while research has continued to flourish, its taught counterpart has floundered (Rhodes, 1996; Johnston Miller 2012; Hood, 2011; Jones 2012).

One of the most significant challenges to UK PA programmes in recent decades has been the rise of the business school. The public sector’s adoption of NPM practices in the 1990’s (Ferlie et al., 1996; Hood, 1991) led to a preference for Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes over Master of Public Administration (MPAs): the mantra being *business is better* (Beckett, 2000; Box, 1999). Additionally, functional areas such as project management and human resource management increased in popularity as did sector specific management programmes focused on areas such as education, healthcare or policing. Faced with the

marketisation of HE throughout the 1990's, and a resultant race for popular degree programmes, alongside shrinking public sector training budgets, many PA programmes were withdrawn. Those that survived, along with the scholars that taught them, were typically absorbed into business faculties which necessarily impacted both research and teaching practices (Liddle, 2017). The fragmentation of PA as a subject is a particular feature of the UK context. Currently, no department of PA exists at any UK university, instead PA academics are located across a variety of faculties, schools and departments such as business, health science, social science and humanities. The lack of a critical mass of PA academics and a lack of visibility within formal university structures has contributed to a certain disregard towards the discipline by many universities who do not perceive it as current, popular or relevant. But the need for the teaching of public administration, and for a unifying voice for UK PA academics, remains.

### **The Current Political Context Including Public Service Standards and Behaviour**

There has arguably never been a greater need for education and training in PA including ethical practice and its philosophical underpinnings. Governments are facing multiple, complex challenges that are interacting and coalescing into what has been described by former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker as a poly-crisis (Eymeri-Douzans, 2022). Recent reports by the United Nations draw attention to increased global uncertainties, significant economic challenge, deteriorating regional prospects across the globe and the impact of war in Ukraine. Moreover, they also point to the devastating human impacts resulting from these circumstances (UNHDR 2022; see also UNDESA 2022). More recently, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, has drawn attention to the 'grim economic outlook' and its broader implications, stressing that 'unprecedented times require unprecedented action' (UNDESA 2023 p. III).

Like many countries, the UK reflects this global flux and uncertainty, but it does so in the context of ongoing internal political difficulties. Jessop (2017) describes ‘a continuing organic crisis’ that has, through various manifestations, reflected sustained and worsening tensions that collectively question the future of country’s global standing. These tensions include the polemic debates surrounding the decision to leave the European Union (Brexit) (Jessop, 2017) along with a series of disputes involving the Cabinet, Parliament, the judiciary, the devolved administrations, and the monarchy (Blick & Hennesy, 2019, p. 3). This crisis of governance is most evident in a range of widely documented controversies and failures in the executive pillar of government: the illegal proroguing of Parliament (Bowcott, Quinn & Carrell, 2019; Gordon, 2019), potential breaches of international law (O’Carroll, 2020), repeated violations of the Ministerial Code (Elgot, 2022) and COVID-19 lockdown restrictions (Gordon, 2022), and re-writing of the Ministerial Code to obstruct the forced resignation of Ministers breaching ethical standards (Mason & Allegretti, 2022). Recognising these various examples of governance failure, the Chair of the Committees on Standards in Public Life has noted that modern, ministerial conduct now openly disregards the Nolan Principles of Public Life introduced almost 30 years ago (Power, 2021; Andrews, 2020).

At the heart of such crises, and the Government's response to them, is the *modus operandi* of Westminster government, described by political historian Sir Peter Hennesy as the ‘good chaps’ theory of government (Priestley, 1986 as cited by Hennesy, 1994: 205). This relates to the belief that those who rise to high office are ‘good chaps’ who understand the tacit rules underpinning our uncodified constitution and can be relied on to do the right thing. Such sentiment has long differentiated the UK from other countries. Indeed, “Britain has always considered government to be an art, reserved for ‘gentlemen’ or ‘all rounders’, while France,

for example, has considered it to be a science” (Dimier 2006, p.337 drawing on Barker 1944). Yet, concerns have repeatedly been raised about this approach, over many years (Assinder 2005). Increasingly, there is a sense that past referents for conducting government in the UK are crumbling and the constitutional consensus is 'fraying by stage' (Blick & Hennessy 2019, 30). In all of this there is a sense that the historic reliance on tacit knowledge, learning through experience and so-called good chaps is no longer fit-for-purpose. Most recently, in reference to concerns regarding the advice and guidance received by the then Prime Minister, Conservative MP Peter Bone suggested that special advisors and aides have been “watching too many episodes of ‘The West Wing’” and “just do not understand how government works in this country” (House of Commons 2020, col. 188-189).

Peter Bone’s comment points not only to a perceived lack of knowledge but arguably there is growing disrespect of the parliamentary process and ministerial rejection of the Haldane-defined tradition of exclusive independent, and impartial counsel from the Civil Service (Richards & Smith, 2016). Collectively these developments are documented as part of a broader decline in the Westminster Model (ibid; see also Russell & Serban 2021; 2022) which has progressively curtailed civil servants’ ability to ‘speak truth to power’ (Murphy, 2020). Though recent years have seen a number of high profile ‘visible acts of defiance’, these have been exceptions to the norm (Fuentes, 2021). Changes in the Civil Service also speak to broader developments within the public sector (Richards and Smith, 2016). Namely NPM driven managerial and rationalisation practices (Hood, 1991) which have shrunk the sector, outsourced services (Grimshaw et al., 2002), introduced private sector values (Chapman, 1994) and market practices (Osborne 2010), threatening the public service ethos (Greenway, 1995) and introducing opportunities for unethical behaviour (Chapman, 1994; 1998; Fuentes, 2021; see also Adam 2011). As observed by Howard Elcock over twenty years ago, ‘[t]he old public



administration values of probity, equity and above all the acceptance by administrators of their duty to protect a collective public interest regardless of its conflicts with the administrator's interests, have been pushed to the back of the stage' (Elcock, 2000 p 15-16). Yet these same values are perhaps needed now more than ever in the face of the poly-crises facing governments not only within the UK but across the world.

For public officials to robustly uphold, defend and promote the standards of public office, they must be equipped beyond their basic role requirements and possess higher-level skills (Adam, 2011). There is clearly a need for more PA education and training. This relates not only to the basic "craft skills" of PA but also its ethical and philosophical underpinnings. Ethics-related knowledge is crucial (ibid) as are the philosophical skills required to 'decipher the complexity of the current world' and negotiate challenging environments (Ongaro, 2011 p. 144). Yet practitioner organisations consistently appear disinterested in formal PA education and degree programmes that do exist offer limited and largely optional instruction on ethics and social equity (Fuertes, 2021; see also Bottom, 2022). In part this may be a product of the UK's failure to introduce professional, statutory and regulatory requirements for PA education (see UK Government, 2020). It may also reflect the prioritisation by practitioner organisations of more technical activities of public service rather than the values that *should* underpin them. Either way, the disinterest of practitioner organisations towards formal PA education risks perpetrating further crises and blunders while leaving practitioners ill equipped to deal with the challenges of tomorrow. Despite this challenging environment there remains a rich and varied landscape of PA provision across the UK.

## **The Current Status of Teaching Public Administration**

### ***Postgraduate Provision***

A recent assessment of PA education in the UK reports a healthy state of affairs, including an increase in degree programmes and student numbers across more universities (Bottom et al., 2022). An adaption to blended and digital learning is evident and substantively, the discipline is beginning to recognise – albeit somewhat belatedly – the need to offer a more progressive curricula that is appropriately cognizant of diverse student profiles and the context in which PA operates (ibid). Nevertheless, core representation of diversity, and social equity on programmes remains limited (ibid, see also Johnston Miller & McTavish, 2011) as is the importance of community approaches (Hatcher, 2020; see also Farrell et al. 2021).

One clear area of progression within PA curricula has been the adoption of more international and comparative content. The disinterest of UK practitioner organisations in PA education has led to an increasing reliance on the international market which has proven very successful (Fenwick and McMillan 2014). With this has come a recognition that PA programs must offer greater inclusivity (Matzslita, 2020), incorporate global and comparative perspectives (Manoharan & Mirbel, 2018), instil cross national skills (Jresiat, 2005), and crucially recognise the increased cultural diversity of students that are taught PA in UK universities. In turn the greater diversity of the student population has highlighted the different interests and learning needs, real and perceived of different groups of students (Bottom et al. 2022). Furthermore, they have introduced significant change to the teaching on PA and drawn attention to important curricula and pedagogic tensions (ibid), thus inviting educators to reflect on what they teach, how they teach it and why. Such dilemmas are encapsulated in contributions by Denhart, 2002), Hatcher (2020) and Farrell et al (2021) who discuss the changes that face the discipline's educational offer.

Despite the increasingly international nature of postgraduate PA programmes in the UK, a peculiar feature of these programmes, in comparison to postgraduate PA programmes in other countries, is the lack of formal accreditation. There are no PA programmes in the UK that are currently accredited by the ‘Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration’ (NASPAA), the ‘European Association for Public Administration Accreditation’ (EAPAA) or the ‘International Commission on the Accreditation of Public Administration and Training Programs’ (ICAPA). This is in stark contrast to other disciplines and subject areas where accreditation is seen as highly desirable by universities and students. It is unclear to what extent this is a consequence of the fragmented nature of the PA scholarly community (and subsequent ephemeral links with the international PA scholarly community), a sense of superiority (that UK programmes don’t need validation by others), or the fact that PA is not considered a formal profession. But whatever the reason, this undoubtedly contributes to the very broad range of topics that can be found in any postgraduate PA programme in the UK.

### ***Development of Apprenticeships***

Innovation in PA education has most recently been demonstrated in HE’s response to the introduction of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (HDA’s) in 2015/16. These were introduced in England (with variations in the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) to enable employers to support their staff in gaining work-relevant qualifications alongside practical work experience. Funded through an employer payroll levy, the introduction of HDA’s “heralded a new approach to collaborative working between universities, employers, students, professional bodies and independent training providers” (Mulkeen et al., 2019, 333).

The introduction of various public sector relevant standards<sup>3</sup> enabled PA to regenerate its postgraduate offer after experiencing some decline in student numbers, as a result of post-2010 public sector budget cuts. But these programmes are not conventional degrees and have created their own challenges for universities, particularly in relation to the administrative burdens that result from working with multiple stakeholders (Powell and Walsh 2018). Specifically, the curricula (professional standards) of HDA's are not set by academics, but by employers and professional bodies. This process is overseen by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) which is a UK Government funded non-departmental public body. Only approved 'training providers', including some universities, are eligible to provide HDA's and must follow the set professional standards as well as ensuring the teaching of Fundamental British Values<sup>4</sup> and (from 2021) compliance with the OFSTED<sup>5</sup> inspection regime<sup>6</sup> (both of which were previously limited to early years, primary and secondary education) as well as participation in the Prevent programme<sup>7</sup>. As such it has been recognised that the introduction of apprenticeships represents "a major departure in curriculum design and learner identity" (ibid, 91).

In addition to the significant administrative burdens associated with HDA's, they are also quite different to most PA programmes in their style of delivery. Unlike MPA programmes, which may educate police officers, healthcare workers and local government officials in a single cohort, each profession tends to have their own professional standards linked to a specific apprenticeship award with associated knowledge, skills and behaviours. Thereby, some of the

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<sup>3</sup> Professional standards related to the public sector include systems thinking practitioner, senior leader, policy officer, public service operational delivery officer and police constable  
<https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/occupational-standards/>

<sup>4</sup> Democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance.

<sup>5</sup> The Office for Standards on Education, Childrens Services and Skills.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/provider-guide-to-delivering-high-quality-apprenticeships/ofsted-inspection-and-esfa-intervention>

<sup>7</sup> A UK Government programme to "safeguard vulnerable young people from radicalisation and recruitment by terrorist organisations" (HM Government, 2011: 72).

more collaborative aspects of learning typified by PA programmes, as well as the broad knowledge base, may not feature to the same extent.

These programmes, being subject to UK Government policy and funding decisions, are also subject to change as UK Government policy changes. This point is particularly pertinent in the context of a UK Government that, at the time of writing, has seen 10 Secretaries of State for Education in as many years and 12 universities Ministers over the same timescale. Indeed, skills policy, which includes apprenticeships, has been described as “the single fastest-changing policy environment in the developed world” (Jones et al. 2022: 97). The most significant change to the HDA’s so far has been the removal of any Master’s degree qualification (including MA, MSc and MBA), so that universities can only offer qualifications up to Postgraduate Diploma (PgDip) (the remainder may be offered as a non-funded optional top-up).

While creating opportunities for universities to target public sector employers with an attractive (and crucially free) training offer (albeit not always with a public administration or public management element), programmes have experienced high attrition rates, particularly due to challenges in managing full-time employment alongside the requirements of study (Fabian et al., 2022; Mulkeen et al., 2019). The future of apprenticeships as a source of growth for PA teaching therefore is uncertain. Continued changes to policy related to apprenticeships have been found to place particular stress and pressure on academics (Martin et al. 2018) and can be seen as a contributing factor to increasing disaffection by academics towards the teaching of PA.

*Leadership College for Government*

Another potentially significant development for the teaching of PA in the UK is the creation of the Leadership College for Government (LCG). This was established by the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit in response to challenges facing the UK Government following the initial Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The LCG was announced in the Government's Levelling-Up White Paper which stated that it would, "strengthen the effectiveness of government policy and delivery, by ensuring civil and public service leaders have the skills, knowledge and networks needed to deliver for the country" (HM Government, 2022, p. 132). The LCG officially opened in April 2022 with three campuses located at existing sites in England (the Emergency Planning College and two Colleges of Policing)<sup>8</sup>. Whilst there has been some academic input into the design of the LCG, its focus appears generic and mapped against standard (business) leadership and management attributes. Furthermore, the leadership and management educational standards developed by the LCG make no reference to recognised PA concepts such as public value or public service motivation<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, the only reference to ethics is made in reference to the handling of data and there is no mention of equalities or the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the pursuit of which are expected to shape governance agendas in all countries that signed up to the 2030 Agenda in 2015 (Massey, 2022). As such the LCG standards bear no resemblance to accepted international standards as set out by recognised bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the 'Network of Schools of Public Policy Affairs and Administration' (NASPAA) or the 'International Institute of Administrative Sciences' (IIAS). Again, this serves as an example of the isolation of academics and practitioners along with a sense of ambiguity in how PA is perceived in comparison to other social sciences. Whilst this might appear a rather morose assessment it is important to recognise

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<sup>8</sup> Again it is important to note that different arrangements for training and development of civil servants exist in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

<sup>9</sup> See Annex A – Leadership and management educational standards.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1084147/Annex\\_A\\_-\\_Leadership\\_and\\_management\\_educational\\_standards.pptx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1084147/Annex_A_-_Leadership_and_management_educational_standards.pptx)

that PA remains very strong in the UK. This also serves to highlight the importance and value of a learned society for PA such as the JUC Public Administration Committee.

## **Conclusions**

Public trust in government is at an all-time low in the UK. Amendments to rules and bureaucratic norms have led to changes in civil servant behaviour with many feeling that they can no longer ‘speak the truth to power’. Increasingly, Ministers are being told what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. Being a civil servant was described by Rhodes (2016) as a craft – partially learned on the job from your master and partially through professional development. There is no manual on how to be a good public servant, rather we have principles and codes of conduct that have been developed over time, to guide behaviour. A ‘bad’ (not to be confused with a corrupt) civil servant is easily identifiable, but what is meant by a ‘good’ civil servant is less clear. Through Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Master of Public Policy (MPP) programmes, grounded in social sciences, we can provide a policy toolbox that the ‘good’ civil servant will be able to draw upon when necessary. Knowing which tool or theory to use when is a craft skill that can only be learned on the job. No training manual can create a good craftsman. Engagement with new tools and theories can however improve the craft. We hope that through our professional body we will be able to improve communication between academia and practitioners of public administration throughout the regions of the UK, resulting in better public administration craftsmanship.

The UK civil service has been renowned throughout the world for its professionalism and impartiality. A reputation largely emanating from strong institutional norms and a senior administrative class largely graduating from Oxbridge universities. While reform of the model was certainly necessary, the gap between public administration research and practice has never

been as far apart. The fragmentation of UK public administration scholars and of practice (Elliott et al. 2022) has ensured that this gulf has grown over the years. Private consultancies, think tanks and business schools have taken the place of social science research-led teaching of the subject of public administration. Public administration is a craft (Rhodes, 2016) and without civil servants appreciating the contribution primary academic research can bring to practice, we are in danger of losing these craft skills. A potential response to these challenges lies in the rejuvenation of the JUC Public Administration Committee (PAC). Following a thorough, externally-led, governance review (in 2021) we have embarked on a process of modernisation and strategic change. As we rejuvenate our new professional society, based on over one hundred years of experience, we have every reason to be optimistic. The new PAC will continue to bring scholars of public administration from throughout the UK together and be a conduit for disseminating our research in an accessible format to civil and public servants, should they be given the time and encouragement to engage with the academic discipline that underpins their profession.

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