

Transforming the master of public administration education for a changing world of work: A personal account of a South African case

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Abstract

Public administration managers are confronted with new and highly complex challenges emerging at a rapid rate. This situation requires a reimagining of public administration education to prepare public administration managers to capably deal with these challenges. While the Master of Public Administration (MPA) is globally used as vehicle for preparing public administration managers for performing their functions, the question posed is: How can MPA programmes be transformed to prepare students for dealing with emerging complex challenges in the changing world of work? This article provides a personal exploratory account of the transformation of teaching and learning of a South African MPA case. The research design was not selected for generalising findings to the universe of MPA offerings, but for obtaining case-specific information and insights. The study draws from insider's memory work supported by a variety of textual data such as notes, reports, official documents, curriculum documentation and the content of the 2020 online module sites. The article proposes a transformed curriculum to provide for the learning of public administration capabilities appropriate for dealing with emerging challenges. It subsequently reports on the curriculum transformation project of the selected case by reflecting on some philosophical assumptions and assumptions on how people learn and explaining the use of the inquiry-driven learning strategy to facilitate the learning of appropriate capabilities for dealing with public administration challenges. This article contributes to the existing literature on the role of the MPA in the mid-career education of public administration managers by suggesting the learning of public administration capabilities through an inquiry-driven learning strategy.

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Keywords

Master of Public Administration (MPA), capability approach, inquiry-driven learning, learning, situatedness, interconnectedness, teaching and learning transformation

We are at the beginning of a revolution that is fundamentally changing the way we live, work, and relate to one another.

Klaus Schwab (2016)

Introduction

The changing world of work has become not only a highly topical theme at conferences of world leaders, but also the focus of scholarly reflection and research.¹ This interest in the changing world of work was further enhanced by the publication of the book *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* by Klaus Schwab (2016), founder of the World Economic Forum, in 2016. He states the following in the second sentence of this book (Schwab, 2016: 7):

We are at the beginning of a revolution that is fundamentally changing the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope and complexity, what I consider to be the fourth industrial revolution is unlike anything humankind has experienced before.

Within the specific context of public administration, Allan Rosenbaum (2014: 92) observed that “new and very complex challenges have continued to emerge at a rapid rate”, resulting in “various efforts to rethink and improve the quality of public administration education and training throughout the world”.

Considering that Master of Public Administration (MPA) programmes are globally used as a vehicle for preparing public administration managers for performing their functions, and that public administration managers are situated in diverse, dynamic and co-constructed realities “with different features of time, space, structures, relationships, multiple and non-linear connections and subsystems” (Wessels, 2021a: 438), a crucial question is the following: How can MPA programmes be transformed to prepare students for dealing with emerging complex challenges in the changing world of work?

This article reports on an examination of the MPA curriculum attributes necessary for instilling those capabilities, through a South African case. As this case is situated within the global context of the changing world of public administration, this world is firstly discussed.

The changing world of public administration

The reality of the changing world of work is rarely disputed. Within the world of public administration, these changes have a fundamental impact on the life, work and behaviour of public administration managers. This article shows that public administration managers are situated in emerging, diverse, dynamic and co-constructed public administration

realities. Public administration is an emerging and context-specific social construction (Raadschelders, 2020). Therefore, emerging public administration challenges can only be dealt with in the specific context of time and space (Raadschelders and Whetsell, 2018).

Irrespective of the effect of time and space on the socially constructed phenomenon of public administration, it is possible to recognise this phenomenon within different contexts of time and space from the presence of certain ontological attributes, namely that of “organised, non-political, executive functions of the state” (Pauw and Louw, 2014: 16). While these multiple executive functions of the state, broadly classified as that of protection, promotion and enabling (Loxton, 1994: 94–106; Wessels, 2020: 153–154), have been traditionally performed through “a complex, logically inclusive composite of activities undertaken by one or more government departments, or other public institutions” (Robson, 2006: 72), the performing of those functions has gradually become more complex with the inclusion of a diversity of other participants from outside the formal organisational structures of government as well as a variety of context-specific functions to be performed.

The protection functions of the state are commonly associated with what Hobbes (1651: 166) referred to as “the Peace of the Subjects within themselves, and their Defence against a common Enemy”; in other words, the functions performed by the police service and the defence force. It is, however, noteworthy that Rousseau (1762: 219) included in this category of functions a different type of protection, namely the protection of “the poor against the tyranny of the rich”. Within the context of Africa, this is done through, *inter alia*, child support grants for poor households (Wessels, 2021b), school feeding programmes (Govender et al., 2021; Tandoh-Offin et al., 2021b) and mental healthcare (Wessels and Naidoo, 2021b). Furthermore, the global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic posed extreme challenges to the ability of states to protect society. Subsequently, to protect society against the spreading of the virus, governments announced lockdown measures that severely restricted the freedom of movement of individuals. Within the South African context, the unintended consequences of these protection measures included “a shutdown of the economy, which in turn resulted in a shock in the labour market and a big change in the way people went about doing their work” (Stats SA, 2021: 5). Similar unintended consequences caused the United Nations Children’s Fund to launch initiatives for the protection of “the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” (Unicef, 2019: 4). The challenges to governments’ protection function inevitably became highly complex. While these challenging interventions may share common functional categories and purposes, their distinct contexts of time and space require situation-specific capabilities for public administration managers to deal with them.

The conceptualisation of the state’s promotion functions is also rooted in the works of esteemed philosophers of state. Hobbes (1651: 267), for example, articulated the rationale for these functions as the obligation of the state to provide for members of society who have become “unable to maintain themselves by their labour”. With regard to Africa, Raadschelders (2003: 377) observes a “heavy reliance upon the state as the vehicle for social and economic development”, perhaps a symptom of what the president of the Republic of South Africa depicts as “a caring state” (Ramaphosa, 2019). It is within this promotion functional sphere where public administration managers are challenged with,

inter alia, the promotion of democratic governance in the sphere of local government (Tandoh-Offin et al., 2021a), the provision of water and sanitation infrastructure (Tempelhoff et al., 2021) and the provision of access to higher education (Wessels, 2021c). As these challenges occur within distinct contexts of time and space, it follows that the same contexts inform the capabilities necessary for dealing with them.

The last category of state functions is the enabling and facilitating functions of the state. The purpose of these functions is to make it possible for the state to perform its protection and promotion functions (Loxton, 1993: 54, 69). This category of functions is also founded on what Rousseau (1762: 221, 223) referred to as providing “for the public wants” such as the “management of the exchequer, ... the expenses of public administration” and “the maintenance of the Magistrates and other Officials”. These enabling and facilitative functions include new, comprehensive and improved policies and strategies (Constantin et al., 2018; Divay, 2015; Myrberg, 2017), coordination and alignment of programmes aiming to protect and enhance (Hellevik, 2012) and the improvement of accounting comparability (Brusca and Martínez, 2016). Within the context of Africa, public administration managers have to deal with challenges such as the procurement of service providers for social grant payments (Sambo, 2021), cooperative financial governance (Krishnan and Subban, 2021), sustained poor audit outcomes (Wessels et al., 2021a, 2021b), the implementation of employment equity policies (Wessels and Naidoo, 2021a) and risk management (Nundkumar and Subban, 2021). These are all context-specific challenges.

The difficulty for public administration managers to perform these functions may vary according to their specific situatedness in time and space (Wessels, 2021a). They are increasingly confronted with what has been coined ‘wicked problems’ that resulted from emergent and diverse contexts, roles and requirements (Wessels, 2020: 154); contradictions in legislation; constant changes in the political, social, economic and administrative environments; increasingly complex systems (PSC, 2016: x, 21); numerous conflicts; outbreak of diseases; rural–urban migrations (AUC, 2015); and a mismatch between problem structures, organisational structures and accountability channels (Christensen et al., 2015; Hellevik, 2012; Laegreid et al., 2015).

The challenges confronting public administration managers within their changing world of work are evidently context-specific, emergent, complex and unpredictable. Dealing with these challenges requires special but universal capabilities, which are discussed next.

Appropriate capabilities for dealing with emerging challenges

While the capability approach is rooted in Aristotle’s articulation of the concept of capability with reference to being, movement, acting and acting upon (Aristotle and Barnes, 1995: 97, 1034, 1029), the contemporary use of the concept has been articulated by Sen (1994: 334), with reference to the well-being and freedom of the human being “to achieve functionings that we have reason to value”. Nussbaum (1997: 275) draws a relation between the human capability to function and the achievement of specific higher-order goals within society. With regard to public administration, Latib (2016: 83)

contextualises operational capability with public value and legitimacy, with the implication that capability refers to the ability to perform legitimate functions of value. The capability approach has shown to be characterised by an ability to act or move towards legitimate goals that are valued.

While Nussbaum (1999: 237) identified three distinct categories of capabilities, namely basic capabilities (the intrinsic equipment of individuals as starting point for further development), internal capabilities (person-specific conditions sufficient to perform the requisite functions) and combined capabilities, the relevant category for the current study was the latter, namely combined capabilities. Nussbaum (1999: 237) defines this category as “internal capabilities combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function”. While public administration managers function in diverse, complex and sometimes interrelated functional areas, they are expected to be capable to deal with these challenges (therefore, to function) in specific and diverse contexts.

What capabilities are necessary for public administration managers to deal with their day-to-day challenges? Several scholars have attempted to answer this question. While Latib (2016: 83) refers to ‘operational capabilities’, several other scholars refer to ‘governance capabilities’ (Knasmüller and Meyer, 2013; Pacheco and Franzese, 2017: 45; Quinn, 2013; Termeer et al., 2015: 685). Termeer et al. (2015: 683) provide a specific definition of ‘capability’, namely “the ability of policy makers to observe wicked problems and to act accordingly, and the ability of the governance system to enable such observing and acting”. We are therefore dealing with capabilities necessary for public administration managers to function within their specific contexts. These capabilities include those of reflexivity, resilience, responsiveness, reciprocity, revitalisation and rescaling.

Reflexivity

For Quinn (2013: 7), reflexivity means the ability of public administration managers to question and reframe their own positions on an issue. Termeer et al. (2016: 13) outline the concept as referring to an interactive process of framing (articulating) in which actors discuss and negotiate competing frames of a challenge or wicked problem to decide which frame is most helpful for making sense of it. Reflexivity entails observing conflicting frames, convincing others to accept a specific frame and furthering reflexive activities (Termeer et al., 2015: 700). Reflexivity in this context is not an individual capability, but a social or collaborative capability. Raelin (2007: 502) refers to the developing of routines that “transcend the sum of individual actions and capabilities ... to practice and learn as part of a social network”. Considering the context-specific nature of public administration practice, Knasmüller and Meyer (2013: 83) rightfully advise that this capability should be instilled on an appropriate level of complexity as required by the situation-specific tasks and responsibilities of public managers.

Resilience

Several scholars (Bourgon, 2010: 211; Eppel and Rhodes, 2018: 950; Termeer et al., 2015: 689; Termeer et al., 2016: 14) identify resilience as an adaptive capability for dealing with unpredictable public administration challenges. For Termeer et al. (2016: 14), resilience entails dealing with the intrinsic uncertainties and interconnectivity of public administration challenges through adapting “flexibly to unpredictable and frequently occurring and changing circumstances without losing identity and reliability”. Eppel and Rhodes (2018: 955) also relate resilience to another capability, namely the ability to respond effectively to challenges.

Responsiveness

Research purpose response. The awareness attribute is articulated by Mischke (2010: 152) as “a sensitivity and continuous awareness of societal expectations”, while Termeer et al. (2016: 14) explicate the societal expectations for public administration managers as to observe and respond to “unlimited demands and concerns ...[and] issues that are pressing in politics and society”. One can therefore expect from responsive managers to be aware not only of pressing and unlimited societal expectations, but also of the risk of disastrous failures and the scarcity of resources (Notten, 2016: 72). Responsiveness implies that public administration managers, situated and present within their challenging work environment, should be actively risk-sensitive. An ample example of the absence of this risk awareness and responsiveness within the South African context is the rapid de-institutionalisation of vulnerable mental healthcare patients in the Gauteng province without mitigating the embedded risks, which resulted in the deaths of at least 144 mental health patients (Wessels and Naidoo, 2021b: 25). The literature furthermore shows that the response attribute of the concept of responsiveness occurs within a context of time, space and legitimacy. The *Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid* (WRR) (2013: 12) of the Netherlands asserts in a 2013 report on the learning economy that responsiveness does not occur in a vacuum, but in a specific context of time and space. The context provides a sensitivity for “when to hold back and when to react” (Termeer et al., 2016: 14). This sensitivity directly relates to the legitimacy of such a decision, which may be more complex than simply working within the specific regulatory framework. The response attribute of responsiveness implies the ability to decide and act in a proactive way. For Notten (2016: 72), contextual responsiveness requires the circulation of knowledge, knowledge differentiation and knowledge enrichment to support a “proactive competency to link to and learn for the future”. In the same line, the report by the WRR (2013: 122–129) emphasises the need for a culture of innovation in public administration to inform and enrich public administration managers’ responsive capability.

Reciprocity

The capability of reciprocity relates directly to the state of interconnectedness of public administration managers with one another and with other stakeholders on a specific issue, hence the need for them to collaboratively deal with the intrinsic uncertainties of a changing world of work. According to [Herrington and Herrington \(2005: 201\)](#), public administration managers should be exposed to reciprocal teaching to instil this capability. [Pacheco and Franzese \(2017: 45\)](#) suggest that this capability should be instilled through a master's programme by developing a community of practice as support base "rooted on values and engagement ... which goes beyond a set of formal knowledge". In this regard, [Yeung et al. \(2012: 231\)](#) emphasise the importance of trust and the acceptance of mutual obligations, while [Head and Alford \(2015: 725\)](#) point out that the building of trust often takes considerable time to realise. The practice of cultivating reciprocity within professional learning communities has shown to be founded on "a rich theoretical base of collaboration and professional learning" ([Timperley et al., 2009: 228](#)).

Revitalising

The capability of revitalising is a response to stagnations, powerplays or deadlocks of processes presenting themselves as counterproductive patterns or wicked problems ([Termeer et al., 2015: 686](#); [Termeer et al., 2016: 15](#)). To prevent or mitigate the risk of regression or commencement with futile actions, the capability of revitalisation entails the unblocking of stagnations, the reanimation of processes and the changing of existing patterns of behaviour ([Termeer et al., 2015: 686](#); [Termeer et al., 2016: 15](#)).

Rescaling

[Termeer et al. \(2016: 16\)](#) define the capability of rescaling as "the ability to address mismatches between the scale of a problem and the scale at which it is governed". Rescaling is therefore in particular relevant for dealing with ill-defined or wicked problems amid diverse and overlapping perspectives and jurisdiction spheres ([Wessels, 2020: 161](#)). In time and space, the consequences of this capability may be far-reaching for the inclusion and exclusion of both jurisdiction spheres and responsible actors for dealing with a public administration challenge.

While one can expect from public administration managers to be equipped with resources of authority, funding, people and diverse sources of knowledge, they do need the ability to, in the words of [Nussbaum \(1999: 232\)](#), "convert resources into functionings". The capabilities of reflexivity, resilience, responsiveness, reciprocity, revitalising and rescaling are therefore instrumental for public administration managers to make that conversion into the performing of those legitimate functions which they value.

The MPA can be regarded as most appropriate for the learning of these capabilities by current and aspiring public administration managers. The following section provides a personal exploratory account of a South African case of redesigning an MPA programme for this purpose.

Instilling capabilities for dealing with emerging challenges in MPA students: A South African case

The MPA qualification is probably the most widely used capacity building vehicle for mid-career public officials. This qualification is offered in various countries, including the United Kingdom, the USA, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa (ANZSOG, 2021; Ngele, 2019; Wessels, 2010, 2012, 2020) with the aim to prepare public administration managers to optimally function within their specific world of work (Dall’Alba, 2009: 39; Wessels, 2012: 159–160). At the time of authoring this article, the MPA was offered by nearly all the South African universities.

The MPA offered by the University of South Africa (Unisa), South Africa, has been selected as typical case of the phenomenon of MPA education. The purpose of this case is to provide an exploratory account of the transformation of MPA education to prepare public administration managers for a changing world of work. As this account is situated within the broader scholarly discourse on MPA education, trends in this discourse relevant to the specific case are articulated, whereafter the inculcation of appropriate capabilities in public administration managers is explored.

MPA education as phenomenon of this study

MPA education is a widely researched phenomenon (Hiedemann et al., 2017; Notten, 2016; Quinn, 2013; Ry Nielsen and Quinn, 2016; Wessels, 2010, 2012; Ysa et al., 2017). It has been approached as mid-career education (Kearns and Kearns, 2022; Notten, 2016; Quinn, 2013; Ry Nielsen and Quinn, 2016) as well as executive education (Hiedemann et al., 2017; Ysa et al., 2017) for public administration managers. The phenomenon has also been studied for the ability of its curricula to prepare public administration managers for emerging and challenging worlds of work (D’Agostino et al., 2019; Termeer et al., 2015; Wessels, 2020). Some literature shows that these worlds of work have context-specific differences, resulting in diverse role perceptions (Knassmüller and Veit, 2016) and perspectives on public administration challenges (Stout, 2018). The implication of this emerging world of work is the need for changes in education programmes and their curricula (Oldfield, 2017; Wessels, 2020; Wooldridge, 2004) to improve the preparation of public administration managers for dealing with emerging wicked problems (Termeer et al., 2015). In this regard, Termeer et al. (2015) and Termeer et al. (2016) propose the learning of public administration capabilities, as referred to earlier in this article.

Research purpose

The purpose of this article was to provide a personal exploratory account of the transformation of the mode of teaching and learning of the MPA programme offered by Unisa for instilling these capabilities in MPA students. This account includes a reflection on the process followed, the difficulties encountered and the implications of the study for the current scholarship on MPA education.

Selection of the MPA at Unisa as case

In South Africa, the MPA was first introduced by the University of Pretoria in 1965 under the name Master of State Administration (Cloete, 1988: 97), while Unisa introduced the MPA in 1982 (Auriacombe, 1988: 174). The MPA offering at Unisa has been selected as a typical case for this study due to its shared attributes with MPAs globally. The MPA is a master's by coursework and mini-dissertation (cf. CHE, 2013: 36). This qualification is pitched in South Africa on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Exit Level 9 and consists of 180 credits (equivalent to 1 800 notional study hours) at this level. All MPA offerings in South Africa must meet the criteria of this framework.

Unisa, the largest university on the African continent, offers a wide range of qualifications, including the MPA, through a distance and e-learning mode of tuition (Unisa, 2021). The curriculum of the MPA initially consisted of eight papers (modules) offered at honours level and a dissertation of limited scope offered at master's level (Ngele, 2019: 34). In preparation for the new qualification framework announced in 2013 (CHE, 2013), Unisa introduced a new curriculum for the programme in 2012, consisting of four compulsory coursework modules at NQF Exit Level 9, a research proposal module and a mini-dissertation. The coursework modules focus on four broad functional areas of a public administration manager, namely public policy, the management of public human resources, leadership and the management of public money (Ngele, 2019: 35–36). As in the past, the coursework modules of the revised qualification were offered by means of correspondence – tutorial letters, study guides, prescribed books, recommended scholarly articles, formative assignments and summative examinations.

It became evident that the cohort throughput rate of this qualification² was consistently low, with the highest rate of 17% in 2005, while the throughput rate was nearly non-existent since 2008. In fact, the throughput rate of the 311 students enrolled from 2005 to 2014 was a mere 1%, while the graduation rate was only 8.4% (Ngele, 2019: 78–80). This was indeed a dismal situation calling for a decisive choice between either the termination of this qualification or the transformation of it.

The MPA qualification has been offered by Unisa for four decades. It is therefore not only a typical case of an MPA offering, but it also has some unique institutional- and context-specific attributes, such as its e-learning nature, that make it worthwhile to study from an insider's perspective.

Research design

A single case design was used to provide a personal exploratory account of the transformation of the mode of teaching and learning of the MPA programme offered by Unisa for a changing world of work. As indicated by Flyvbjerg (2006: 225), a single case design is not appropriate for generalisation to an entire population; this design was selected to obtain context-specific information on and insights into the transformation of a specific MPA programme for a changing world of work. This study draws from the insider's memory of the researcher (see Haug, 1987, 2008) of the process, consisting of several workshops and individual discussions, supported by textual data such as notes gathered

during these workshops, reports on these workshops, official documentation, curriculum documentation and the content of the 2020 online module sites. What follows is the insider's account of the researcher of the development of the transformation process drawing from the above-mentioned sources.

Preparation to transform the offering of the MPA at Unisa

The transformation project on which this article reports was preceded by several studies on the qualification. The first study was done to clarify the implications of the publication of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework in 2007 for MPA programmes in South Africa and specifically at Unisa (Wessels, 2009). This study found that most South African programmes need to increase the exit level of their coursework modules to NQF Level 9 (master's level) and the weight of the mini-dissertation to at least 33% of the total weight of the qualification (Wessels, 2009: 517). This was followed by a comparative study of MPA programmes in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand (Wessels, 2010). This study recommended that South African higher education institutions learn from the experiences in Australia and New Zealand in revising "their programmes in advance in order to provide the high quality professional MPA programmes needed by the South African government" (Wessels, 2010: 193).

In a subsequent exploration of the implications of the developmental state as context for the selection of core modules for the MPA, several themes were identified (Wessels, 2012: 170). The first theme, namely government in a developmental state, refers to the context within which public administration managers perform their functions. The other themes articulate certain broad functions to be performed by public administration managers, namely leadership and people management, public financial management, public policy implementation and research methodology. These themes directly informed the inclusion of the coursework modules in the revised MPA curriculum, which was introduced in 2012 (Unisa, 2010). In addition to the above-mentioned studies, a master's student who conducted a study on the MPA qualification recommended "a fundamental integration of all the curriculum elements (e.g. students, lecturers, subject matter and professional practice" in the offering of the qualification (Ngele, 2019: 95). This recommendation amounts to an increased interconnectedness among all stakeholders in the MPA programme.

Furthermore, members of the Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa became involved in an international scholarly network, the Copenhagen Forum, with a strong research and practice focus on mid-career education for the public sector through, inter alia, the MPA programme. Participation in two of their forum sessions in 2017 (Limerick, Republic of Ireland) and 2018 (Vienna, Austria) provided the opportunity to share their experiences and research on the MPA programme with other specialists and to obtain their considered feedback. Similar enriching scholarly interactions on the MPA programme occurred in working groups of the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administrative Sciences (IASIA) and the International Institute of Administrative Sciences in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. These interactions resulted in publications on public administration knowledge and skills (Van Jaarsveldt, 2018) and

challenges that may inform the curricula of MPA programmes (Wessels, 2020). Van Jaarsveld (2018: 43) concluded that students are not adequately prepared for a fast-changing world of work and emphasised the need for public administrators to communicate and work within diverse multi- and international teams. Wessels (2020: 160) argues that as the traditional MPA curricula have become obsolete for preparing public administrators for the emerging challenges in their world of work, a gradual paradigm-shift towards the capability approach to teaching and learning, and an ongoing re-designing of MPA curricula seem to be imperative.

Following wide-ranging international networking, the Department of Public Administration and Management invited a past president of IASIA and member of several national and international accreditation agencies for public administration education to visit Unisa in March 2017. He conducted a seminar and workshop on 13 March 2017 on the MPA offering for the Department. Following suggestions made by him and informal consultations with a curriculum expert at Unisa's Academy for Applied Technology Innovation (AATI), the Department decided on 11 April 2017 to transform the current MPA offering to become fully online. This decision provided the project team with the opportunity to utilise the benefits of an online learning environment for making a paradigm shift towards a capability approach to teaching and learning.

The transformation project commenced informally with a consultative process within the Department and the broader structures of the University. The assistance of an internal curriculum expert attached to the AATI was obtained to facilitate the project. The project team, consisting of the four leaders of the coursework modules, a tuition expert within the Department and a research expert, met for the first time on 3 August 2017. To enhance a shared vision and commitment for this project among the team members, several other meetings (on 18 September 2017, 20 October 2017 and 21 November 2017) followed.

Becoming a formal teaching and learning transformation project

The project was formally registered within the University as a teaching and learning transformation project with subsequent official institutional support. Hence, a project leader attached to the Directorate Curriculum Development and Transformation joined the project team with the first scheduled meeting of the team on 16 March 2018. The subject librarian who was responsible for curating relevant reading materials and ensuring the availability of these materials in the library became an ad hoc team member. Other specialists who supported the team on an ad hoc basis included a design artist, who designed appropriate visuals appropriate for the learning material and obtained Shutterstock licenses for graphics. The team was also supported by a language practitioner who ensured the appropriateness of the language used in the study material.

Several multi-day workshops were conducted in July 2018, August 2018, September 2018, October 2018 and November 2018. Although a major part of the transformational shift during this project occurred in the minds of individual team members, it was also demonstrated in the interconnectedness among team members during the project. While a major part of the work was done by individual team members working on their own, this individual work was preceded and informed by various collaborative and interactive

sessions among team members themselves. These work sessions provided for a creative environment to reconceptualise the teaching and learning of this qualification.

The project manager for this project had the task to ensure that all the institutional deadlines and requirements necessary for the successful and timely implementation of the new modules were met. She subsequently assisted the team with meticulous planning, scheduling and controlling of activities. She had to adjust the project plan when necessary to accommodate challenges related to the availability of resources and team members. Several adjustments and provisions were made to the project plan along the way (Venter, 2020).

This transformation project occurred within a specific regulatory and curriculum context with a shared philosophical, curriculum and learning perspective emerging from the project team's interactions in 2017.

Regulatory context of the project

Since 2009, all academic qualifications offered by institutions for higher education in South Africa have to be submitted for accreditation to the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013: 9), which serves as quality council for higher education. Subsequently, the approval of a Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) for integrating all higher education qualifications into the NQF (CHE, 2013: 11). This framework provides for two types of master's degrees, namely a general (research) master's degree and a professional master's degree (CHE, 2013: 36–39). The main difference between the two is the minimum credits allocated for the research component, namely 33% for the general master's and 25% for the professional master's. The framework also provides for two types of general (research) master's, namely a master's degree by dissertation and a master's degree by coursework and mini-dissertation (CHE, 2013: 36). The MPA offered by Unisa is a research master's by coursework and mini-dissertation and is pitched on Level 9 of the HEQSF. In the document titled *Level descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework* by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 2012: 5–6), 10 distinct level descriptions of the learning achievements deemed appropriate for students at Level 9 are given. These level descriptors directly informed the work of the project team by articulating the certification and learning purposes of the qualification.

Strategic decisions by the project team

As the initial intention was to complete this project in the shortest possible time, the project team made a strategic decision not to follow a lengthy and timeous fully-fledged curriculum exercise, but to use the current structure of the qualification as approved in 2010 and implemented in 2012. The implication of this decision was that the project team focused primarily on optimising the learning of students through the transformation of the pedagogy and the utilisation of online delivery platforms. The existing modules included in this transformation project were the following:

- PUB5970 Policy Studies
- PUB5971 Public People Management
- PUB5972 Public Leadership
- PUB5973 Public Finance Management.

Considering the historic low throughput and graduation rates of this qualification, the project team envisaged that the transformed pedagogy would reduce the completion time of students. Although the research component (the research proposal and mini-dissertation) was excluded in the initial phase of the project, the project team took note of research indicating that a key factor in the inadequate throughput rate of MPA students was their inability to complete their research proposal and mini-dissertation within 2 years (Ngele, 2019: 95). However, the team decided to extend the transformation project to the research component as soon as the coursework part had been completed. Therefore, this account excludes the research component of the qualification.

Philosophical assumptions

Our transformed approach to teaching and learning is founded on the idea of “being-in-the-world”, coined by the German philosopher Heidegger (1962: 79). Assuming that our students are situated in the world of public administration, namely the “organised, non-political, executive functions of the state” (Pauw and Louw, 2014: 16) within the South African context, it makes sense to also assume that they are in the best possible position to know that world from their situatedness within a municipality or government department in South Africa, and by implication in Africa. Therefore, we decided to transform our mode of teaching and learning from a mode that expects students to study (not necessarily context-specific) textbooks and to be assessed on their ability to reproduce the content of those textbooks to a mode expecting students to study and reflect on their practice and utilise a variety of knowledge sources (colleagues, fellow students, social media, non-formal sources, myths and scholarly sources), values and ethos to make sense of this reality and the problems within it. With this approach the team intended to move away from an epistemology referred to by Schön (1995: 34) as technical rationality to an extended epistemology (Cary, 1999: 419) that includes all forms of knowing necessary for meaningful knowledge about public administration. Hence, by assuming that an extended epistemology is the most appropriate for meaningful knowledge about public administration, the team set out to design the online interaction with students accordingly to enhance optimal participation and interaction in collaborative and interconnected learning, thoughtful action, a plurality of knowing, thoughtful engagement with their relevant and important work, and professional inquiry (cf. Jakubik, 2011: 71–72).

Assumptions on how people learn

Let us turn to our assumptions on how people learn. These assumptions are informed mainly by the works *How people learn: Bridging research and practice* by the National Research Council (NRC) (1999) in the USA, *Promoting professional inquiry for*

improved outcomes for students in New Zealand by [Timperley et al. \(2009\)](#) and *The meaning of doing: Reflective practice in public administration education* by [Harper \(2018\)](#). For this project, we departed from the following assumptions on how people learn:

Assumption 1: Our students are situated within the world of public administration and are academically qualified (at least a 4-year higher education qualification) with considerable experience in and preconceptions of public administration. Our students draw their preconceptions about the working of the complex world of public administration from their authentic situated experiences of this world ([NRC, 1999: 10](#)). These preconceptions serve as points of departure for their learning. Hence, the facilitation of learning has to engage with these preconceptions ([Harper, 2018: 147](#); [NRC, 1999: 10](#); [Timperley et al., 2009: 229](#)). The implication of this assumption is that learning departs primarily from an ontological point and not from the so-called “foundational theories and seminal literature of the field” ([Kearns and Kearns, 2022: 150](#)). This is an important deviation from conventional strategies.

Assumption 2: To perform public administration management functions, our students require a sound foundation of comprehensive knowledge organised within conceptual frameworks serving as mental maps for understanding and performing their functions ([Guy and Sahraoui, 2022: xx](#); [Harper, 2018: 149](#); [NRC, 1999: 12](#); [Timperley et al., 2009: 230](#)). Comprehensive knowledge includes tacit, experiential, anecdotal, institutional, constitutional, legislation, professional and theoretical knowledge.

Assumption 3: Students need to take control of their own learning through metacognitive and self-regulating processes ([NRC, 1999: 13](#); [Timperley et al., 2009: 229](#)). For [Harper \(2018: 147\)](#), this metacognitive learning implies the instilling and practising of a reflective inquiry into practice (including new concrete experiences, observations and meaningful concepts) to improve the habitual actions of students as future professional practitioners. [Timperley et al. \(2009: 227\)](#) refer to this mode of learning as collaborative reflective inquiry into practice. This assumption has direct implications for the selection of an appropriate learning strategy, which is discussed next.

Learning strategy: Inquiry-driven learning

The project team decided on an inquiry-driven learning strategy for building the capacity of students to learn those capabilities (reflexivity, resilience, responsiveness, reciprocity, revitalising and rescaling) deemed appropriate for dealing with emerging public administration challenges and for meeting our philosophical, curriculum and learning assumptions. The inquiry learning strategy consists of seven attributes, namely collaborative interconnectedness, engagement with authentic experiences, an act of posing provocative questions, theoretical sense making, self- and co-regulated learning, comprehensive knowledge construction and improved performance or practice (cf. [Wessels et al., 2021b: 358](#)). This learning strategy, simultaneously introduced in all four coursework modules (PUB5970, PUB5971, PUB5972 and PUB5973), consists of the following core attributes: collaborative interconnectedness, engagement with authentic experiences, provocative questions or signposts to deeper understanding, theoretical

sense making, self- and co-regulated learning (agency), comprehensive knowledge construction, improved performance or practice, and learning-oriented assessment.

Collaborative interconnectedness: The collaborative attribute of inquiry-driven learning is founded on the learning assumptions of situatedness and self- and co-regulation. In fact, situatedness implies an interconnectedness among all participants in the inquiry process, such as students, practitioners, decision-makers, policymakers and community members (Kearns and Kearns, 2022: 155; Wessels, 2021a: 439). In this regard, Raadschelders and Whetsell (2018: 1138) refer to the so-called triple helix of collaboration among the academic sector, industry and government for producing knowledge for dealing with public administration challenges. Considering the unpredictable nature of public administration challenges, collaboration seems to be a pivotal attribute of a learning strategy preparing future public administration managers for conceptualising these challenges and dealing with them.

The four module sites are used as home for the practice of the students enrolled for the modules. The respective module leaders serve as hosts for the four communities of practice. Hence, each of them welcomes the student members to these sites and provides a brief overview of the learning process and information on how their learning will be assessed. The first lesson in each module is titled “Onboarding” and leads the students through the purpose of the respective module within the context of the MPA programme, the various support facilities available and a roadmap for the way forward. Through a dedicated activity, students are invited to introduce themselves to the other students by providing “a short background on who you are and what you do in the context of the public service” and to “indicate what your expectations are in respect of this module” (excerpt from the module site of PUB5970). This confirms to the students that they are not only members of a specific group of students, but that they are also situated within different public sector institutions. This situatedness provides them with an interconnected interest in the different foci of each of the modules. The interconnected nature of these module sites is further imparted in the various lessons of each module through learning activities and discussions posted on the module site, ultimately to cultivate the capability of reciprocity (state of interconnectedness with one another), as suggested by Herrington and Herrington (2005: 201).

Engagement with authentic experiences: This attribute refers to the students’ authentic experiences as university students and future graduates, as well as their current or future communities of professional practice (Butler and Schnellert, 2012: 1206; Van der Meer and Marks, 2013: 43). The situatedness of students serves as foundation for the inquiry-driven learning strategy by enriching the learning process with diverse situations, perspectives, problem definitions and actor definitions (Van der Meer and Marks, 2013: 43). Acknowledging the situatedness of our students constitutes a radical narrowing of what Mudida refers to as a gap between the teaching and the practice of public administration within the African context (Mudida, 2022: 135–136). The inquiry process learned by students while situated in the MPA programme is, inter alia, aimed to cultivate the capability of resilience (adaptability) for dealing with unpredictable, intrinsically uncertain and interconnective public administration (and, for that matter, student) challenges.

The learning of the inquiry process is facilitated through a distinct authentic scenario for each module, such as the National Health Insurance (NHI) as a case of public policy (PUB5970), Eskom as a case of negative consequences of flouting public people management practices and processes (PUB5971) and the Merafong Local Municipality as a case of public finance management (PUB5973). These scenarios serve to cultivate the capability of responsiveness among students by contextualising their preconceptions about and experiences in each area of inquiry as a point of departure for responding to challenges inherent to these scenarios. Their situated preconceptions are furthermore used to instil critical concepts such as ‘sustainable policy design’, ‘problem structuring’ and ‘root cause analysis’ (PUB5970) as thinking strategies for the outlining and structuring of problems, and to cultivate the capability of rescaling (Termeer et al., 2016: 16). The latter capability is especially relevant within the multi-sphere cooperative government system in South Africa. These scenarios furthermore serve as common ground for asking provocative questions towards deeper understanding, which is discussed next.

Provocative questions or signposts to deeper understanding: The act of questioning as attribute of inquiry-driven learning is founded on the Socratic paradigm, being an “escape from pseudo-certain knowledge” (Partenie, 1997: 1). Socrates allegedly asked questions, letting the other person do most of the talking while keeping the course of the conversation under his control (Delic, 2016: 511–517). Goldman et al. (2010: 297) articulate this act of questioning as Socrates’ attempt “to prove to his students that anything worthy of the name knowledge had to be constructed by the learner through processes of questioning and answering [as] teaching-as-telling could produce imitation, but not real knowledge”. For Harper (2018: 147), the implication of this act of questioning as part of a learning strategy is that future public administration managers will not necessarily “make effective arguments but ... will [rather] seek truth”. Through the act of questioning, the capability of revitalising is cultivated (Termeer et al., 2015: 686): Students are encouraged to deal with stagnations, powerplays and deadlocks of their situation- and scenario-specific challenges by questioning and reflecting on their own and other’s preconceptions about an issue, and to clarify the knowledge necessary for formulating plans for revitalising a process.

Students in this MPA programme are encouraged to, provocatively:

- identify issues within their immediate context and narrow them down to ill-defined and complex problems that could be solved;
- undertake problem structuring to determine what the causes and consequences of the policy issues are;
- identify various options that would solve these ill-defined and complex policy issues (PUB5970); and
- draw from their own experiences and perspectives as well as from various knowledge sources to make sense of wicked problems (PUB5971 and PUB5972).

Theoretical sense making: While the previous attribute draws primarily from students’ own, situated experiences, the attribute of theoretical sense making entails the introduction of theoretical concepts and frameworks to ill-structured problems (Butler and

Schnellert, 2012: 1210). This attribute serves to cultivate the capability of reflexivity necessary for students and practitioners to question and reframe their perspectives on an issue (Quinn, 2013: 7). The NRC (1999: 13) specifically mentions the importance of a conceptual framework for the understanding of societal problems and learning new ways of doing things. In this regard, Harper (2018: 147) emphasises that lecturing staff should link students' practice reflections with theoretical constructs to effect meaningful learning. This view is related to the finding of the NRC (1999: 16) that lecturing staff "must teach some subject matter in depth, providing many examples in which the same concept is at work and providing a firm foundation of factual knowledge". Harper (2018: 147) refers to this as a process of meaningful learning that transpires through the practice of habitual actions of concrete experience, observation, reflection and the forming of abstract (theoretical) concepts.

Each of the fields covered by the four modules has its own set of theoretical traditions to build on students' pre-scientific reflections on wicked problems. These traditions, concepts and theoretical voices are introduced to students using relevant key concepts, scholarly articles and relevant scholarly books. Furthermore, students are urged to identify root causes of issues, reflect on them and test their perspectives by consulting specific theoretical work (PUB5970, section 4.6). Informed by the fusion between practice experience and the theoretical understanding of ill-structured problems, students are encouraged to creatively conceptualise tentative solutions to identified problems (PUB5970 and PUB5973).

Self- and co-regulated learning (agency): Drawing from the third philosophical assumption discussed earlier, this attribute of fostering self-regulation among students is at the heart of inquiry-driven learning (Butler and Schnellert, 2012: 1208). Butler and Schnellert (2012: 1207) articulate self-regulation as constituting "a recursive cycle of goal-directed, strategic activities that include defining problems or expectations, setting goals, selecting, adapting, or inventing task appropriate strategies, self-monitoring outcomes, and revising goals or approaches to better achieve desired outcomes". This approach entails, inter alia, that students and, by implication, future public administrators, take control of their own learning, practice and career (Timperley et al., 2009: 231). In addition to self-regulation, Butler and Schnellert (2012: 1208) refer to co-regulation as a form of 'scaffold', where students or colleagues demonstrate the capability of reciprocity by engaging with one another and relevant stakeholders and by providing support to one another in the inquiry process.

All four modules in this MPA programme are designed to enhance self-and co-regulated learning by providing for a collaborative learning environment and setting learning outcomes and learning tasks, with due dates, for each module. Learning tasks include the drafting of a policy assessment paper in the form of a cabinet memorandum, a professional report on real-life wicked problems (PUB5970, Lesson 7), an assessment paper on a proposed turn-around-strategy for a state-owned enterprise (PUB5971, Lesson 1), a report on a personal leadership inventory (PUB5972, Lesson 6) and a business report on improving the supply chain management framework for a public sector institution (PUB5973, Lesson 6). These tasks are performed either as learning activities posted in the

discussion forum to be challenged by co-students or as part of the summative assessment for feedback by the lecturer.

Comprehensive knowledge construction: This attribute of inquiry-driven learning about a specific practice or authentic scenario of public administration is aimed at comprehensive knowledge construction. It draws from various sources, such as students' preconceptions about the world of public administration works (NRC, 1999: 10), a diversity of inquiry frameworks, knowledge structures and theoretical lenses to co-construct authentic knowledge about multi-layered challenges (Wessels et al., 2021b: 359). Comprehensive knowledge construction therefore draws from different ways of knowing, such as multi-disciplinary propositional knowledge, action-related knowledge, experiential knowledge (things as actually experienced) and presentational knowledge (Jakubik, 2011: 4; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2003: 368–369). In this regard, a Public Leadership (PUB5972) student described her daily duties as establishing comprehensive plans, engaging various stakeholder groups from different backgrounds. Therefore, it makes sense that one of the learning tasks in the module Policy Studies (PUB5970) entails the comprehensive knowledge construction through the population of a log frame matrix with implementation details such as project activities, indicators, sources of verification and risks.

Improved performance or practice: The ultimate purpose of the inquiry-driven learning strategy is to contribute to “meaningful, actionable knowledge” (Ospina and Dodge, 2005: 152) necessary for improved performance or practice. Furthermore, this attribute is aligned with the purpose of the capability approach, namely that students and future public administration managers achieve those functionings they “have reason to value” (Sen, 1994: 334).

The facilitation of learning specifically encourages students to adopt a habit of reflecting on their performance (the capability of reflexivity) and improving and revitalising their practice (capabilities of resilience and responsiveness) through actively participating in all the student-related activities (capability of reciprocity) and dedicatedly performing all their cognitive and practice-related learning tasks (e.g. designing a competency model for selecting appropriate policy options). The summative assessments of these modules are therefore integrated learning activities aimed at the improvement of practice, such as the submission of a cabinet memorandum for approval of a policy to improve practice related to a specific policy issue (PUB5970), a core people management challenge in a public institution (PUB5971), the drafting of a personal leadership inventory (PUB5972) or drawing up a business plan for improving the current supply chain management framework for the public service (PUB5973). Core to the inquiry-driven learning strategy is the learning-oriented assessment strategy, discussed next.

Learning-oriented assessment: An inquiry-driven learning strategy implies a radical transformation of assessment, namely replacing the traditional assessment of learning with assessment for learning. The learning-oriented assessment strategy is informed by the rich scholarly works of David Boud, David Carless, Jaclyn Broadbent, Elizabeth Molloy, Claus Nygaard and others (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Broadbent et al., 2018; Carless, 2007, 2020; Carless and Boud, 2018). Carless (2007: 57) identified three defining attributes of learning-oriented assessment, namely assessment tasks as learning tasks,

student involvement and feedback as feedforward. Learning-oriented assessment implies the design of assessment tasks to “stimulate sound learning practices amongst students”, actively involving students in engaging with the criteria and quality of their own and their peers’ performance, and supporting current and future student learning through “timely and forward-looking” feedback (Carless, 2007: 57). The latter notion of feedback, referred to in the literature as ‘feedforward’, implies a key role for students in providing feedback to fellow students, and the obligation on the lecturing staff to provide explicit feedback on formative learning tasks and exemplars to develop students’ understanding of quality for future learning tasks (cf. Broadbent et al., 2018). The project team implemented the learning-oriented assessment strategy in the four MPA modules as follows:

Assessment tasks as learning tasks: The assessment strategy, assessment tasks and learning tasks for each module include learning through formative assessment activities and discussions among students, as well as through a summative assessment task consisting of a professional report documenting the learning the students had achieved. Both the formative and the summative assessment tasks are designed to enable students to meet the respective module’s envisaged learning outcomes and learning tasks.

The formative assessment in the module Policy Studies (PUB5970) includes learning activities that require students to utilise the online forums to share their own comparisons of political parties’ manifestos, their views on the proposed NHI policy (which serves as authentic scenario for this module), as well their perception of the role of the media in the setting of policy agendas. These activities provide the opportunity for students to give feedback, learn from one another and develop their distinct views on the topic as preparation for the summative assessment. For the summative assessment, students must draw from their formative learning activities and related feedback, as well as from detailed guidance to perform authentic learning tasks such as drafting a policy assessment paper and evaluating its impact.

Student involvement: The involvement of students in learning-oriented assessment is necessary for developing their understanding of the learning goals they have to achieve as well as the criteria and standards indicating the quality of achievement (Carless, 2007: 59). Students are therefore encouraged to actively participate in the discussion forums on the learning sites, to provide feedback on one another’s writings in individual blogs, to share views on assessment tasks (PUB5973) and to submit position papers on identified topics (PUB5970).

Feedback as feedforward: Following the advice of Broadbent et al. (2018), the format of the summative assessment tasks on the module sites is outlined by providing a broad structure of the respective reports, a word count limitation as well as an indication of the cumulative weight of the different components – hence, feedforward.

The above personal exploratory account of the insider’s experience and observations of the researcher of the transformation of the learning strategy for the MPA qualification at Unisa does not include an assessment of the success or of the implementation process. This will be done in a follow-up study.

Reflection and conclusion

As public administration managers are constantly confronted with emerging challenges within their complex and context-specific worlds of work, they need appropriate capabilities for dealing with them. I set out to explore how they can learn those capabilities through an MPA programme.

Public administration challenges are emerging and context-specific human constructions. Dealing with these challenges constitutes a legitimate core of the functions of public administration managers. To capably deal with these challenges, they need the capabilities of reflexivity, resilience, responsiveness, reciprocity, revitalising and re-scaling to convert their diverse resources into productive functionings. The MPA qualification is therefore an appropriate vehicle for learning these capabilities.

The South African e-learning case was used for a personal exploratory account of the transformation of the mode of teaching and learning of an MPA programme for students to learn these capabilities. The online learning environment of this case has shown to enhance the paradigm shift towards a capability approach to teaching and learning.

The transformation process was founded on three assumptions on how people learn: firstly, that students enter the MPA programme with preconceptions about how the world of public administration works, and therefore, the facilitation of learning must engage with these ontological preconceptions; secondly, that students require a sound foundation of comprehensive knowledge organised within conceptual frameworks for understanding and performing their functions; and thirdly, that students need to take control of their own learning through metacognitive and self-regulating processes for improving their habitual actions as future professional practitioners. These assumptions also served as the foundation for implementing an inquiry-driven learning strategy.

The inquiry-driven learning strategy implemented in the four coursework modules aimed at collaborative interconnectedness among students, their engagement with authentic experiences, a deeper understanding of issues through the posing of provocative questions, theoretical lenses for sense making, self- and co-regulated learning (agency), comprehensive knowledge construction, improved performance or practice, and learning-oriented assessment. This learning strategy is aimed at improving their habitual actions, both as students and as future professional practitioners. It entails them learning habits to deal with ill-structured problems and unknown futures while performing the functionings they value.

Public administration managers are indeed confronted by the rapid emergence of complex challenges within their respective functional areas. This study has shown that by transforming MPA curricula to provide for the learning of those capabilities necessary for dealing with the complexity of unknown futures, public administration managers can be adequately prepared to perform their respective functions in dealing with those challenges.

While this article provides an exploratory personal account of the transformation of the mode of teaching and learning of the MPA programme offered by Unisa, this account does not include an assessment of quality and the success of the transformed learning offerings. A follow-up study to evaluate the quality of the programme is therefore necessary.

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Notes

1. This article would not have been possible without the work of the curriculum transformation team consisting of Werner Webb, Londoloza Luvuno, Sinval Kahn, Eric Nealer, Liza van Jaarsveldt, Marié Nöthling and Anneke Venter.
2. The percentage of a specific student cohort completing their qualification within four academic years.

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