

A core curriculum for a Master of Public Administration (MPA) qualification

Some considerations for a developmental state¹

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ABSTRACT

The Master of Public Administration (MPA) seems to lack a core curriculum on which the various universities and other interest groups within a specific country agree. This article considers the possibility of a core curriculum for a MPA programme that would address the intellectual, educational and practical needs and demands of a public official functioning in the context of a developmental state such as South Africa. The research for this article includes a survey of scholarly literature on the MPA and on curriculum development, a study of curriculum documents of the various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering the MPA (or related) programmes in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, an analysis of the generic core management criteria and standards for the Senior Management Service (SMS) of the South African Public Service (South Africa 2006), and inputs obtained from several Public Administration academics. This article confirms that it is indeed possible to identify core modules with related competencies for a MPA programme in a developmental state such as South Africa, and proposes the following modules as part of such a core curriculum: government in a developmental state; leadership and management in a changing public environment; public financial management; public policies for solving service delivery challenges; master the designing of a research project and the writing of a research proposal; master the writing of a dissertation under supervision to solve problems which need scientific solutions.

INTRODUCTION

The Master of Public Administration (MPA) is a course work postgraduate university programme offered to educate practicing public servants in managerial positions. The MPA is especially popular in the United States of America although the programme is also offered in various other countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In South Africa this programme is offered by various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and regulated by the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF). Although the MPA is a professional qualification, it is evident that a diversity of curricula exists worldwide amongst the various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering this programme (Wessels 2010). There seems to be an absence of a commonly agreed upon core curriculum for this programme – not even in a typical developmental state such as South Africa.

Research by Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:694) has shown that the highest regarded MPA programmes in the USA are “tightly focused” with the core as high as 57,1% of the total programme content. Their data also show that accredited MPA programmes are more homogeneous than non-accredited programmes (Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008:696). A comparison of MPA programmes in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Wessels 2010) confirms this finding, as the majority of the modules which are offered as part of the respective MPA programmes, are core modules (Australia (51%); New Zealand (58,33%); South Africa (77,92%). The core of the Executive Master of Public Administration (EMPA) offered in Australia and New Zealand by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) consists of 80% of the total coursework. The purpose of this article is to propose a core curriculum for an MPA programme that would address the intellectual, educational and practical needs and demands of a public official functioning in the context of a developmental state such as South Africa.

The research for this article includes:

- a survey of scholarly literature on the MPA and on curriculum development,
- a study of curriculum documents of the various HEIs offering the MPA (or related) programmes in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand
- an analysis of the generic core management criteria and standards for the Senior Management Service (SMS) of the South African Public Service (South Africa 2006)
- inputs obtained by means of an open ended questionnaire from several Public Administration academics
- the results of an internal workshop by an academic Department at a South African University on the content of a MPA curriculum

This article will start reporting in a review of scholarly literature on the MPA programme and an overview of the current offerings of MPA programmes in the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This will be followed by a discussion of the selected approach for curriculum development of a MPA programme and a reflection on the various considerations in the process of designing an MPA curriculum within the context of a developmental state. The article will conclude with such a proposed core MPA curriculum.

THE MPA – A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

A review of scholarly literature on the MPA, has shown that several articles have been published on the MPA degree (Grode and Holzer 1975; Baldwin 1988; Bowman 1988; Cleary 1990; Bowman, Chen, Tinkersley and Hilliard 1993; Hays and Duke 1996; McSwite 2001; Denhardt 2001; Cunningham and Weschler 2002; Roux and Van Rooyen 2002; Masilo 2003; Nel 2004; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006; O'Neill 2006; Card and Fairholm 2007; Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008). Only a limited number of them focus on curriculum related issues, such as the purpose of the programme (Baldwin 1988; Denhardt 2001:527–531; Cunningham and Weschler 2002:104; O'Neill 2006:678), curriculum requirements and components (Cleary 1990:665; Hays and Dude 1996:427; O'Neill 2006:679–681; Card and Fairholm 2007:6–7; Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008:698–699), theory competence (McSwite 2001:111; Denhardt 2001:527,531; Cunningham and Weschler 2002:105–109), delivery mechanisms (Denhardt 2001:528; O'Neill 2006:682–688), accreditation and rankings (Hays and Dude 1996; Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008:702–704) and the perceived utility of the MPA degree (Grode and Holzer 1975; Hays and Dude 1996:431; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006:6).

It makes sense that reflection on a core curriculum for the MPA in a developmental state, should start with the purpose of such a qualification. What causes a MPA to be different from a Masters of Arts in Public Administration or a Masters of Commerce in Public Administration? Within the South African context one may use the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) as a point of departure (South Africa 2007:27). This framework makes provision for two types of master's degrees, namely (1) to educate and train researchers and (2) to prepare graduates for advanced and specialised professional employment (South Africa 2007:27). The MPA clearly falls in the second category, namely to prepare graduates for advanced and professional employment. In this regard Denhardt (2001:529) observes that "public administrators ... need to develop skills to affect change in the public sector" – a clear purpose for the MPA programme. Cunningham and Weschler (2002:104) are adamant that the MPA

programme should apply theory-based training to meet the developmental and career needs of “administrative practitioners”. If the MPA is regarded as advanced and specialised professional preparation for senior public practitioners or public managers, the purpose statement formulated by O’Neill for the Executive Master of Public Administration offered in Australia and New Zealand, may be also applicable to the MPA in general, namely “to enhance the depth and breadth of management and policy of high-potential public sector managers, to provide these managers the tools and frameworks needed to be clearer about the value public managers deliver to the public, and to better equip public managers to manage complex accountabilities in the face of shifting political, economic, and organizational environments” (O’Neill 2006:678).

Although the literature seems to be in agreement about the professional nature of the MPA qualification, the literature review reveals the existence of a diversity of curriculum requirements and components for this programme (Card and Fairholm 2007:6–7; Cleary 1990:665; Hays and Dude 1996:427; O’Neill 2006:679–681; Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008:698–699). Cleary (1990:665) observes that common curriculum requirements vary from masters programme to masters programme. However, a survey conducted by him reveals a tendency to an “inner core” of six areas, namely public administration, research methods, public finance, policy analysis, personnel, and political institutions and processes (Cleary 1990:665). Card and Fairholm (2007:6–7) have a different view on this as they conclude from their research that leadership, communication, financial management and “wearing well on people” are amongst the most important areas of competences for an MPA programme to focus on. Hays and Dude (1996:427) identify a different list of topics to be covered by the Certified Public Manager (CPM) programme, which may also be considered in the reflection on a core curriculum for the MPA. This list is as follows: general administration and organisations, technical and quantitative skills, analytical and conceptual skills and human skills (Hays and Dude 1996:427).

The discourse on curriculum requirements and components is continued by a recent article reporting on a survey of websites from top 50 institutions in the USA by Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:698–699). This article reveals that more than 50 percent of MPA programmes at these institutions require at least one of the following subjects or modules as part of the core: budgeting and finance (84,8%), ethics and leadership (58,7%), policy evaluation (87%), public administration (73,9%), politics and legal institutions (52,2%) and organisational concepts and institutions (87%). From Australia and New Zealand, O’Neill (2006:679-681) reports that the EMPA consists of ten subjects, of which eight are core. These eight subjects are public sector financial management, delivering public value, designing public policies and programmes, government

in a market economy, decision making under uncertainty, leading public sector change, governing by the rules and the work-based project (O'Neill 2006:679–681). Some of these EMPA topics, for example, delivering public value, leading public sector change, and governing by the rules, are quite unfamiliar to the traditional topics associated with the MPA and suggest a possible trend away from the disciplinary approach of an MPA curriculum. This trend may be to a “socially responsive and competency-based” curriculum as identified in an article by Nel (2004:23–49). This trend may perhaps be the reason for a perceived tension observed between theory competence curricula and professional competence curricula.

The usefulness of theory in the MPA curriculum has also been discussed extensively in the literature. The question of “how theory is properly related to practice” within the arena of the MPA curriculum has been addressed a few years ago in an article “Theory competency for MPA-educated practitioners” by McSwite (2001:111–115). McSwite (2001:112) argues that education MPA students in theory “adds at least three potential aspects to their capacity for effective administrative action: richness of perspective, flexibility of attention, and modesty”. This implies that practitioners will have a sensitivity for the existence of many possible ways of working out a line of action, a willingness to shift their understanding and line of action if needed, and a willingness to openly engage with others in a discourse about possible lines of action (McSwite 2001:112). Cunningham and Weschler (2002:105–109), however, warn that the “orientation of the instructor trumps curricular content” in the sense that the instructor or lecturer is supposed to create a learning environment in which students can reflect on the application of alternative theories to explain and understand current policies, practices and managerial tasks. The lecturer is thus supposed to create a haven where the MPA student can consider profession related issues “thoughtfully, at low personal cost, and prepare for the trial by fire that will inevitably face the line practitioner” (Cunningham and Weschler 2002:109). This haven is supposed, not only to instil knowledge about the field, but to prepare MPA students “to act, effectively and consistently, to make things happen” (Denhardt 2001:529). MPA students should therefore, in the words of Denhardt (2001:533), learn as part of “a relationship that creates the conditions under which appropriate learning and personal development can flourish, both for the student and the teacher” (Denhardt 2001:533). It seems that the creation of learning environments in which learners can apply various theoretical tools to reflect on professional problems, is directly related to appropriate delivery mechanisms (Denhardt 2001:528; O'Neill 2006:682–688). It is especially distance learning that asks for new and innovative ways of delivering.

The professional nature of the MPA qualification seems to make a discussion regarding accreditation (the official recognition of the qualification for meeting

the minimum requirements of professional education) and ranking inevitable. However, this is not a new discourse. In the United States of America (USA), MPA programme accreditation has been done for many years by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA). It is specifically the issue of accreditation that “fostered the impression that the practice of public management could be boiled down into a generic core of knowledge” (Hays and Dude 1996:425). This impression is not without reason as research by Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:697) shows that accredited MPA programmes in the USA tend to have a higher percentage (57,5%) of modules as part of the core of the programme than non accredited MPA programmes (47,9%). Their research has also shown that accredited programmes have a stronger preference for certain modules (eg human resources management, policy evaluation, politics and legal institutions, organisational concepts and institutions, capstone or final research project) than non-accredited programmes (Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008:697). However their research has shown that accreditation is not necessarily a factor contributing to the rankings of the top 50 programmes in the USA – in fact accredited programmes rank lower among the top 50 institutions (Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008:703). It seems that larger programmes are statistically associated with a higher rank, probably due to a higher visibility in the field and the ability to attract better students (Koven, Goetzke and Brennan 2008:702). The implication is thus that accreditation is not a necessary requirement for a specific institution’s qualification to be recognised as one of the top programmes.

Related to the accreditation and ranking of the MPA degree, is certainly the issue of its perceived utility. There seems to be a longstanding belief under MPA degree holders in at least the USA that the acquisition of this degree is of significant benefit to them (Grode and Holzer 1975:411). Research by Hays and Dude (1996:431) finds that it is especially the traditional academic setting of the professional training that appeals to MPA students. A study by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006:6) concludes that MPA programmes continue to be relevant and highly effective as their curricula incorporate attention to skills and knowledge development in understanding how things work, the so-called “hard” skills (e.g. programme and project management, financial management and job specific technical skills) and people skills (e.g. change management, people management and empowerment, client orientation and customer focus, and communication). Although similar research has not been done on the perceived utility of the MPA degree in South Africa, one can take it for granted that the number of students still enrolling for this programme serves as evidence of at least a perception of utility under proposed students.

The literature as discussed earlier in this article has shown that the MPA is generally regarded as a programme giving advanced and specialised professional preparation for senior public managers. For this purpose there seems to exist a diversity of curriculum compositions among the various HEIs offering this programme. The trend in the discourse of MPA curricula seems to be in the direction of the creation of learning environments in which learners can apply various theoretical tools to reflect on professional problems. The literature also reveals that accreditation is not necessarily a proxy for high ranking MPA programmes. However, accredited programmes seem to have greater uniformity with regard to the type of modules as part of their core than non accredited programmes. There seems to be, at least in the USA, a long standing belief that an MPA qualification is relevant and beneficial for students working in the public sector. Bearing in mind that the purpose of this qualification is to prepare senior public managers for a profession in the public service, it makes sense that continuing attention is given to the relevance of the programme's curriculum.

SOME THOUGHTS ON CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The curriculum of any academic programme can be considered as the heart of such a programme (*cf.* Slattery 1995:xv). Although there may be various definitions of the word "curriculum" (see for example the one in Collins 2009), I understand the concept as referring to the learning (in the widest sense of the word) that is facilitated by a specific university programme such as the MPA. Consequently, the concept includes a combination of explicit and implicit knowledge, skills, values and competence in the broadest sense of the word (Pauw 1995:45–46; Clapper and Wessels 1997:49). The concept is thus more comprehensive as the definition by *Collins Dictionary*, namely "all the courses of study offered by a school or college" and "a course of study in one subject at a school or college" (Collins 2009: Online).

The wide interpretation of the concept resonates with the trend of designing curricula where the typical learner is seen firstly as citizens, and then as employable graduates (Heath 2000:44). Consequently, this interpretation of the concept "curriculum" see curriculum development central to the process of transformation (Tisani 2004:174; Esakov 2009:69). The implication of this view is that an ideal curriculum is supposed to prepare an MPA student to be more than an "armchair pontificator" who only criticises, without having the skills or motivation to transform society or an institution, and solve societal problems (Rowe 2002).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGNING AN MPA CURRICULUM FOR A DEVELOPMENTAL STATE

How does the ideal MPA curriculum for a developmental state, such as South Africa look like? The literature review has shown that there is a general agreement that the purpose of MPA programmes is to prepare senior public managers for a profession in the public service. Knowing that, the typical learner (senior public manager) and the professional context of such a person needs to be kept in mind when a legitimate MPA curriculum is designed. For considering such a curriculum, I have decided to follow in part “a simplified process for designing your curriculum” (Nöthling, Goodwin-Davey and Van Rensburg 2009:3.4). This process has been used on 8 October 2009 in a curriculum development workshop of an academic department at a South African university offering the Master of Public Administration. This process consists of the following five steps: problem-space analysis; finding a clear focus of the professional characteristics the learner; designing down; mapping the curriculum; and completing the necessary forms.

Answers obtained from a recent qualitative survey amongst members of the Association of Southern African Schools and Departments of Public Administration and Management (ASSADPAM) as well as the generic core management criteria and standards as published in the *Senior Management Service Handbook* (South Africa 2006: Annexure E) has been fed into the workshop. This article will consequently report on the results of the application of this process during the workshop under the headings “problem-space analysis”, finding a clear focus on the professional characteristics of the learner, and competencies needed.

Problem-space analysis

The purpose of this first step, the problem-space analysis is to understand the context in which the typical learners for this programme work and live. The context has been categorised as follows: the developmental state, places, situations or spheres in the context, role players in the context, typical problems encountered, and social forces influencing the context (Nöthling, Goodwin-Davey and Van Rensburg 2009:3.5).

***The developmental state*²**

The “developmental state” enjoys axiomatic status within the South African milieu although the concept does not appear as such in the South African Constitution. Section 152(1) (c) of the Constitution, 1996, however, states that the objects of local government is, inter alia, to promote social and economic

development. Furthermore, the concept “developmental state” does not enjoy unambiguous definition among scholars. It seems, therefore, that “developmental state-ism” will have to be defined and constantly redefined contextually if it is to convey any meaning. The determining context relevant to this presentation is the learning or educational and training ideals of and for a South African public official; assuming the conventional wisdom that the South African public official functions in a developmental state setting. Edigheji (2005) points out that the developmental state, by definition, comprises an *ideological* and a *structural* component. From an ideological point of view, the developmental state is meant to have clearly defined socio-economic objectives (White 1998:20), including targeted economic growth that results in the improvement of the material living conditions of the majority of the population (*cf.* Manual 2004; Rasool 2008). The *structural* component of the developmental state definition requires that the developmental state focuses on increasing the capacity to implement economic and social policies with a growing measure of efficiency in response to the multiple constituencies that it purports to serve. Improving the policy implementation capacity requires increasing and improving the institutional, technical, administrative and political aptitudes, competencies and capabilities of those fingered in the implementation of the policies. Against the background of Amartya Sen’s conception of the developmental state, Manual (2004) concludes that public servants that function in the developmental state context must have a particular understanding of themselves; *viz.* as servants of the people, as “champions of the poor and downtrodden”. Both the *ideological* and *structural* components of the developmental state hold important implications for the preparation of the ideal public official. Considering, for example, chapter 10 of the South African Constitution, 1996 as a funnel through which all constitutional ideals can be poured into the public service, invariably yields that public administration must be in pursuit of, *inter alia*, economy, efficiency, development, high ethical standards and accountability, broad representivity, public participation, transparency, and cultivation of human resources (RSA 1996; s 195(1) and (2)). These requirements; aspects that resonate with both ideological and structural components of the developmental state as contextually explained above, demand that the capacities of public officials who aim to function optimally as servants of the public be systematically honed and developed in line with the developmental pursuits as stated above. Such contextually responsive development, education and training of public officials would, in turn, demand contextually defined curriculum development. In response to the latter understanding of the developmental state relative to the South African Constitution and the requirements it holds for public officials, this article advances a contextually specific MPA programme for the managers in the South African public service.

Places, situations or spheres in the context

The typical learner for this programme is one living and/or working simultaneously in the global world, Africa, South Africa, in one of the spheres of government, in the public service or local government service, and in a senior managerial position.

Other role players in the context

The typical learner shares this context with other role players, such as political office-bearers, legislative institutions and their members and committees, the public sector as employer, the public, the private sector, NGOs and CBOs, various Chapter 9 institutions, co-ordinating departments such as the department of Finance and the Department of Public Service and Administration, Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA), other government departments, and the various professional associations (e.g. ASSADPAM, South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM), Institute for Public Finance and Auditing (IPFA), Institute of Municipal Finance Officers (IMFO), Institute for Local Government Management of South Africa (ILGM), and Southern Africa Institute of Management Services (SAIMAS)).

Typical problems encountered

In performing their managerial tasks, the typical learners for this programme seems to encounter a variety of problems or challenges. These challenges include inter alia the ability to deal with the ever changing technology, lack of academic writing skills, applying theoretical knowledge in the workplace, lack of project and programme management skills, lack of financial management skills, compliance with the diverse financial regulations, lack of knowledge of the policies impacting on public service, lack of strategic leadership in government and lack of implementation of good policies (South Africa 2008:18-19).

Social forces influencing the context

The context in which the typical learner operates is influenced by a diversity of social forces, such as the current economic recession, poverty combined with unemployment, a lack of housing and health related issues such as HIV/ Aids and TB, a high crime rate, illegal immigration, human and gender rights infringements, the effect of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), employment equity and illiteracy.

Professional characteristics of the learner

It has been found that the typical learner for this programme is part of the

Senior Management Service (or equivalent level) or aspiring to be there. The following typical roles within a government institution for this person has been identified (*cf.* South Africa 2006:Annexure E): Strategic capability and leadership; Programme and project management; Financial management; Change management; Knowledge management; Advisory; Quality assurance; Service delivery innovation; Problem solving and analysis; People management and empowerment; Citizen orientation; Communication and networking; and honesty and integrity.

Complementary to the above roles, the following tasks has been identified to be executed by a senior public manager within the identified context: Budgeting; Staffing; Planning; Execution of line function; Strategic decision making; Design procedures; Design policy oversee implementation of policy; Monitoring and evaluation; Delegation; Make submissions/presentations; Negotiate; Communicate; Co-ordinate; Commission or do research; Do/ commission impact studies; Reading and interpreting texts (research reports, policies, legislation, submissions); Liaising with legislator and executive; Networking; Implement judicial decisions; Training; and Counselling.

The expected impact that a well-educated professional will have on his/her professional environment, is as follows: improved productivity; improved levels of knowledge and skills; healthy working environment; well-rounded professional individuals; improved service delivery; improved citizen satisfaction; improved quality assurance standards; reduced need for monitoring and quality assurance instruments; improved managerial and leadership cadre; improved high level problem solving skills; increased time spending on academic programmes; enhanced life-long learning.

Competence needed

Bearing in mind the problem-space analysis and the ideal professional characteristics of a typical professional public manager, the following question relevant to our discussion is what competence is needed by this public manager? What is meant by the concept “competence”? I share Hager and Butler’s (1996) understanding of this concept, namely that it refers to “the ability of a person to fulfil a role effectively”. In a qualitative survey amongst members of ASSADPAM attending the annual conference on 28 and 29 October 2008, a number of competences regarded as crucial for the Senior Management Service (SMS) have been identified. For the purpose of this article, they will be categorised according to the three categories identified by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006:6–7), namely (1) the “lay-of-the-land” competencies relating to a general understanding of how things work, (2) the technical skills competencies and (3) the people skills competencies. These competencies are summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Competences regarded as crucial for the Senior Management Service

General understanding of how things work	Technical skills competencies	People skills competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to contextualise (socio-economic/ geo-politics) • General knowledge • Knowledge (evidence based knowledge) • The ability to understand large and complex systems. • The ability to understand the context in which they operate: political, economical and technical, regulatory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to apply technical skills to generate knowledge for management • Decision-making • Financial management and supply chain management • Ability to deliver services relevant to context • Being able to restructure • Knowledge and skill to link operational goals and objectives to compensation plans • Management • Performance budgeting • Performance management • Policy implementation • Process and reengineering knowledge to maintain and improve cost efficiencies • Programme and project management, including service delivery (citizen focus) • Project & programme management • Project management • Public financial management • Public human resource Management • Public policy making • Strategic human resource Management • Strategic leadership programme • Strategic planning • Technical competencies • Implementing of regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competency on values/ ethics/moral toughness • Capacity and competing flexibility – ability to move quickly, start programmes, close programs and seize opportunities • Leadership: guiding people and motivating them to serve the people • Interacting with people appropriately • Human capital management • Mentoring

After a thorough analysis and consideration of the above list, the following synthesised expected competence has been formulated. It is expected from a senior public manager to be competent to:

- Gain and apply specific theoretical knowledge in Public Administration.

Table 2: Topics as preferred by ASSADPAM members to be included in a generic South Africa MPA programme

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual influences: International and national politics, economics, judicial institutions, and civil society • Effective networking on various levels • Effective planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation • Ethics (guiding values) • Executive management (managing people, change, programmes and projects) • Human resource management (with emphasis on <i>strategic</i>; including performance management) • Intergovernmental relations • Introduction to Public Administration theories (including management and governance) • Leadership (creating vision and getting others excited about it) • Organisational Development • Planning (including monitoring and evaluation) • Policy formulation/development, interpretation and implementation • Public administration research methodology • Public financial administration and management • Public financial management (including budgeting; supply chain management; risk management; accounting) • Research culminating into a dissertation • Social entrepreneurship • Sustainable development
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- Synthesise information autonomously in specialised fields in order to deal with contradictions.
- Perform advanced professional, leadership and managerial tasks in the public sector.
- Apply research methods and techniques solving problems which need scientific solutions.
- Write high level texts.

In order to instil this rich competence to our typical learners, we need to package the learning process in a number of core modules.

PROPOSED MODULES AND RELATED COMPETENCIES

In the survey conducted among members of ASSADPAM, the several topics to be covered as modules in a generic South African MPA programme were suggested by them (see table 2).

These suggested topics have been evaluated in the light of the problem-space analysis, the professional characteristics of a typical senior public manager and the expected competence of this person. As a result, six core modules (with

related competencies) for a MPA in a typical developmental state have been identified (see table 3) and are proposed.

The first module (Government in a developmental state) falls within the competency category “general understanding of how things work” and provides the country specific context within which the senior public manager is supposed

Table 3: Proposed core modules for a MPA programme in a developmental state

Module	Related competencies
Government in a developmental state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformation • Indigenous knowledge systems • The influence of politics • The influence of the economy • The functions of government and the state • Working with other role-players
Leadership and management in a changing public environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing • Communication • Co-ordination • Integrity • Professionalism • Negotiation • Conflict resolution, diversity management, emotional intelligence
Public financial management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management • Obtaining and spending funds sparingly • Understanding financial reports • Ensuring effective utilisation of financial resources • Align own budget with macro frameworks
Public policies for solving service delivery challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced reading and writing • Interpretation • Implementation • Decision-making • Planning
Master the designing of a research project and the writing of a research proposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced reading and writing • Interpretation • Editing, amending and changing • Research
Master the writing of a dissertation under supervision to solve problems which need scientific solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced reading and writing • Interpretation • Editing, amending and changing • Research • Knowledge and information management

to function. This context includes issues such as transformation, indigenous knowledge systems, the influence of politics, the influence of the economy, the functions of the government and the state and working with other role-players.

The second module (leadership and management in a changing public environment) falls in the competence category “people skills”. It includes the acquiring of competencies related to staffing, communication, co-ordination, integrity, professionalism, negotiation and conflict resolution, diversity management and emotional intelligence.

The third module (public financial management) falls in the competence category “technical skills”. This module includes the acquiring of competences related to risk management, obtaining and spending funds sparingly, understanding financial reports, ensuring effective utilisation of financial resources, and aligning own budgets with macro frameworks.

The fourth module (public policies for solving service delivery challenges) also falls in the competence category “technical skills”. This module implies the acquiring of higher order competences related to advanced reading and writing, the interpretation of texts, the implementation of policies, decision-making and planning.

The fifth module (master the designing of a research project and the writing of a research proposal) also falls in the competence category “technical skills”. This module encompass higher order technical competences such as advanced reading and writing, interpretation, editing, amending and changing of texts, as well as the planning and adequately designing of research.

The sixth module (master the writing of a dissertation under supervision to solve problems which need scientific solutions) also falls in the competence category “technical skills”. As module five, this module includes the higher order technical competences such as advanced reading and writing, interpretation, editing, amending and changing of texts. It also includes competences such as the implementation of research plans, the utilisation of the most applicable methods of data collection and interpretation, the competence to formulate valid research findings, and to manage knowledge and information.

CONCLUSION

This article reports on qualitative research that investigates the possibility of a core curriculum for the MPA programme that would address the intellectual, educational and practical needs and demands of a public official functioning in the context of a developmental state such as South Africa. The review of scholarly literature has shown that although the MPA is in general regarded as a programme giving specialised and advanced professional preparation

for senior managers in the public service, there is a lack of agreement on the core curriculum of this programme among the various universities offering this programme. With regard to the concept “curriculum”, this article uses it with the connotation of referring to an academic programme preparing senior public servants with implicit and explicit knowledge and skills, values and competence in the widest sense of the word necessary to transform society and public institutions and solve societal problems. For this purpose a simplified process for curriculum design has been used to categorise the professional context, the future professional characteristics, and the competence needed by the professional public service manager with a MPA degree. From this process of curriculum development the six modules as summarised in table 3, have been identified and are hereby proposed.

This article contributes therefore to the ongoing discourse on professional education for public managers by proposing a core curriculum for a MPA programme in a developmental state such as South Africa. This article suggests that if this core curriculum be introduced by the various universities offering this programme, the MPA as a course work postgraduate university programme will improve its ability to give high quality professional education to practicing public servants in managerial positions.

NOTES

- 1 Paper read in Working Group 1 at the annual Conference of the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA) on “Improving Administrative Sciences Worldwide”, 12–18 June 2011, Rome, Italy. The attendance of the conference was made possible through a research grant from the College of Economic and Management Sciences, Unisa.
- 2 The contribution of Prof V A Clapper in the formulation of this section on the “developmental state” is hereby acknowledged with appreciation.

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