

# **A core curriculum for the Master of Public Administration**

## **Lessons from Australia and New Zealand**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article considers whether South African Higher Education Institutions can learn from similar institutions in Australia and New Zealand with regard to the composition of their Master of Public Administration (MPA) programmes. This investigation is based on a review of scholarly literature on the MPA, curricula and course information as published on the websites of universities in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), as well as notes resulting from interviews with academic staff members of universities in Australia and New Zealand, and of ANZSOG. The article finds that the investigated MPA programmes are indeed professional qualifications. However, the Executive Master of Public Administration (EMPA) which was developed by ANZSOG, has shown to have a stronger professional focus in comparison to the MPA. Bearing in mind that the EMPA originated due to dissatisfaction by the governments in Australia and New Zealand as employers with the quality of professional education provided by the MPA programmes at their HEIs, South African HEIs can learn from that experience and revise their MPA programmes in advance in order to provide the high quality professional MPA programmes needed in South Africa.

### **INTRODUCTION**

An assessment of the implications of the South African Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) for the Master of Public Administration (MPA)

has shown that most of the MPA programmes that are offered by at least twelve Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa will have to be adapted to meet the requirements of the HEQF (Wessels 2009:517). The Master of Public Administration (MPA) is an internationally recognised course work postgraduate university programme offered "to educate practicing public servants ... that they can carry out their day-to-day work in a manner that is informed by broad understandings and relevant conceptual perspectives" (McSwite 2001:111). This programme is specially aimed at public officials in managerial positions. The MPA is especially popular in the United States of America (USA) where no less than 253 master's programmes are offered (Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:692) of which 158 programmes have been accredited (PA Times 2007:22-31.) A comparison between the South African MPA programmes and those offered in the USA, has shown that although the programmes offered in the two countries share certain common characteristics, they differ particularly with regard to the research component as only 27,63% of the USA programmes compared to 83,33% of the South African programmes have a research component (Wessels 2009:516).

The MPA programme is also offered in various other countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand. Bearing in mind that Australia and New Zealand are, as South Africa, members of the British Commonwealth (Commonwealth Secretariat 2010) and sharing a common British civil service tradition, one would expect that South Africa can learn from the experiences of Australia and New Zealand in offering the MPA. In Australia and New Zealand the MPA is offered by several HEIs. In addition to the traditional MPA, a special variety of the traditional MPA is also offered in these two countries, namely the Executive Master of Public Administration (EMPA) (O'Neill 2006). This programme is offered by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) through a partnership with fifteen HEIs and ten governments (ANZSOG 2009a:4). A survey of the Internet websites of the HEIs who are part of the consortium comprising ANZSOG reveals that these HEIs also offer separate course work Master's programmes in Public Administration, Public Policy or Public Management.

The purpose of this article is thus to investigate whether South African HEIs can learn from the similar institutions in Australia and New Zealand with regard to the composition of their MPA programmes before changes to the composition of the MPA programmes in South Africa are considered. The study aims to investigate the composition of MPA programmes in Australia and New Zealand, and how these programmes differ from the EMPA offered by ANZSOG and from MPA programmes offered in South Africa. This research will make a contribution to the limited Public Administration literature on the ideal composition of a MPA curriculum for South Africa. This article will therefore

start with a review of the scholarly literature on the MPA and with the selection of the appropriate research methods for approaching this problem.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Since 1975 various articles have been published on the MPA degree (Grode & Holzer 1975; Baldwin 1988; Bowman 1988; Cleary 1990; Bowman, Chen, Tinkersley & Hilliard 1993; Hays & Duke 1996; McSwite 2001; Denhardt 2001; Cunningham & Weschler 2002; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff 2006; O'Neill 2006; Card & Fairholm 2007; Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008). These articles focussed mainly on the following issues:

- \* General admissions policy (Bowman 1988:868–873; Bowman *et al.* 1993; O'Neill 2006:682)
- \* The perceived utility of the degrees (Grode & Holzer 1975; Hays & Duke 1996:431; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff 2006:6)
- \* Programme goals (Baldwin 1988; Denhardt 2001:527–531; Cunningham & Weschler 2002:104; O'Neill 2006:678)
- \* Perceived effectiveness (Baldwin 1988; O'Neill 2006:689)
- \* Name of the degree and similarities and differences between various degrees (Cleary 1990:664; O'Neill 2006:677; Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:695–702)
- \* Programme setting and organisation (Cleary 1990:664; O'Neill 2006:679–681)
- \* Credit hour requirements (Cleary 1990:664)
- \* Internship requirements (Cleary 1990:665)
- \* Common curriculum requirements (Cleary 1990:665; Hays & Duke 1996:427; O'Neill 2006:679–681; Card & Fairholm 2007:6–7; Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:698–699)
- \* Additional curriculum components (Cleary 1990:665; O'Neill 2006:679–681)
- \* Professionalisation, certification and rankings (Hays & Duke 1996; Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:702–704)
- \* Perceived gaps in responding programmes (Cleary 1990:665)
- \* Theory competence (McSwite 2001:111; Denhardt 2001:527,531; Cunningham & Weschler 2002:105–109)
- \* Delivery mechanisms (Denhardt 2001:528; O'Neill 2006:682–688)

The above categories of issues seem to be conceptual indicators of the unit of analysis for this article, namely “the MPA programme” as an intervention to increase the productivity and efficiency of public managers (Olaniyan &

Okemakinde 2008:158). The value of the MPA can thus be considered in terms of the human capital theory providing justification for “large public expenditure on education” (Olaniyan & Okemakinde 2008:158). However, for the purpose of this article, the investigation will be restricted to only those few core indicators used by the HEQF for the composition of a MPA programme and its main characteristics in the selected countries (South Africa, Australia and New Zealand). Although the history of this programme will be considered by means of the literature, this study is primarily a cross sectional study of what the current characteristics of this programme is. In order to describe these characteristics and composition of the MPA programme in relation to the HEQF (South Africa 2007:27), the conceptual framework of this study will be confined only to a few decisive indicators, namely the most appropriate admission requirement for the degree (Bowman 1988:868–873; Bowman *et al.* 1993; O’Neill 2006:682; South Africa 2007:27), the purpose of the MPA (Baldwin 1988; Denhardt 2001:527–531; O’Neill 2006:678; South Africa 2007:27); the curriculum composition including the course work content and the research content (Cleary 1990:665; Hays & Duke 1996:427; O’Neill 2006:679–681; Card & Fairholm 2007:6–7; Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:698–699; South Africa 2007:27) and the delivery mechanisms (Denhardt 2001:528; O’Neill 2006:682–688).

In order to identify possible lessons from similar institutions in Australia and New Zealand with regard to the composition of their MPA programmes with the view of revising the composition of the MPA programmes in South Africa, the following material (units of observation) will be examined: scholarly literature on the offering of the MPA, curricula and course information as published on the websites of universities in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and of ANZSOG, and interview notes resulting from interviews with academic staff members of universities in Australia and New Zealand, and of ANZSOG. The above mentioned categories of texts will be examined in a hermeneutical way. Although some of the comparisons will be presented as elementary descriptive statistical data, the statistics will be read for their meaning, the possibility of an objective understanding, and their relation to other texts on this theme (De Beer 1999:445).

## **ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MPA**

It is common practice that diverse admission requirements exist for the variety of Higher Education programmes. As all qualifications build on existing knowledge and competence, it is a universal feature that minimum admission requirements are set for them. The MPA programme, offered by various HEIs all over the world, is no exception. In an article published more than two decades ago,

Bowman (1988:867) confirms the challenge faced by those who are charged with making admission decisions for MPA programmes: "the evaluation of student promise based on limited data". He asks the question whether MPA programmes "admit nearly any college graduate, only those who meet minimum and higher standards, or just candidates who substantially exceed basic requirements?" (Bowman 1988:867). His study (confined to the USA) shows that most professional schools are selective as the goal of their entrance requirements is "to identify those best equipped to benefit from graduate work" (Bowman 1988:873). Another study by Bowman and three colleagues (Bowman *et al.* 1993:369) confirms that there is no one universal model in MPA admission decision making. However their research reveals that when admission decisions are made, "inexplicably ... not necessarily the top-ranking candidates" are selected, but "rather the qualified ones who satisfy the admission standards" (Bowman *et al.* 1993:369). It seems that the authors doubt the validity of the admission standards as predictors for success.

For the purpose of this study, academic qualifications (bachelor or bachelor honours degree) and experience are used as comparative indicators for admission requirements. Table 1 contains the results of a survey of the relevant web pages of Australian, New Zealand and South African universities offering the MPA programme. It shows that 58% of the South African institutions require a relevant bachelor honours degree from potential MPA students while the rest (nearly 42%) require a bachelor's degree. In Australia and New Zealand the situation differs, as a higher percentage of programmes only require a relevant bachelor's degree from a recognised tertiary institution (cf Curtin University of Technology 2009). It seems that a "relevant" bachelor's degree does not imply one with Public Administration as a major subject as many of the HEIs in Australia and New Zealand do not offer Public Administration at the undergraduate level. However, in South Africa, Public Administration as a major in either the bachelor's or honours degree, seems to be required by most of the institutions. This seems also be in line with the HEQF's requirement of a "relevant" bachelor honours degree or a "professional" bachelor's degree – which can be interpreted as degrees in the field of Public Administration or related fields (eg Public Management and Public Governance).

With the exception of one, all the South African programmes requiring only a bachelor's degree, have an additional requirement of practical experience. The requirement for practical experience is required by 71,43% of the programmes in Australia, while only 50% of the programmes in New Zealand (the two programmes offered by the same institution) expect practical experience from proposed candidates. The EMPA offered by ANZSOG through 15 participating institutions, require any bachelor's degree (although a few participating institutions will admit exceptional candidates without an undergraduate degree)

with at least five years of relevant work experience. As all the candidates admitted to their programme are full-time employees of the participating governments passing a strict internal selection process, all of them usually meet the experience requirement. The interviews confirmed that the participants in the ANZSOG programme are more experienced and on a higher hierarchical level than the candidates in the participating institution's own MPA programmes (Interviews 5 & 6).

With regard to the ANZSOG programme, the EMPA is targeted at public servants in the participating governments who (O'Neill 2006:682):

- \* are part of the successor pool for public sector executives
- \* have demonstrated above-average performance
- \* have the potential to move to senior executive positions in the short to medium term
- \* have the intellectual capacity to complete a high-level master's degree
- \* have the ability to contribute to class learning and to learn from others
- \* have a strong personal commitment and motivation to pursue their own career development, including a career in the public service

The EMPA's admission requirements differ from other MPA programmes as candidates for the EMPA are nominated by their governments (employers) and are not open for any qualifying individual to apply. This implies that any person who meets the minimum academic and experience requirements, cannot apply (as in the case of "open" MPA programmes) to be enrolled to the EMPA. There seems to be a strict employer-driven selection process for admission to the EMPA, of which the enrolling university's selection criteria is the final step.

**Table 1: Minimum admission requirements for the MPA: Australia, New Zealand and South Africa**

Minimum admission requirement	Australia (n=12 <sup>1</sup> ) %	New Zealand (n=4 <sup>2</sup> ) %	ANZSOG (n=1 <sup>3</sup> ) %	South Africa (n=12 <sup>4</sup> ) %
Bachelor honours	14,29	25,00	0,00	58,33
Bachelor	85,71	75,00	100,00	41,67
Practical experience	71,43	50,00	100,00	50,00

Bearing in mind that the EMPA has been developed as a professional qualification, and that most of the other course work master's programmes (MPA, MPM and

MPP) target current or aspiring public servants as potential students (see also the next section), one can conclude that practical experience is a vital admission requirement for admission to a professional degree. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that the bachelor's degree is regarded as a sufficient academic requirement by most of the Australian and New Zealand programmes. In South Africa, the HEQF with its minimum admission requirement of "a relevant bachelor honours degree", a professional bachelor's degree or a postgraduate diploma (South Africa 2007:27), will force those HEIs who still require only a bachelor's degree, to lift their admission requirement to the level of a bachelor honours degree. The result will be that admission requirements to MPA programmes in South Africa will share the practical experience requirement of the EMPA and most of the other similar qualifications in Australia and New Zealand. South African programmes seem to have stricter academic requirements with the HEQF's emphasis on the relevance (which is normally interpreted to be Public Administration as a major in the first degree) and the level (a bachelor honours) of the previous qualification.

The above analysis of admission requirements of a typical MPA programme has shown that these requirements are closely related to the purpose of such a programme, which will be discussed in the next section.

## **PURPOSE OF A TYPICAL COURSE WORK MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

The literature reviewed for this article has shown that various words (*purpose*, *goal* and *aim*) are used for what seems to be the same concept, namely purpose. Although I will use the same word applied by the author of a specific text in the discussion of that text, I will in my discussion and evaluation of the concept apply the word *purpose* meaning "The action or fact of intending or meaning to do something; intention, resolution, determination" (*The Shorter Oxford English dictionary* 1968:1624).

The survey of scholarship on the MPA programme has shown that discourses on the purposes of MPA programmes (Baldwin 1988; Denhardt 2001:527–531; O'Neill 2006:678) are related to the programmes' perceived effectiveness (Baldwin 1988; O'Neill 2006:689) and the relevance of the theoretical tools provided by them to students (Denhardt 2001:531; Cunningham & Weschler 2002:104–111; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff 2006:6 & 7). Knowledge and skills seem to be generally regarded as fundamental to the purpose of MPA programmes. This is evident from the way Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006:6–7) have categorised the knowledge and skills cultivated by successful MPA programmes into three areas, namely the "lay-of-the-land" (general understanding of how

things work), technical skills (eg a basic understanding of economics, budgeting, financial management, planning and evaluation, policy analysis and performance measurement, and management) and people skills (relationship management, self-awareness and social awareness). These analytical, management and technical competencies are, according to Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006:6), supposed to prepare graduates not only for traditional jobs in the public sector, but also for jobs in private companies consulting or doing business in the public sector.

Bearing in mind this emphasis on practice related competencies, it is no surprise that the duality of the academic and practical (professional) purposes of MPA programmes is present in most of the discourses on this topic. The duality is evident when Baldwin (1988:879) identifies, amongst a list of six educational goals for a MPA, the goals “providing students practical skills” (similar to the technical skills mentioned by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006)), “instilling a sense of professionalism in students” and “instilling a sense of professional ethics in students”. The academic side of the qualifications is manifested in other purposes, such as “providing students theoretical frameworks”, “developing student appreciation for the history and tradition of the field” (similar to the “lay-of-the-land” mentioned by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006)), and a technical skill of “providing students with analytical skills” (Baldwin 1988:879). Denhardt (2001:527–531) approaches the issue of purpose from the perspective of the so-called “big questions”. Two of these questions identified by him, are as follows (Denhardt 2001:531):

- \* Do we seek to educate our students with respect to theory or to practice?
- \* Do we prepare students for their jobs or for those to which they might aspire?

The second question by Denhardt is actually a refinement of the option “education for practice” posed in question one. The paragraphs that follow will show that all MPA (and related) programmes are primarily concerned with educating participants for practice. It is, however, not possible to make a distinction between purposes for current or aspired jobs.

The review of the curricula published on websites of the various Australian and New Zealand institutions offering course work master’s programmes has shown that most of the institutions do provide a purpose statement of their programmes. These purpose statements also reveal a strong inclination to the preparation of candidates for their profession, and are as follows:

- \* To “promote the study of public sector administrative and managerial processes, problems and disciplines at an advanced level. The flexibility enables students to develop advanced professional competence in their own fields of interest and to relate this to the broader strategic managerial



processes and the context in which they take place” (Griffith University 2008)

- \* To develop “the basic intellectual and technical capacities needed to be an effective top level manager either in the public sector or in an organisation which deals with public sector agencies” (University of Canberra 2009)
- \* To equip graduates with “skills necessary for advanced public sector and community sector management and policy making” (University of Melbourne 2009)
- \* To provide a “practical educational experience to enhance existing skills for senior public servants of national, state, provincial and local governments” (University of Sydney 2009)
- \* To “enhance their understanding of the theory and practice of public management, improve their performance as a manager in the public sector, and become more aware of new approaches to practice which can benefit their organisations” (Faculty of Commerce and Administration, Victoria University of Wellington 2008: 17)
- \* To “acquire, or enhance the skills necessary for effective and responsible public sector management and policy analysis” (Massey University 2009).

These purpose statements are supported by the representatives of various academic institutions interviewed as part of this project. On the purpose of their respective programmes, the interviewees stated the following:

- \* To “equip students to work within public sector or to improve their operations in the public sector” (Interview 2)
- \* Aimed at those “who are already in, or taking up management positions in the government and nongovernment sectors”, and aimed to “to enhance their understanding of theory and practice of public management and their performance as a manager, and to develop ways of improving practice” (Interview 3).

The above purpose statements referring to, *inter alia*, “public sector administrative and managerial processes, problems and disciplines”, an “effective top level manager”, and “management positions in the government”, shows that these programmes offered in Australia and New Zealand have strong professional characters. Bearing in mind that the EMPA programme offered by ANZSOG was established in spite of the existing programmes, one would want to know whether the EMPA has a purpose that is distinctly different from the other programmes. O’Neill (2006:678) summarises the purpose of the EMPA as follows: “to enhance the depth and breadth of management and policy skills of high-potential public sector managers, to provide these managers with 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 organisational environments." The purpose statement of the EMPA programme has an explicit research aim supplementary to the professional aims, namely that "managers ... understand and can apply research methods and undertake independent research" (ANZSOG 2009). The outcome statement of this programme is more subtle and includes by implication a research competence with an outcome of "applying theory and analysing data to solve real world management and policy problems" (ANZSOG 2009). The interviews with participants in this programme and an official of ANZSOG supply further confirmation that the emphasis in the EMPA is not on academic research but on the utilisation and understanding of the competencies used by academic researchers, to improve their abilities to solve real world problems. The purpose statements of the EMPA are extended in the list of outcomes of this programme. According to ANZSOG's online brochure, the outcomes of the EMPA are as follows: "Graduates of the EMPA will

- \* be familiar with fundamental theories and concepts underpinning effective performance in public sector management and policy development
- \* have a good understanding of the difficulties of delivering results in government
- \* be skilled in applying theory and analysing data to solve real world management and policy problems, and
- \* have well-developed personal and leadership skills".

From a South African perspective it is useful to refer to the statement in the HEQF (South Africa 2007:27) that the "primary purposes of a Master's degree are to train researchers ... or prepare graduates for advanced and specialised professional employment." The second part of the purpose statement following the "or" seems to be applicable to a course work master's programme such as the MPA as it refers to educating students with respect to practice (cf Denhardt 2001:531). A survey of the websites of South African HEIs, reveals the following practice related purpose statements:

- \* "to enhance the knowledge and skills of public managers" (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University 2009)
- \* "to enable the manager in the public sector to perform his/her management function effectively" (University of Pretoria 2008)
- \* "to provide a sophisticated interdisciplinary education in contemporary South African governance and public policy. The programme is designed to engender in its students the capacity to think objectively and analytically about the policy process in contemporary South Africa, and so to become more effective as policy makers, public servants, researchers or policy analysts" (University of Cape Town 2009)

**Table 2: Comparative summary of purpose statements of MPA programmes: Australia, New Zealand and South Africa**

Categories of purposes	Australia	New Zealand	ANZSOG	South Africa
General understanding of how things work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the study of processes, problems and disciplines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>theory and practice of public management</li> <li>awareness of new approaches to practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>clarity about the value public managers deliver to the public</li> <li>familiar with fundamental theories and concepts underpinning effective performance in public sector management and policy development</li> <li>have a good understanding of the difficulties of delivering results in government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to enhance the knowledge of public managers</li> <li>to provide a sophisticated interdisciplinary education in contemporary South African governance and public policy</li> </ul>
Technical skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develop intellectual and technical capacities</li> <li>management and policy making skills</li> <li>skills for all spheres of governments</li> <li>develop ways of improving practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>improve management performance</li> <li>effective and responsible public sector management; policy analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>enhance depth and breadth of management and policy skills</li> <li>to manage complex accountabilities</li> <li>applying theory and analysing data to solve real world management and policy problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>prepare graduates for advanced and specialised professional employment</li> <li>to enhance the skills of public managers</li> <li>to perform management functions effectively</li> <li>to think objectively and analytically about the policy process</li> <li>to become effective policy makers, public servants, researchers or policy analysts</li> </ul>
People skills			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>well-developed personal and leadership skills</li> </ul>	

- \* “om die bestuursfunksie in hul beroepe op gevorderde vlak te bemeester ten einde die komplekse Suid-Afrikaanse sosiale omgewing effektief te kan bestuur” (Noordwes-Universiteit – Potchefstroomkampus 2008).

Table 2 presents a comparative summary of the purposes of the various course work master’s programmes in the selected countries. The categories identified by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006:6–7) is used for this purpose. In the category “general understanding of how things work” the purposes set by HEIs in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are formulated in general terms focusing on processes, problems, disciplines, theory, new approaches, knowledge and governance. The purposes set by ANZSOG for their EMPA are more specific as they focus on the “value public managers deliver to the public” and a “good understanding of the difficulties of delivering results in government” (see Table 2). The various programmes’ purposes focusing on “technical skills” seem all to enhance competencies aiming at solving real world management and policy problems. This summary shows that only the EMPA of ANZSOG has a specific purpose aiming at enhancing “people skills”.

The above purpose statements have shown that the course work master’s programmes in Public Administration in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are professional qualifications aiming primarily at the understanding and improvement of the practice of public managers. With the possible exception of one programme, these programmes do not primarily aim at the education of students in theory or research. Although not a primary purpose in these programmes, the next section will show that theory and research is present as a fundamental enabler in the curricula of MPA and related programmes.

## **CORE CURRICULA OF MPA PROGRAMMES IN AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND AND SOUTH AFRICA – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

Various authors pay attention to the common curriculum requirements of MPA programmes (Cleary 1990:665; Hays & Duke 1996:427; O’Neill 2006:679–681; Card & Fairholm 2007:6–7; Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:698–699). Cleary (1990:665) observes that these curriculum requirements vary from programme to programme. The presence of a capstone research project in the curriculum is mentioned only by Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:698) and O’Neill (2006:681). Course work seems to be the primary curriculum component. Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:698) observe in their research that a higher percentage of MPA programmes in the USA “focus on course work in the applied skills-based courses, such as human resources management, budgeting

and finance, general public administration, and organisational concepts". As the requirements of the HEQF (South Africa 2007:27) make research a compulsory component of a course work master's programme, it seems that MPA programmes need to be evaluated in terms of whether research forms part of it or not, the percentage of the course work that can be regarded as core to the programme, and the subjects or courses comprising a MPA programme.

### **Research component**

The analysis of purpose statements of course work master's programmes has shown that the preparation of researchers, with the possible exclusion of the University of Cape Town, is not a purpose of course work master's programmes in Public Administration. However, the survey of course work master's programmes reveals that 57,14% of these programmes in Australia, 75% in New Zealand and 100% of those in South Africa do require a compulsory research project as part of the curriculum (Table 3). Although the preparation of researchers is not mentioned as part of the purpose statement of these programmes, the majority of them do include a compulsory research component. This is in sharp contrast with the situation in the United States of America (USA) where only 36,84% of all the course work programmes and 28,3% of the MPA programmes have a capstone or final research project (Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:698; Wessels 2009).

Where the aim and outcome statements of the ANZSOG's EMPA programme include strong reference to the preparation of candidates to undertake independent research, an analysis of the courses shows that the evidence of this outcome is not as expected a dissertation, but a work based project culminating in a 10 000 word report (ANZSOG 2009). These work based projects are not individual projects, but involve cross-jurisdictional project teams whose aims are "analysing and proposing solutions to substantive and contemporary issues in public management and public policy identified by agencies in participating jurisdictions" (ANZSOG 2009). The interviews conducted for this research have revealed that each project team is working under the supervision of an academic attached to one of the participating universities. However, the outcome of a work-based project is not an academic dissertation, but a 10 000 words report on "genuine and sustainable solutions to difficult and complex issues" (ANZSOG 2009; Interview 1, 2009). According to ANZSOG's official subject outline, the purpose of work-based projects is to "test each team's ability to define a 'real-life' problem, design a strategy for the problem, gather data, formulate and evaluate options and make recommendations addressing the problem" (ANZSOG 2009). The work-based project is clearly not an academic or scholarly one, but a professional one, as it enables participants to "manage

the challenges of working cooperatively in teams spanning jurisdictions and work backgrounds to develop genuine and sustainable solutions to difficult and complex issues" (ANZSOG 2009).

Bearing in mind the work-based nature of the EMPA's research content, it is worthwhile to again consider the HEQF expectation of a course work master's programme (South Africa 2007:27), namely that it also "prepare[s] graduates for advanced and specialised professional employment" by "successfully completing a course work programme requiring a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence and a research project, culminating in the acceptance of a dissertation". Table 3 reveals that the South African course work master's programmes in Public Administration meet these requirements as they all include a compulsory research project culminating in a dissertation, a research report, a research seminar, a treatise or an extended assignment (Wessels 2009:516). The main difference between the research project included in the MPA and related programmes at Australian, New Zealand and South African HEIs and the EMPA offered by ANZSOG, is the outcome of the project. Usually these projects culminate in academic documents (dissertations) while the EMPA's document is a report (written to appropriate scholarly standards) of more or less 10 000 words to the sponsor of the specific project, and a presentation to the group of co-students and lecturers. The report is also assessed by the ANZSOG faculty.

**Table 3: The average percentage of programmes requiring a compulsory research project as part of the programme – a comparison between Australia, New Zealand, ANZSOG and South Africa**

Australia (n=7) %	New Zealand (n=4) %	ANZSOG (n=1) %	SA (n=12) %
57,14	75	100	100

Although the research component seems to be present in the curricula of the majority of MPA and related programmes in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, the nature of this component needs to be reconsidered. As the course work master's programme is considered by the HEQF as a professional qualification, it makes logical sense that the research component of the MPA serves a professional purpose.

### **The core as a percentage of total course work**

The research by Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:694) has shown that the highest regarded course work programmes in the USA are "tightly focused" (the

majority of the programme content consists of core modules) with the core as 57,1% of the total programme content. Their data also show that accredited programmes are more homogeneous than non-accredited programmes (Koven, Goetzke & Brennan 2008:696). Table 4 compares the MPA programmes in Australia, New Zealand, ANZSOG and South Africa with each other in terms of the core as a percentage of the total number of course content. It shows that the average 51% core content of the total programme composition of the seven HEIs in Australia is the lowest of the three countries (New Zealand: average of 58,33%; South Africa: average of 77,92%) used for this comparison. The 80% core of the EMPA offered by ANZSOG, on the other hand, is the highest – just a few percentage points above the 77,92% average of the twelve South African HEIs). The 80% core include the seven courses offered by ANZSOG and the compulsory elective (public sector financial management) offered by the participating HEIs. The high percentage of core subjects in the total composition of the programme offered by ANZSOG as well as South African HEIs, are not only an indication that a uniform curriculum for a professional qualification is regarded as important by ANZSOG, its participating academic and employer institutions, as well as the relevant South African HEIs, but serves as a confirmation of the above-mentioned findings by Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:694) regarding tightly-focused programmes.

**Table 4: The core of course work master’s programmes in Public Administration as an average percentage of the total programme content – a comparison between Australia, New Zealand, ANZSOG and South Africa**

Australia (n=7) %	New Zealand (n=4) %	ANZSOG (n=1) %	SA (n=12) %
51,00	58,33	80,00	77,92

### Subjects/topics for course work

Earlier in this article I referred to the classification by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006:6–7) of the knowledge and skills cultivated by successful MPA programmes. For the purpose of the analysis of the subjects, modules or courses comprising course work master’s programmes, these units will be classified in the column “Category” (see Table 5) according to the three categories identified by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2006:6–7), namely (1) the “lay-of-the-land” units facilitating a general understanding of how things work, (2) the technical skills units facilitating a basic understanding of economics,

budgeting, financial management, planning and evaluation, policy analysis and performance measurement, and management, and (3) the people skills units covering relationship management, self-awareness and social awareness. This analysis will make a distinction between open programmes (programmes for which any qualifying candidate can enrol) offered by the various HEIs and the EMPA offered by ANZSOG.

Table 5 shows that five of the typical subjects/courses fall in the category “general understanding of how things work”, another five fall in the category “technical skills” and only one falls in the category “people skills”. The capstone or final research project, being the culmination of all the learning experiences, is classified in all three categories. An analysis of table 5 shows that the following categories of courses/subjects have a 50% and higher presence:

#### **General understanding of how things work**

- \* Economic and social institutions (Australia and ANZSOG)
- \* Politics and legal institutions (New-Zealand and ANZSOG)
- \* Public Administration – general and theory / Delivering Public Value (South Africa and ANZSOG)

#### **Technical skills**

- \* Research methods (South Africa; at least partly covered in ANZSOG’s EMPA subject Decision Making Under Uncertainty)
- \* Human Resource Management (South Africa)
- \* Decision making/problem solving (ANZSOG)
- \* Budgeting and finance (New Zealand, ANZSOG and South Africa)
- \* Policy designing/evaluation (Australia, New Zealand, ANZSOG and South Africa)

#### **People skills**

- \* Ethics and/or leadership (Australia and ANZSOG)

The above list and table 5 show that the emphasis of course work programmes is on technical skills with “general understanding of how things work” knowledge in the second place. It seems as if there is less emphasis on subjects/courses which fall in the category “people skills” as only “ethics and/or leadership” that falls in that category.

Although there are strong overlaps between the subjects of the EMPA and courses/subjects offered by open course work programmes, the subject titles of the EMPA have been formulated differently from the traditional subfields of Public Administration as reflected in table 5. The subject “delivering public value” is probably the most obvious difference between the traditional (open)



**Table 5: Percentage of course work master's programmes in Public Administration requiring one of the following courses/papers/modules as part of their core**

Courses/papers/modules	Category	Australia (n=7) %	New Zealand (n=4) %	ANZSOG (n=15) %	SA (n=12) %
Microeconomics	1	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Economics and social institutions	1	57,14	25,00	100,00	8,33
Politics and legal institutions	1	14,29	50,00	100,00	16,67
Public Administration (general & theory)	1	29,57	0,00	100,00	91,67
Organisational concepts and institutions	1	14,29	0,00	0,00	33,33
MIS/IT course	2	0,00	0,00	0,00	16,67
Research methods	2	29,57	25,00	0,00	83,33
Capstone or final research project	1, 2 & 3	57,14	75,00	100,00	100,00
Human Resources Management	2	0,00	0,00	0,00	66,67
Decision making/ Problem solving	2	14,29	0,00	100,00	0,00
Budgeting and finance	2	28,57	50,00	100,00	75,00
Policy designing/ evaluation	2	100,00	75,00	100,00	66,67
Ethics and/or leadership	3	71,43	0,00	100,00	33,33

course work programmes and the EMPA. This subject focuses on what is called “the essential management task of delivering value to the public” (ANZSOG 2009). This subject may fall within the scope of the sub-field Reflective Public Administration which may also be called the philosophy and theory of Public Administration.

Based on the high presence of certain courses/subjects in the various course work master’s programmes, a typical curriculum for a MPA programme may include courses/subjects focusing on a general understanding of how things work in the public sector (Understanding the philosophy of Public Administration; Understanding the political and legal context of public administration; Understanding the economic and social context of public administration), certain technical skills related to work within the public sector (The ability to do, commission and interpret research; Managing public human resources; Making decisions and solving problems; Budgeting and managing public money; Designing and evaluating public policy) and people skills (Leading and acting ethically).

## **MODE OF DELIVERY**

Equally important to the curriculum composition as discussed in the previous section, is the mode of delivery of a programme. The issue of appropriate delivery mechanisms for MPA courses and curricula is discussed thoroughly by Denhardt (2001:528). He poses the following questions, which are directly relevant to this research (Denhardt 2001:528):

- \* “If students are learning from a distance, is there something lacking in terms of student/faculty or student/student interaction?”
- \* “How can we create distance learning approaches that permit something more than typing and reading?”

These questions are especially relevant as students enrolling for an MPA programme are, due to the admission criteria, in most cases full-time employees in the public sector. These programmes attract students from a diverse number of origins (cities, provinces and countries). In South Africa the University of South Africa (Unisa), a distance education institution, uses printed material combined with online facilities. No formal contact sessions take place. The University of Stellenbosch, a traditional residential university, makes provision for one week of contact sessions per year (Stellenbosch University 2008:5).

The Griffith University in Australia offers the Master of Public Administration “in external mode which means that there is no requirement for on-campus attendance” (Griffith University 2008: online). They provide their course

material through a variety of means, including printed material and online. They expect from their students to use the internet and other electronic media during their enrolment (Griffith University 2008: online). The course work MPA programme offered by the University of Canberra is "taught using a combination of flexible delivery with traditional teaching methods comprising lectures, tutorials and workshops. A number of units are available in intensive mode" (University of Canberra 2009: online). The intensive mode is where course content "is delivered in fewer face-to-face teaching sessions than is usually structured in a ... standard semester" (University of Canberra 2009: online). At the Victoria University of Wellington the Master's of Public Management offered by the School of Government are delivered in Wellington in both modular<sup>5</sup> and intensive<sup>6</sup> forms so that individuals from all parts of the country (and overseas) can undertake them (Victoria University of Wellington 2009: online). This implies that candidates travel to Wellington for whole and often consecutive days of teaching and learning, maintaining contact with teaching staff and their colleagues by phone and email, and can assess (Victoria University of Wellington 2009: online). Some teaching materials are available via Blackboard, a web-based system designed to support teaching and learning (Victoria University of Wellington 2009: online).

The EMPA uses a more intensive course delivery model as the core and elective and subjects are taught in "locations across Australia and New Zealand". ANZSOG's reason for this delivery model is to bring participants together from all jurisdictions, providing them with the opportunity to develop links with the ANZSOG faculty and their fellow participants. The teaching and learning style in all core subjects is "interactive and application-based", incorporating case studies, guest speakers, exercises and other teaching methods. The teaching and learning approach draws on the practical experiences of delivering high value in government (ANZSOG 2009).

Interviews with former students and individuals teaching on the programme, confirm that the advantages of the delivery model followed with the EMPA are that it creates a opportunity for participants to:

- \* network and learn inter-jurisdictionally
- \* experience enriched learning
- \* share different ways of thinking
- \* combine management with policy
- \* learn from peers, senior and experienced practitioners and theorists simultaneously

Different modes of delivery are followed as all the subjects in the programme are not taught in the same way. Three core subjects are taught to the full group, in five-day intensive residential blocks, the leadership subject is taught twice

to two groups of approximately sixty while the policy subject is taught in three different locations at various times to groups of forty or so. To complete the compulsory subjects Government in a Market Economy and Decision Making under Uncertainty, participants attend one and two-day contact sessions in six cities – Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane, Wellington and Perth over a period of approximately eight weeks. The elective subjects are taught at the participant's chosen university (ANZSOG 2009: online).

Although there is not a universally standard mode of delivery for MPA programmes, one can deduce from the aforementioned discussion that single mode delivery programmes is not common. HEIs seem to apply a mixture of modes in a single programme. A mixture of contact modes of delivery seems to be present in the delivery of course work master's programmes at nearly all the assessed HEIs.

## CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this article is to determine what the composition of a typical MPA programme in Australia and New Zealand is, and how such a typical programme differs from the Executive Master of Public Administration (EPMA) offered in the two countries by ANZSOG. The secondary purpose is to compare those programmes with the MPA offered by South African HEIs. The comparison has been done in terms of the admission requirements, purpose statements, core curricula, and mode of delivery.

The comparison has shown that in all the included programmes, practical experience is a vital admission requirement. This can be regarded as a confirmation of the professional nature of this qualification. Furthermore, the bachelor's degree seems to be regarded as a sufficient academic requirement by a high percentage of the Australian and New Zealand programmes (including ANZSOG). In South Africa, it is a sufficient admission requirement for only 41,67% of the programmes. The HEQF (South Africa 2007) with its minimum admission requirement of "a relevant bachelor honours degree", a professional bachelor's degree or a postgraduate diploma (South Africa 2007:27), set stricter academic admission requirements for the MPA than the norm in Australia and New Zealand. These new requirements will have the effect that 41,67% of the South African MPA programmes will have to raise their admission requirements. The HEQF will thus have the effect that the admission requirements for the MPA in South Africa will be academically stricter than the requirements for the EMPA and most of the MPAs in Australia and New Zealand.

The comparison of purpose statements has shown that MPA programmes in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand (including the EMPA of ANZSOG),

are professional qualifications aiming primarily at the understanding and improvement of the practice of public managers. However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the purpose statements of these programmes and the expectation of the South African HEQF that the primary purpose of a Master's Degree (including course work Master's such as the MPA) is to educate and train researchers.

Although the majority of the programmes included in this survey require a compulsory research project, there seems to be a strong academic emphasis on the research projects in the South African programmes and most of the open programmes at Australian and New Zealand HEIs. Not only are these projects done individually, but most of them culminate in academic documents (dissertations). The "work-based" projects of ANZSOG's EMPA is done under supervision of academicians in groups and culminate in a professional report, submitted to the sponsor of the specific project and ANZSOG faculty, and presented to the group of co-students and lecturers. More research is necessary to determine whether the traditional academic dissertation is an appropriate outcome in a professional master's programme.

This research has confirmed the findings by Koven, Goetzke and Brennan (2008:694) about the tightly-focused nature of highly regarded MPA programmes. As expected, the emphasis in the composition of the course work programmes included in the survey is on technical skills and to a lesser extent on a general understanding of how things work. However, it seems that the ideal curriculum of a professional course work master's will include courses/subjects in the categories of general understanding of how things work, technical skills and people skills.

The research has also shown that single mode delivery programmes are not common. The University of South Africa, a dedicated distance education institution, seems to be the exception on the rule of HEIs applying a mixture of delivery modes in a single programme.

MPA programmes in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are all professional qualifications aiming at advanced education of public managers. The admission requirements to most of the programmes demand not only a basic academic background, but professional or practical experience. The core curricula of most of the programmes place a strong emphasis on technical skills as well as on a general understanding of the theoretical and practical environment of their profession. Research seems to be regarded as an enabling competence for the professionals. The ideal mode of delivery seems to make provision for variety, interaction and networking. The open MPA programmes in Australia and New Zealand seem to have a stronger academic inclination than the EMPA of ANZSOG. MPA programmes offered by South African HEIs have an even stronger academic structure, mainly due to its admission requirements

and the outcome of the research project. Bearing in mind that the EMPA was developed due to dissatisfaction by the government as employer with the quality of professional education provided by the open MPA programmes at their HEIs, South African HEIs can learn from that experience and revise their programmes in advance in order to provide the high quality professional MPA programmes needed by the South African government.

## NOTES

- 1 Number of HEIs offer a course work Master's in Public Administration.
- 2 Number of HEIs offer a course work Master's in Public Administration.
- 3 Although various HEIs participate in the EMPA programme of ANZSOG, the EMPA is regarded as one programme.
- 4 Number of HEIs offering a course work Master's in Public Administration.
- 5 Every modular course involves three modules. Each module is a full day of classes (08:30 to 18:00) on the Victoria University campus and the three modules are spread over one trimester, roughly six weeks apart (i.e. module 1 is at the beginning of the trimester, module 2 is in the middle of the trimester and module 3 is at the end of the trimester). For both modular and intensive courses, students are usually required to do some reading before the first module/day and they usually have to complete an assessment item after the last module/day (Information provided by Mr Darren Morgan, Master's Administrator, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington).
- 6 Each intensive course involves four consecutive days of classes (eg Tuesday 11 to Friday 14 August 2009) on the University campus. For both modular and intensive courses, students are usually required to do some reading before the first module/day and they usually have to complete an assessment item after the last module/day (Information provided by Mr Darren Morgan, Master's Administrator, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington).

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## PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

- Interview 1: Dr Deirdre O'Neill, ANZSOG. Melbourne, Australia. 16 March 2009.
- Interview 2: Dr Lauren Rosewarne, Melbourne University: Centre for Public Policy. Melbourne, Australia. 17 March 2009.



- Interview 3: Prof Terry Stokes, Robert Gregory, Chris Eichbaum, Bill Ryan. Victoria University of Wellington – School of Government. Wellington, New Zealand. 20 March 2009.
- Interview 4: Prof Claudia Scott, ANZSOG and Victoria University of Wellington – School of Government. Wellington, New Zealand. 20 March 2009.
- Interview 5: Mss Rosemary Hannah-Parr and Bella Sutherland, State Services Commission, Wellington. 20 March 2009.
- Interview 6: Prof John Uhr, Australia National University, Canberra. 24 March 2009.
- Interview 7: Prof Jenny Stewart and Prof Mark Turner, University of Canberra. 25 March 2009.
- Interview 8: Mr Alan Barratt (ANZSOG graduate), Public Sector Commission, Perth. 27 March 2009.
- Interview 9: Prof John Phillimore and Alan Fenna, Curtin University of Technology, Perth.

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