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Charting a route back to relevance? Supporting 21st century public service practitioners through action-oriented, complexity-informed, and engaged pedagogy

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Introduction

Our motivation for this special issue stemmed from our observations of a paradox. On the one hand, our interactions with policymakers and public service professionals emphasised the crucial role that both public administration research and education must play in helping navigate an increasingly complex and challenging operating environment (French et al., 2023; Sanders, 2025). Yet at the same time the academic and taught discipline of public administration has become increasingly marginalised. In a UK context at least, there has been a steady decline in the number of taught programmes available (Bottom et al., 2022; Elliott et al., 2023)

Discussion of the 'relevance gap' in academic Public Administration (PA) research is hardly a novelty (Bouckaert and Massey, 2018; Drechsler, 2019; Pollitt, 2017, 2020). However we have observed a growing field of what we previously called 'Action-Oriented Research' (AOR) approaches (French and Hawkins, 2020) used by academics and policy researchers, involving methods like action research, action learning, participatory research and co-production, and research roles such as learning partner and embedded researcher. AOR methodologies, tools and approaches bridge the normally separate domains of theory, learning and practice, and shorten pathways to impact by combining research production with use in organisational settings (French and Hawkins, 2020). Yet while AOR methods are often adopted as knowledge-exchange initiatives

(Bennett and Brunner, 2020; Escobar and Watson, 2019; French and Lowe, 2019; Hesselgreaves et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2019) they do not feature strongly in public administration academic research, nor in classroom-based teaching and learning practice (Elliott et al., 2021; Rhodes and Eppel, 2018). This is a peculiarity of the public administration field, since AOR does have a strong basis in disciplines like, *inter alia*, education (Glassman et al., 2013; Hendricks, 2019) development studies (Burns, 2019) and management studies (Shani and Coghlan, 2021; Zuber-Skerritt, 2021).

Another promising response has been to engage with 21st century challenges through curriculum design (Montefusco and Angeli, 2024; Rhodes and Eppel, 2018). Rhodes and Eppel (2018) for instance considered how complexity theory could aid with teaching "things we cannot predict". Approaches from the systems and complexity sciences, such as the Human Learning Systems approach (Lowe et al., 2020, 2021), seem particularly apposite in this context. More generally, PA curricula could be emboldened to consider the field's 'big questions' (Behn, 1995), and the range of wicked problems like climate change often overlooked in mainstream PA in favour of narrow disciplinary questions (Pollitt, 2017).

PA academics also seem particularly well placed to engage with the growing range of policy engagement bodies, knowledge brokers and other intermediaries who seek to bridge research and pedagogy and connect researchers and practitioners (Durrant and Mackillop, 2022). 'Engaged' research roles like policy fellowships (Buckley and Oliver, 2025), embedded research (Gradinger et al., 2019) learning partnerships (Hesselgreaves et al., 2021), or cooperative inquiries (Ospina et al., 2008) also combine pedagogy and research in impact-seeking roles. Finally, there is growing interest in academic-practitioner outputs, wherein both parties are involved in writing and dissemination of research (see Wilson et al., 2025 for a recent example). But doing this type of boundary-crossing work requires academics to engage in time-consuming and uncertain work, building and maintaining relationships with disparate policy communities and balancing research with other policy and practice-related commitments and priorities.

To explore the above ideas and developments further, we posed six organising questions for this special issue:

1. How can we design curricula and otherwise support public service professionals to navigate complex 21st century challenges (e.g. climate change and global heating)?
2. How can we make use of action-oriented and/or complexity-informed methods to support public service professionals?
3. What can we learn from other disciplines about the use of complexity-informed practice, action-oriented research and engaged scholarship in teaching and learning environments?
4. What are the main routes back to relevance in public administration research and teaching?
5. Can – and should – PA education diversify? What is the role of executive education, consultancy, CPD, and knowledge exchange?

6. What role can knowledge brokers, policy engagement institutes and other institutes play in moving public administration ideas into practice?

Overview of submissions

The six papers selected for publication all had a strong rationale focussed on one or more of these questions. The submissions span action-oriented (Goodhall et al.), complexity-informed (Gilbride) and engaged methodologies (Macaulay and Ormston, Şahin), with a couple of papers drawing on a combination of action-oriented and complexity-informed (Good and McKeith, Dorr et al.). All are focused on supporting public administrators and service providers to navigate 21st Century complexities. The papers also embody boundary-crossing in their authorship with four of the six including joint practitioner/academic publications. Therefore it is no surprise that they offer both practical ideas and methods that can be used by public service professionals to support their own practice, whilst also furthering the field of academic public administration primarily through methodological development.

In the first paper, Şahin (2024) takes an engaged approach in exploring how relationships can be strengthened between scholars, students, and public service professionals so that there are reciprocal benefits for all. An innovative undergraduate public administration education programme 'The Studio of Public Reasoning' was created within the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Atılım University. The intention of the programme was on closing the research-practice gap and ran for fifteen years with over 1000 students engaging with over 300 public institutions.

The programme was highly innovative due to its highly engaged approach, with students participating in extended fieldwork activities using experiential and creative methods to the research process, and a variety of outputs which were beneficial to all stakeholders involved (including reports, analysis and workshops). This enabled strong partnerships and reciprocity to become established. This meant that students felt more prepared for their future careers, public sector organisations were supported in innovative thinking, and universities benefitted from the development of co-created knowledge. However, despite clear benefits, the initiative has been recently discontinued due to change in staffing and management structures. This demonstrates the fragility of such innovations. The author advises that gaining institutional and administrative support with an alignment of university vision with programme aims is required to ensure programmes like these remain sustainable.

For the second paper Good and MacKeith (2025) make a case for an alternative approach to public administration educational practice. They cite strong evidence to suggest that there is a lack of current pedagogical offerings which can support public service professionals who are working in increasing uncertainty and complexity. Good and MacKeith have responded to this need by developing the 'Outcomes Star' evidence-based approach to supporting learning.

The Outcomes Star method is a participatory action research approach that is intended to enable developmental evaluation of practice. Examples are given from various case studies of the benefits that an Outcomes Star method can yield. This includes pedagogical benefits for practitioners, service users, liner managers and commissioners, as it offers space for dialogue and collaborative learning to support meaningful change to everyone's lives. However the authors also acknowledge that it is often difficult to sustain such an approach whilst remaining within a New Public Management paradigm. To navigate this issue, Good and MacKeith propose a potential way forward is to incorporate ideas from the human science paradigm into public administration educational offerings.

In the third paper Macaulay and Ormston (2024) reflect on their engaged method to facilitating an educational workshop on organizational trust. An 'Embodied Values Approach' is taken where participants explore how trust is embodied in specific practices and behaviours and thus demonstrates how trustworthiness is created. Macaulay and Ormston stress the need to start from a practitioner experience if the educational offering is to be meaningful and relevant to support them in navigating the 21st Century challenges they face. Theory is introduced at a later point in the workshop, which enables practitioners to make meaningful connections between research and practice.

The benefits of taking an embodied approach are that it enables practitioners to reflect on their own values and consider how these interlink with trust and relationships. These reflections form the building blocks of working collaboratively to tackle systemic and wicked problems. This method requires the disintegration of what Macaulay and Ormston consider to be an artificial divide between academic researchers and public servants, and where everyone is instead viewed as a 'practitioner'. The removal of such a divide encourages a more collaborative relationship to be developed in the workshops, fostering more honest dialogue and resulting in greater participation.

For the fourth paper Goodall et al. (2025) outline their approach, 'Relational Conversations', which is used to support public service professionals in engaging in initial conversations with people with complex needs. Relational Conversations is designed to help professionals overcome the challenges created by New Public Management, which has fostered siloed and transactional approaches to work. The method re-conceptualises of the role of the professional as 'helper' with a primary purpose to support people with complex needs through taking a bespoke approach.

The Relational Conversations approach has been iterated by what could broadly be considered an action research cycle of: design and testing, running the training sessions, reviewing the training, feedback and evaluation, and review of data. Goodhall et al. have found a variety of benefits to taking this approach. These include that helpers feel more capable as they can build empathy with clients and explore needs together holistically. A conclusion of this research is that there are common good practices which can be identified that can support public service professionals to feel more capable in their role. These insights can be incorporated into meaningful training and educational offerings.

In the fifth paper Dorr et al. (2025) explore how appreciative inquiry (AI) can be used to motivate public service employees who may be resistant to change and to support taking a complexity-informed approach to public service reform. AI is an action-oriented

approach enabling all those involved to be an active participant, including citizens, policy professionals and researchers.

Plymouth City Council have adapted AI to fit their needs, responding to critique that when AI only focuses on positive discourse this can result in an unhealthy suppression of any negative aspects of systems change. Plymouth City Council's development of AI includes focusing on areas of potential dissonance. This enables participants to consider changes to policy and practice which are inclusive and informed by the complexity of the social world. The authors have termed this approach 'Open Appreciative Enquiry'. As a methodological innovation, it creates opportunities for everyone to participate in the co-creation of knowledge, helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

For the sixth paper Gilbride (2025) highlights the importance yet difficulty in teaching complexity science to Public Administrators as they are likely to be 'complexity novices'. This can be due to a lack of prior conceptual knowledge as complexity science is not often to be found in traditional teaching and learning educational offerings. In addition, Adult Ego Development theory highlights that individuals differ in their responses to complexity and in their capacity to tolerate it. Furthermore there is an additional challenge in that many methods of supporting learners are in contradiction to the social reality of a complex world. For example, it is difficult to break down concepts and offer concrete examples when teaching about the complex, interconnected, and ever-changing nature of the social world.

In what might seem an impossible situation—where complexity is recognised as essential in practice, yet the barriers to engaging with it appear insurmountable—Gilbride offers hope by offering methods to engage learners with the principles of complexity science. Examples given are the use of interconnected case studies and taking a meta-cognitive scaffolding approach to support learners in understanding key concepts of complexity. The use of reflective frameworks can also support learners to make sense of what they are learning and how it relates to their practice. There is also the suggestion that building conditions for psychological safety is required so that learners can reflect honestly and candidly about the difficulties in grappling with the concepts of complexity.

All six submissions to this special issue offer their own unique contributions, which when drawn together also provide a coherent answer to most of our questions we originally posed in the call. All answer the question of how we can we design curricula and otherwise support public service professionals to navigate complex 21st century challenges, through a variety of complexity-informed, action-oriented and engaged methods. All approaches require stepping outside of traditional classroom settings and diversifying. Prominence is given to the role of CPD, knowledge exchange, and bespoke training offers which are designed in collaboration with public service professionals and where relevant the users of services. All suggest methods which are of practical relevance to practitioners, and which offer tangible alternatives to that offered by educational offerings underpinned by New Public Management principles.

Conclusions

The contributions to this special issue provide insight into the barriers and enablers of taking an action oriented, complexity-informed and/or engaged scholarship approach to public administration teaching and scholarship. The submissions demonstrate that these approaches blur the boundaries between traditionally distinct domains of research, knowledge exchange, and education. All offer practical methods which require researchers and public administrators to work in collaboration and learn together. Authors make clear their difficulty in distinguishing between what is a research or practice-oriented endeavour, as the opportunity for theory development and practice improvement occurs simultaneously. Because of this closer relationship between all those involved, there is greater opportunity for reciprocity to occur and to further both practice and research.

Contributors also call for educational offerings to be taken out of a traditional classroom-based scenario. By taking an engaged scholarship approach and meeting public service professionals where they are, public administration scholars can provide clear benefit to practice. This does not mean that theory is side-lined, merely that it is enacted within the research process. Theory development also benefits through increased opportunity to be challenged, informed and refined through collaboration. However, contributions also make clear synergising theory development and practice improvement is far from straightforward. We therefore need continued prominence in this area, in leading conferences and journals; see for example McDonald III and Hatcher (2025) call for papers for an immediate opportunity.

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