

An agenda for rethinking mid-career master programs in public administration

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tpa**Frans-Bauke van der Meer and Peter Marks** 

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Abstract

The pace of societal change and the development of societal challenges have speeded up considerably during the last couple of decades, with substantial impact on different levels, i.e. ranging from global to local, or from business to government. When focusing on the public domain, these changes and challenges have had a major impact on public professionals, who face different and frequently changing questions. Mid-career programs in Public Administration (MPA) have the mission to support enrolled professionals in dealing with these changes and challenges. This article is about the development of such MPAs. Both substantive and didactic development is needed. To counter institutional inertia it seems vital to institutionalize a regular rethinking and adaptation of curricula and didactic strategies. This article identified some important points of attention and some options to deal with these in order to continuously improve the contribution of MPA programs to relevant and effective professional development and ongoing professional learning.

Keywords

Societal challenges, mid-career master program, professional development, public professional, life-long learning, curriculum development

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Introduction

Mid-career Master of Public Administration / Public Management programs (MPAs) are designed to educate public professionals and practitioners on an academic level to enhance the scope and level of their professional competence and improve their professional functioning. The pace, turbulence and diversity of, often intertwined, societal developments and of administrative and public management challenges frequently pose new, often complex, problems for public administration (PA) professionals. Therefore, it is useful to regularly pose the question of whether MPA programs are fit and effective in supporting practitioners to deal with these (new) challenges. This article does not aim to answer this question for each program, i.e. it does not assess existing programs. Rather, it seeks to identify general key points of attention for review and (re)design of MPA programs: in other words, an agenda for rethinking a master program.

We proceed as follows. In the next section we elaborate on reasons for regularly updating mid-career MPA programs. These are related not only to societal and administrative developments, but also to institutional context and new ideas and practices. In subsequent sections, we discuss central points of attention for design review of programs. In the concluding remarks, we propose a framework for MPA program review.

The focus points for redesign are based on two strands: on the one hand our analysis and argument is based on existing research on (impact of) teaching PA, and on the other hand on an inventory among MPA program leaders in a diversity of countries.¹

The following questions were responded to by these program leaders:

1. What substantive issues and themes, related to dominant actual issues in your societies, should get (more) attention in mid-career MPA programs? Can you also identify substantive themes that could do with less attention?
2. What do you consider main difficulties and challenges that PA professionals meet in their professional context that require more attention in mid-career MPA programs? Could you also identify challenges addressed in present programs that could do with less attention?
3. What (new) competences are involved in dealing with the new problems and challenges in 1 and 2 that should be addressed in mid-career MPA programs?
4. What do you consider the main institutional or other obstacles for redesigning MPA programs in relation to 1 to 3?
5. Finally: which further points of attention would you suggest?

The results of this inventory were discussed with colleagues at the 2016 EGPA Conference in Utrecht (Permanent Study Group 'Teaching Public Administration') and the 2016 Copenhagen Forum in Rotterdam. This article draws extensively from the inventory and related discussions.

Why update?

Mid-career MPA programs typically aim to equip students to function more effectively and at a qualitatively higher level in their professional practice(s). Therefore, these

programs are generally designed to address key issues and challenges that students meet in their professional practice. Moreover it is important that students learn and are supported to actually link theory and practice in a reflective and in a practical way. Indeed, in many of these programs efforts are made to link theory and research on the one hand with actual real-life situations, developments and challenges on the other (Kearns, 2014; Majgaard et al., 2016; Pedersen and Jensen, 2007; Van der Meer and Marks, 2016; Van der Meer and Ringeling, 2009, 2010). Efforts are also made to enhance students' ability for life-long learning (Peters, 2015; Reichard and Schröter, 2018). However, the careful design of programs, their content and their didactical approaches is not a one-shot effort. To keep and enhance the quality, relevance and impact of mid-career MPA programs, it is necessary that designers, managers and lectures are, like their students, involved in an ongoing process of professional learning and adapting their programs and didactics accordingly. There are at least three reasons for such regular, if not continuous updating.

Firstly, societal developments, new trends in governmental organization and public management as well as new strategies of governance and participation, pose increasingly *new* challenges for professionals in the public domain (Bryer, 2016; Reichard & Schröter, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2014). This may require new content in case examples, but also in theoretical approaches and insights taught. It may also have implications for professional skills to be exercised or didactic strategies to be applied. We will elaborate on these aspects in the light of present societal challenges and trends in the section below on Substantive issues. In view of these challenges, there may also be reasons to reflect on the societal role of academic education. Next to professional and academic training, debate on public values and education towards critical individuals taking responsibility both in their professional and in their citizen roles, seems to gain in importance (Bryer, 2016).

Secondly, the general structure of academic teaching programs tends to change relatively little over time. Reasons for this may be found in the little time and energy available for reviewing programs, criteria for accreditation and/or the inclination to derive program contents from canonized academic knowledge. The consequence seems to be that programs tend to lag somewhat behind with respect to new societal, administrative and professional challenges. Institutional conditions also play a role. As Reichard and Schröter (2018) observe, programs tend to differ between countries, not only because of different actual needs but also as a consequence of different academic and administrative traditions. While differences between countries may in part be related to specific societal and/or administrative challenges, they also seem to reflect path dependency. That should not be considered a negative qualification by definition. On the contrary, alignment with institutional contexts and traditions will help to keep the programs in place. Moreover, it helps them to benefit from past experience and proven practice. However, it should be noticed that all of this is supply oriented. The strategic question how it relates to the actual or desirable demand is pertinent (see De Wit et al., 2000 for a discussion of the strategic paradox between supply and demand orientations); the section on curriculum development will elaborate on this. This is not to suggest that curricula do not change every now and again. Reichard and Schröter (2018) observe growing convergence of programs across Europe, which seems to reflect mutual learning

and/or the adaptation to (developed) shared (international?) needs and contexts. However, our argument – and our inventory – suggests that a comprehensive rethinking of mid-career programs may be urgent at this point of time to realize the societal missions of these programs.

Thirdly, there are some indications that MPA programs are not always as effective as hoped for in enabling students to link theory and (their own) practice (Van der Meer and Marks, 2016; Webster-Wright, 2009). This may partly be due to the fact that programs tend to deal with strategic public management and policy issues at a high and general level, while students generally come from mid-level professional positions in a specific domain. This may hinder recognition of relevance for their own professional practice. But there also seems to be a need to develop and implement more effective didactical strategies and methods to facilitate making such links. New insights from pedagogy and heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012; Canning, 2010) as well as experiments and experiences in similar programs may offer building blocks for improvement. We will come back to this in the section on didactical strategies.

Substantive issues

Our inventory among program leaders produced an extensive list of substantive themes and issues that were seen as relevant for inclusion and deserving more attention in MPA programs in relation to actual societal and administrative developments. Many of the topics mentioned are related to perceived increasing complexity of administrative and societal challenges. More specifically, substantive problems in relation to increasing diversity and intercultural tensions were frequently mentioned. The same holds for new ways of steering and cooperation in relation to governmental retreat and an increasing (desired) role for societal participation. Finally, in view of complexity and societal developments, many program leaders feel a need for more reflection on public values and ways to deal with these. We elaborate on these clusters of topics as anchor points for review of MPA programs.

Complexity

There is an increase in international interdependence and mutual influence owing to the globalized economy, technological developments, violent conflicts, global warming, etc. At the same time there are increasing nationalist tendencies, which in turn influence the other interdependent nations. Globalization impacts the economy and trade, but at the same time it limits options for, and outcomes of, national economic policies. Armed conflicts and depressing economic situations cause large migration movements. Environmental degradation and climate problems are, to a large and increasing extent, of a global nature. Moreover, issues with respect to economy, environment and migration are interrelated in complex ways. Within countries, these developments create new problems for policy and public management, which seem to require new instruments and strategies. Cooperation between countries is growing in relevance, not only for its own sake, but also to enable and safeguard national and local options and developments. Therefore,

international relations, the fate of international agreements and institutions in an increasingly competitive world with isolationistic and nationalistic tendencies, have to be understood and considered as focus of PA-analysis and strategy development and, as such, deserve attention in MPA curricula.

Interdependency is also growing on lower scale levels. Inter-municipal or inter-regional competition and cooperation, shifting tendencies of centralizing and decentralizing tasks and competences, public private partnerships and societal entrepreneurship contribute to both success and complexity in the public domain. Increasing complexity has profound implications for policy planning and decision making, because of increasing uncertainty about the nature and dynamics of societal challenges and about the possible impact of policies and because of the decreasing amount of 'control' by single (governmental) actors. Therefore it is desirable to pay attention to at least some of these contemporary challenges if only to underline the relevance of the mid-career MPA programs to understand the complexities with which the public professional are confronted in their professional practice. More importantly, the professional should learn to analyze societal developments and issues and understand complex multi-level societal and administrative processes. This may require that new conceptual tools and theoretical approaches are offered in MPA programs; e.g. complexity theories, (social) network analysis and network strategies, social constructivist analysis, etc. Also the role of neighboring disciplines (sociology, psychology, history and economics) may change, and become more extensive and integrated.

Diversity and integration

A considerable number of the challenges posed by increasing complexity seems to be related to increasing diversity and tensions between societal groups, cultural, ethnic or religious, and between different styles and content of policies promoted. Owing to the importance and impact of these specific challenges, MPA programs should incorporate theories to teach students how to analyze and deal with the diversity and tensions. In addition to more insight in complexity, this seems to imply that MPA programs need to devote (more) attention to conflict management, to organizing societal cooperation and to combining cultural diversity and social integration. In other words, a specific focus and application of the complexity tools of the previous section to the diversity and integration domain may require knowledge of and insight in different cultures and the dynamics of intercultural interaction. In this connection, the role of government and other public organizations should be analyzed from the perspective of different cultures and with respect to their impact on interaction between cultures.

Democracy and participation

The role of governments and semi-public institutions is changing in many countries. In part this is their own (forced) choice. The need for budget cuts or changed conceptions of the role of government has led to (partial) withdrawal from certain policy and societal domains. The aforementioned globalization and the citizen emancipation in democracies

fundamentally influence the position and role of governments as well. At the same time, an increasing role is ascribed in many (democratic) countries to participation, coproduction and societal self-steering. All these shifts ask for redefinition of the tasks, instruments, organization and strategy of governments. What kind of basic rules and boundary conditions can and should governments create? How can governments effectively stimulate societal self-steering and under which conditions should they do that? What does it take to respond to and facilitate initiatives from society? How to deal with such initiatives if there is resistance from other societal groups? These questions, but also the question of accountability of governmental bodies, civil servants and politicians and of societal actors should be given due attention in MPA programs. That is, traditional approaches of the roles of and relations between politicians, administrators and civil servants have to be rethought, owing to shifts and tensions with respect to autonomy and control of these actors, integration between internal and external management, new ways of accountability, but also completely new types of policy processes and the like. The implication of these pressing questions for MPA programs is that (more) attention should be given to strategic human resource management and organizational change to equip students for the necessary transformation in (semi-)governmental organizations. Also (more) attention for network analysis and management and for horizontal steering strategies is relevant, as well as insight into conditions that may stimulate or limit participation and coproduction.

Public value and integrity

In some MPA programs there are courses explicitly devoted to ethical questions, dilemmas and norms for professionals. Both our inventory and relatively frequently reported integrity incidents in virtually all countries underline the need to explicitly give attention to these issues (see also Menzel 1997; Shand 2015). However, in relation to the discussed societal and administrative developments, a much broader attention for dealing with values, norms and codes of conduct is necessary. On the one hand new types of professional ethical dilemmas come about. Apart from tensions between political instructions, personal interests, professional responsibility and the public good, there may be tensions between political-administrative loyalty, realizing performance targets and cooperation/coproduction with private or societal organizations and citizens. On the other hand, consensus about what is 'common good' or 'public value' often seems to be decreasing. This not only makes balancing of values in political decision more difficult, it also raises increasingly societal tensions that need to be managed. MPA programs should help PA professionals to identify and understand such value conflicts and have insight in ways of dealing with these.

Professional challenges

Our inventory produced a number of competences in need of (more) attention in MPA programs. Of course these are not new. Reichard and Van der Krogt made a scheme in the framework of NISPACEE (The Network of Institutes and Schools of Public

Administration in Central and Eastern Europe) in which, next to general professional competences at academic level, they identified six clusters of PA specific competences to be incorporated in academic PA programs (Reichard and Van der Krogt, 2014):

1. Competences to manage in public governance.
2. Competences to participate in and contribute to policy and administrative processes
3. Competences to articulate and apply a public service perspective.
4. Competences to communicate and interact productively in the public domain.
5. Competences to analyze and to solve PA-related problems by applying appropriate scientific methods.
6. Competences to understand the public domain.

We would like to elaborate on this distinction between general academic competences with the focus on PA, and specific competences for mid-level PA professionals, i.e. competences related to specific work- and career-related challenges. Below, we elaborate on some of these that, based on the inventory and our own experience, may be in need of more (effective) attention in MPA programs.

General competences

A competence gradually in need of more attention relates to *collaboration between different pillars, sections or policy domains*. Developments in different domains increasingly tend to be related to each other, which requires analysis from different perspectives and the development of solutions or strategies that are sensible from different points of view (both conceptual and in terms of interests). By and large professionals work in, and are responsible for, specific domains, which means that they are well equipped to perform their specific tasks, based on their expertise, skills and routines within that domain. However, collaborating with other disciplines tends to be more problematic. This is not only an issue during the development of policy plans, but perhaps even more so in policy implementation and consecutive going concern. MPA programs need to address this issue not only as an academic issue, but also in terms of helping students to communicate and collaborate over organizational and professional demarcations.

A related competence, increasingly needed by PA professionals, involves interaction with the outside world. A first point of attention is that professionals need to learn how to map the relevant environment, e.g. by network or stakeholder analysis. Arguably, this aspect is well addressed in most MPA programs. However, the changing role, position and strategy of governments implies that in both theory and practice attention should be given to the development of, often situation specific, strategies and competences to interact with stakeholders and to deal with their mutual relations. In actual practice there are many efforts to realize this. Evaluating these efforts and learning from them is an important substantive point of attention in MPA curricula, as well as acquiring the competence to engage in such evaluating and learning by the students themselves. This holds not only for

students working in governments. It can be expected that PA professionals will, even more so than is already the case, find jobs in societal and private organizations, which play an increasing role in (the coproduction of) tackling societal challenges. They will also have to acquire the competence to operate in complex networks.

A third issue concerns the *use of knowledge*. Linking theory taught in the program to real life practice deserves much further development of didactical methods; there is ample evidence that this ‘transfer’ is not at all straightforward and not always successful (Majgaard et al., 2016; Van der Meer and Marks, 2016). However, there is also the question how to generate knowledge that is relevant for present societal, policy and steering problems, how to use the knowledge, and how to organize knowledge usage. Sometimes the impression emanates that research results and actual assessments do not play a role (fact-free politics). This will frustrate professionals and may diminish the quality of policy and steering strategies. So, a relevant competence is to present relevant knowledge in a clear and convincing way to different actors. But if policy or societal actors are open to relevant knowledge, it is often not immediately clear which knowledge is useful in what way. Moreover, knowledge needed with respect to concrete issues will often not be readily available. Hence, key issues for MPA programs are: learning to formulate key knowledge needs in relation to specific challenges and situations, administrating policy relevant research (which is of course not only PA research), presenting its outcomes and interacting these to enhance optimal use.

A final strategic competence is dealing with contradicting values and dilemmas (Aucoin, 1990; Meyer and Gupta, 1994; Van Thiel and Leeuw, 2002; De Wit et al., 2000). Policy decisions and network strategies often have to simultaneously deal with different and conflicting interests, with different values and strategic choices. Also the definition of ‘the’ problem and of ‘best’ solutions is influenced by interests, values and frames of reference. This gives rise to strategic dilemmas or paradoxes; e.g. short-term solutions may be considered necessary, while at the same time, or from different perspectives, they may generate long-term problems; a supply orientation reflecting what a professional or an organization is good at may not fit with societal needs; the need for cooperation may conflict with the (perceived) efficacy of a go-it-alone strategy (De Wit et al., 2000). Of course, such dilemmas and related choices are inherently political in nature. However, there is also the question how such dilemmas can be identified, dealt with and redefined in order to generate less tension and more societal/political support and impact. Framing issues and options and interaction with and among stakeholders seem to be important points of attention to be addressed and worked on in MPA programs.

Competences for mid-level PA professionals

One of the obstacles for students in mid-career MPA programs to use knowledge, insights and skills acquired in the program, is that often they feel that their job, role and position prevents that. Formal tasks and responsibilities, procedures, time and resources available and the attitude and behavior of colleagues and superiors (and even subordinates) are often experienced as strong limits to their own behavior and options.

Institutional conditions seem to provide little discretion. Seemingly, theories taught on discretionary power and principal-agent relations do not necessarily change that. Yet, based on this very theoretical insight, we would claim that every professional has, by definition, discretionary space to maneuver. As such, MPA programs should help students to discover and explore that space in their specific settings and to use it in sensible ways. Coaching and peer consultation (Van der Meer and Marks, 2016) may help, but other effective methods and strategies still have to be developed as well. This involves ways to interact in effective and constructive ways with superiors, peers and subordinates (taking their discretion into account). It also involves learning (to dare) to experiment with one's own behavior. And it requires analysis of and reflection on ongoing processes and their own role in it.

A related set of competences for mid-level professionals in MPA programs relates to some strategic dilemmas or paradoxes that manifest themselves in specific ways. We give two examples (De Wit et al., 2000). The first dilemma has to do with felt responsibility for realizing public value in the relevant domain and network on the one hand and the individual accountability and performance on the other. The latter is important for their position and career – or more basically for feeling socially integrated in the organization – while the former concerns what they may consider their professional or public interest responsibility. This tension is felt most strongly when individual performance and results play an important role in personnel assessments, while at the same time results are heavily dependent on other actors (within or outside government). Students should learn how to negotiate the way they give account for their efforts and direct results within their professional setting. Another, in part related, typical mid-level tension has to do with formal rules and regulations and with standing operating procedures in the organization. In dealing with external actors, mid-level professionals are often confronted with critical reactions on 'bureaucratic' and time consuming procedures and on pillarization within the organization. They may also become frustrated by these institutional conditions themselves if they see it as interfering with effective participation, co-production and societal self-steering. Insight in the relation between internal structure and processes of public organizations on the one hand and their external functioning on the other hand is essential. Students should learn strategies and the ability to organize internal cooperation in connection with external cooperation from their mid-level position.

Curriculum development

The ongoing shifts in societal context and professional needs of PA professionals demand regularly rethinking and redesigning mid-career MPA programs. This may lead to adaptations in MPA curricula. A useful starting point for curriculum development may be a thorough reflection on the intended learning outcomes of the program. A balance should be found between 'supply' and 'demand'. The supply consists of well-developed PA theories, research lines, methods and skills. The demand refers to insights and instruments to deal with actual and future challenges with which PA professionals may be confronted. Finding the balance means on the one hand to carefully select from the

available supply, and on the other hand real curriculum development. This may imply focused research, working on actual real-life cases to envisage the relevance and enhance the applicability of what students learn in the program. After a reformulation of intended learning outcomes, it should be translated in the curriculum. We mention three central points of attention.

Actualizing content

It seems important to pay considerable attention to the dynamics, multiple nature and complexity of present societal developments and challenges. Understanding such developments and being able to analyze them, is to be considered a necessary condition for adequate professional functioning in the public domain. Although it seems attractive, if not necessary, to have actual societal challenges and actual specific cases as exemplary material in courses, it seems even more important that students learn to explore and analyze such challenges and situations themselves, as their shape and content will change continuously during their professional career. Thus *methods* of finding relevant information and analyzing it are to be a key ingredient of course content. Furthermore, insight in dynamics of strategies for network management, coproduction and facilitating participation as well as societal self-steering are necessary in view of societal developments and the changing role of governments. Students should learn how to *develop* such strategies. Another point of attention for actualizing curriculum content is that insights in the options of discretionary space, linked to principal-agent relations, but also to peer and external relations should be supplemented with exploring how such space can be found and used in effective and ethical ways.

Skills for mid-level professionals

Next to academic competences such as doing research, writing and presenting, MPA curricula may be improved by including training in other skills relevant for the professional practice, such as negotiating with multiple actors, mediating, framing, and communication strategies. Mid-career students can get assignments to experiment with such skills in their own practice or in simulated settings. They may be asked to write a reflective evaluation of their experiences in such experiments, which may be discussed in class or small groups, and followed up by new assignments or experiment. Such an approach may lead to a gradual improvement of professional competences, but also to more insight in the impact of behavior and interventions. Moreover in doing so students also enhance their reflective capacity and hence their capability for ongoing, life-long, professional learning.

Application and reflection

Due attention should be given to linking theory and practice. Although in most programs cases from real-life practice are frequently used and students are often asked to apply theoretical concepts and theories to their own practice, it seems clear that more work has to be done and additional methods will have to be developed to make this linking more

effective. On the one hand the link of theory to practice can be practiced by assignments to apply theoretical concepts and insights to real-life cases, to their own practice and reflect on the added value. Linking in the reverse direction is also important: use practical insight and experience to critically reflect on existing theories and to contribute to theory development.

Reflection on theory, actual practice, their interrelation and one's own behavior is to be considered a self-evident professional attribute. However, it is not evident that MPA graduates master and apply this faculty sufficiently. Arguably, students often tend to take theories as 'given' and their implications to be applied straightforwardly, possibly reinforced by the way their learning is tested in the program (Gibbs, 2006). Their professional context also tends to be seen as given too, often preventing the application of acquired insights, which discourages reflection of their own behavior. Much thought has been given to ways to include teaching and learning reflection in curricula (Cunliffe, 2002; Gur-Ze'ev et al., 2001; Halonen, 2006; Kinkhorst, 2010; Maiden and Kinsey, 2008; Smith, 2011; Van der Meer and Marks, 2013), but as yet they are not as successful as we would like.

Didactical strategies

The potential implications for curriculum design also resonate in the didactical strategies of MPA programs. For students to learn more skills (see section, Skills for mid-level professionals) and to be able to apply and reflect on the link between theory and practice (see section, Application and reflection), but also to help students meeting the diverse professional challenges discussed above, students should actively engage in their learning process. There are many methods for actively engaging students (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006; Sivan et al., 2000; Spronken-Smith and Harland, 2009; Trigwell, 2010). However, these methods should be carefully considered from the perspectives discussed in this paper, since active modes of learning do not necessarily lead to 'deep' learning that aims at understanding the meaning of the learning materials (Richardson, 2011). "Students adopting a Deep Approach to learning seek meaning in order to understand. [This approach is associated] with an intention to comprehend, to active conceptual analysis and, if carried out thoroughly, generally result in a deep level of understanding" (Struyven et al., 2006: 280). Reflection by students on their own learning processes may help and should be included in the courses. Participating in group discussions, simulations, real-life experiments may be fun (of course some will disagree on this), but students should reflect what they actually learned in these sessions and why. As mentioned before, this stimulates both understanding and life-long professional learning competence.

Notwithstanding the diversity of options to organize active deep learning, we will briefly mention three suggestions for directions of development in didactical strategies.

Blended learning 1: Online and in the class room

Simply put, blended learning is nothing more than the mixing of different learning and teaching methods. However, mostly "blended learning refers to all kinds of combinations of face-to-face (FTF) learning with technology-based learning: traditional

education can be enriched with the use of technology and learning with technology can profit from FTF meetings.” (Graham, 2005; see also Kerres and Witt, 2003; Heinze and Proctor, 2004). Combining classes and online education may give interesting options to intensify active learning.

Online lectures and instructions enables motivated students to repeat parts of it so as to digest and reflect on them. Moreover it may save straightforward lecturing time during classes, which creates room for more interactive learning and assignments in class (flipping the class room). But also online tests and assignments may enable or even force students to prepare classes better. On top of that, online discussions may enable and enforce *all* students to actively participate in these. So, even if adding online teaching and learning to classes may reduce the total FTF time, it may intensify the learning process and create more active responsibility in students for their own learning process (Fleck, 2012). Online discussions and group work may also help them to learn from their peers, sometimes even more so than during classes. Of course, the success of such approaches in relation to desirable improvements as discussed in this paper, will depend strongly on the type and quality of the online elements and on the orchestration of the interplay between class and online elements. Therefore, much creative didactical and substantive work is required.

Blended learning 2: Combining class and workplace

As discussed, there are big challenges in more effectively linking learning in the program with experiences and functioning in practice, especially since these practice situation are characterized by increasing complexity and situation specific dynamics (Newswander and Newswander, 2012). How can methods already in place be improved or supplemented? Options to consider are: more in-depth coaching and peer consultation, students visiting each other’s workplaces, mentors or peers as consultants for learning in the work place. This may be supported by training in giving and receiving feedback, and educating students toward a critical and research minded attitude (Van der Meer and Marks, 2017). Insights on condition for and mechanisms of professional learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Schön, 1995; Wenger, 2000) such as: learning in and by experience (Schön, 1995), linking to and interaction within ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 2000; Reichard and Schröter, 2018) may help the development of new approaches to this challenge (Watson et al., 1993).

Peer consultation

Both previous options involve consultation and cooperation among peers, within the program and perhaps also in the workplace. This may contribute to learning about analyzing situations and problems, developing strategies and solutions, intervening, experimenting, etc. However, working with peers does not always seems to be as fruitful as it could be. This can be related to the competences of the peers involved, but also to their attitude. Thus, a further quest in didactical development is to motivate (or force) students to ‘really’ dive into each other’s puzzles and to equip and trigger them to do so in a constructive way. Again, reflection on learning processes in peer consultation, both

for the ‘client’ and for the ‘consultant’ is helpful. Such mutual learning processes may help to anchor their outcome and to improve further (collective) learning processes (Sambell et al., 2006; Struyven et al., 2005; Weinstein, 2006)

In this context, probably even more so than in relation to other issues discussed, it has to be taken into account that many MPA programs are dealing with students from quite diverse backgrounds and experience levels. One question related to this is when to work with more or less homogeneous peer groups (and in what respect?) and when to work with heterogeneous ones. Both options have advantages and disadvantages, in part depending on purpose. Heterogeneous groups may contribute to Socratic questioning and thus to out-of-the-box reflection (Taket and White, 1997; Wenger, 2000), whereas homogenous groups may enhance practical feasibility of advice generated.

Conclusion

Public professionals are confronted with many challenges in dealing with complex issues, their superiors, their peers, their subordinates, societal partners, citizens groups and tensions between them. These complex and often quickly changing societal and administrative challenges require flexible design and regularly updating of mid-career MPA programs to assist the enrolled professionals in dealing with the changes and challenges. Both substantive and didactic development need regular review. To counter institutional inertia it seems vital to institutionalize a regular rethinking and adaptation of curricula and didactic strategies. This article identified some important points of attention and some options to deal with these in order to continuously improve the contribution of MPA programs to relevant and effective professional development and ongoing professional learning. These ideas can be summarized in a general agenda for the design and review of MPA programs. This agenda is not a comprehensive set of criteria for all MPA programs. Rather, it aims to point to elements that may need to be included, or sharpened, in order to better adapt these programs to actual professional challenges in the public domain.

An agenda for design and updating of MPA programs

Content and competences

- Insight in complexity in multi-actor and multi-level systems.
- Recognizing, analyzing and dealing with uncertainties in problem definition, problem analysis, prediction of policy impact and decision making.
- Insight in and dealing with societal diversity at different levels and tensions between societal groups.
- Insight in dynamics of and conditions for new ways of steering such as societal coproduction and self-steering.
- Recognizing and dealing with (implicit) values, norms and presuppositions in problem definitions, policies and public management processes and strategies.
- Analyzing and dealing with value conflicts.
- Analyzing of, contributing to and shaping of cooperation within and between organizations.

- Insight and strategies of intervention and change in and of institutionalized contexts.
- Finding and using discretionary space.

Didactics

- Effectively and creatively linking theory and practice, in both directions.
- Reflection.
- Effective use of (information) technology.

Although many of these points may seem rather self-evident, our inventory and experience suggest that much is to be gained on these aspects, which may enhance the relevance, contribution and attractiveness of the discipline and teaching of PA.

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Note

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