

DRAFT

## ***Improving mid-career MPA programs***

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### **Abstract**

The paper discusses options to improve mid-career MPA programs with respect to educational approach, didactical methods and content. Emphasis is laid on the need to realize a solid connection between past and present experiences and views of students on the one hand and new insights, theories, approaches, competences and practices on the other. I analyse preoccupations and expectations of students in the Erasmus University Part Time PA Program and compare them with dominant issues in vocational literature and with views of our staff on central PA questions. I intend to come with some suggestions to enhance the 'connectivity' of the program and at the same time make it more thought provoking and innovative.

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## ***Improving mid-career MPA programs***

### **Introduction**

Mid-career MPA-programs typically have the ambition to provide professionals with theoretical knowledge, academic competences, the ability to relate these to real life questions and the ability to utilize new knowledge, approaches and competences in their professional practice. Thus, these programs are both an academic education and a professionalization trajectory. When they finish the program, students should be equipped for academic analysis and research of societal, administrative and organizational issues and to function more effectively as public administration professionals.

In this contribution I want to reflect on how programs can be developed and shaped in order to maximize their contribution to this ambition. I suspect that many programs are designed in an enlightened supply oriented mode. That is, they do not reflect so much what the staff of the teaching institution have to offer, but what staff or program managers think to be useful for the this category of students. In these ideas two elements may be distinguished. On the one hand there is a more or less articulated image of what students should know, understand and be able to by the end of the program. On the other hand there are implicit and explicit ideas about how the teaching can be shaped and learning can be facilitated.

I do not want to question the first type of ideas as such. I take them to be based on sound academic and professional judgment. The second category however does deserve closer attention. How valid are these, often implicit, didactical ideas? How do they relate to specific characteristics of the target group? Do they make optimal use of the experience, abilities and environments of this group? In order to answer such questions, we need to supplement the enlightened supply oriented approach with an enlightened demand oriented approach. The latter does not refer primarily to students' wishes as a guiding principle for program design, but rather to the need to explore their situations and characteristics in order to evaluate the efficacy of current didactical methods for this specific group and to find cues for developing new group specific methods. It should be added that such explorations may not only have consequences for didactical methods but also for substantive content of MPA programs. It is conceivable that some content is hard to digest by most members of the target group, irrespective teaching methods used. On the other hand addition of some specific content may be helpful to involve students in intended learning processes.

Thus, the central question of this paper is

*How can mid-career MPA-programs be tailored to characteristics of the target group in order to enhance the efficacy of teaching and learning.*

Below, I start with a discussion of some relevant theoretical notions about learning processes. Then, I describe some of the characteristics of the target group of the Rotterdam part time program, including an extensive exploration of their substance and competence oriented expectations. Next I analyze the relation between characteristics and expectation of the target group on the one hand and characteristics (content and method) of our program. Using the theoretical notions I'll identify a number of point for discussion and/or improvement. I conclude with a number tentative suggestions how to proceed.



## Professional and academic learning

How do humans learn? There are quite a few theories on learning processes, implying different mechanisms that shape and change thoughts, behaviors, capabilities or identities of individuals. They do not necessarily exclude each other. To the contrary, there may be more effective learning (and teaching) strategies for similar or different types of knowledge and competence. Sauquet (2004, 373-380) for example distinguishes four 'schools of thought': behaviorism, the cognitive school, pragmatism and finally situated learning. I follow this typology and elaborate on learning processes associated with each category.

Behaviorism refers to the idea that learning is the establishment of a relation between stimuli and responses. Individuals are trained to react in a given way if a certain set of stimuli manifests itself. They do so because of rewards related to given individual needs are implied in or associated with the stimuli or with their response. Students may be trained to write their papers in a given structure and type of language, since after some trial and error this behavior appears to produce high marks. Note that needs are supposed to be fixed and given and that no process of sensemaking is implied, except, perhaps, with respect to the production of rewards; not with respect to the content of what is learnt.

In the cognitive model, thinking, conceived of as information processing, plays a far more prominent role. In this image of a learning process, data, information and 'knowledge' are offered to or acquired by the individual, who consecutively fits this new knowledge in what he already knows. His thinking and acting will from then on be based on this supplemented and increased knowledge. In this mode a teacher may explain a theory or a method for cost-benefit analysis, expecting the student to be able to reproduce it in exams and in relevant practice. 'Knowledge', is primarily seen as a kind of commodity (be it that transferring knowledge to someone else does not diminish one's own possession) that is rather unequivocal and can be integrated in existing knowledge without much difficulty. Learning is information processing. It is hardly sensemaking, since 'meaning' is supposed to be self-evident and the connection to existing knowledge unproblematic.

Pragmatism emphasizes the role of experience and of the social context in learning. "(L)earning is associated with purposeful action and is oriented to making sense out of a confusing or problematic situation" (Sauquet 2004, 379). Here, the presupposition is that the experience of a problem triggers searching for solutions and that 'solutions' are what appears to 'work'. In the sensemaking process about problems and solutions social interaction plays a key role. Cyclical models such as those of Kolb and Argyris & Schön [p.m. references] are examples of this approach. Programs focusing on this type of learning processes may be characterized by a problem oriented educational approach in which students are stimulated and facilitated to search for explanations and solutions for exemplary problems.

Finally, in the concept of 'situated learning', the role of the social context in learning processes is even larger as is the role of experience. Learning is simultaneously a socialization and a personal development process. People involved in a 'community of practice' {Wenger, 2000 #473} learn from and in their interactions in the community as well as from those across the communities boundaries. In the same process their identity and role in the community is shaped and changed. This image of learning processes does not seem to have a clear cut relationship with specific educational approaches. In fact, it is, more than the other three approaches, a perspective on learning as such and not so much a specific mechanism for it. Still, it asks attention for two important issues in relation to learning and educational strategies. The first is that this image suggests that learning is by definition also a process of personality development. The second issue is that learning processes can only be understood in the context in which students are embedded. This context is not limited to the social and institutional setting of the program but comprises also – and probably primarily – the professional context in which students are involved. In Wenger's language, participation of professionals in MPA-programs may be interpreted as boundary interactions from their community of practice. Sen-



semaking eventually will take place to a large extent within their work setting and the interactions taking place there.

All these models – and the variants that can be discerned within them – provide insight in possible mechanisms of learning. They give general ideas about what might be effective in education. None of them, however, provides us with a specific cue about what to teach and how. The first reason for this is obvious: the models sketched do not refer to specific content such as public administration knowledge. But more important is that specific cues do not show up, even if we know – as we probably think we do to a large extent – what ‘public administration’ is about. It depends.

In all models discussed learning has to do with the establishment of new connections. Between stimulus and response in behavioristic models. Between existing and new knowledge in cognitive models. Between perceived ‘problems’ and socially constructed ‘solutions’ in the pragmatic mode. And between identity, community and boundary interaction if we apply the situated learning perspective. So, for sensible (improvement of the) design of MPA programs we need to have (more) insight in which specific (types of) connections may be made and how these can be induced or facilitated. This implies we need to know something about the needs, knowledge, ideas, problems, social relations and identities of our students, primarily in relation to their professional occupations, but also across the borders of their job. Based on this more or less situated knowledge we may be better equipped to evaluate the feasibility and potential efficacy of both educational contents and methods, as well as to tailor them.

## A profile of the target group

Each year, the part time MPA-program at Erasmus University welcomes some 80 new students in its two year curriculum. These groups are heterogeneous in many respects, but also show some characteristics and patterns that seem relevant for tailoring the program. In fact, a break-down of the heterogeneity may reveal one of such patterns.

In this section I start with some general data on the composition of the group. Next attention is devoted to their views on key public administration issues and competences, as well as to their expectations in relation to the program. Finally, some observations from working with this group will be presented. In the next section I will analyze the implications of this picture for connectivity in teaching and learning.

### *General characteristics*

#### **Gender** (data cohort 2007)

Male	43%
Female	57%

#### **Age** (data cohort 2007)

24 – 29	38%
30 – 39	44%
40 – 52	18%

**Education** (data cohort 2007)<sup>1</sup>

university	14%
higher professional education	86%

58% of the students with an academic background has a masters degree in law. Students with a higher professional education are distributed as follows:

management and economics	22%
social work	20%
policy and administration studies	19%
technology	11%
labor, personnel and organization	8 %
environmental planning	4%
police/security management	4 %
other	9%

**Occupation** (data cohort 2004)

Students are employed in the following types of organizations

municipality	38%
ministry	21%
other governmental bodies	8%
police/fire department	6%
education and care institutions	17%
private (e.g. consulting organizations)	11%

The types of functions they fulfill are quite divers. About 20% has internal organizational functions (personnel, organization, ICT, finance). Most others have functions of policy advise or implementation in fields like social and economic policy, environmental planning, safety and security, care, and education and culture.

It can be concluded that most but not all students work in the public sector in a wide variety of domains and functions. Their professional experience ranges from 2 to about 25 years, with probably an average of 6-8 years. Nearly two thirds of the students is working at the local level. Most of them completed professional education in the past in a wide variety of directions, although most previous studies have some or even clear relations with public administration.

So, while all students have relevant professional experience of at least 2 years (this actually is a condition for admittance) and most of them have prior education of some relevance, there are large differences in the group as to the measure and nature of experience and with respect to the level and the field in which they work and for which they have been educated.

***Views and expectations***

The cohort 2007 of the Rotterdam program (N=85) has been questioned with respect to what they consider key public administration issues and problems and what their images are of what public administration professionals (at an academic level) should be occupied with and

<sup>1</sup> For the cohort 2006 de percentages were 18% and 82 % respectively (internal report by Casper Geurtz)



should be able to. 60 Open ended questionnaires were returned (71%). The answers can be summarized as follows.

The first question we asked was: *What would you consider the two of three most important topics that should be investigated by Public Administration as an academic field?*

- 15% of the respondents only mentioned general subjects, such as ‘policy’ ‘organization’, ‘steering’, ‘management’ and ‘theory’
- 57% asks for more *insight* in specific domains or issues. Most mentioned are:
  - public organization and management (19x)
  - relations between national, regional and local administration (10x)
  - impact of the international context (7x)
  - role of ICT’s in public administration (3x)
  - relation between politicians/administrators and civil servants (2x)
  - relation between policy making and policy implementation (2x)
- 45% of the respondents think academic PA should contribute to *solutions* of all kind of specific administrative problems in the areas mentioned in the former and the next point
  - 55% of the questions mentioned pertains to ‘external’ relations (how to manage societal developments? how to improve relation between government and citizen?)
  - 33% concerns internal management issues
  - 10% relates to interadministrative relations
- 28% mentions specific *substantive domains*, such as
  - social economic questions (7x)
  - safety and livability (5x)
  - societal trends, such as individualization, fragmentation (5x)
  - ageing of the population (3x)
  - Europe (3x)
  - international questions (3x)
  - integration of immigrants (2x)
  - education (2x)
  - traffic and transport (2x)
- 12% suggests PA should contribute to *implementation* (strategies)
- 12% thinks PA should also *judge* administrative and policy practices

It can be concluded that the students do not consider Public Administration only as an ‘academic’ discipline focusing on ‘understanding’ and explanation of phenomena in the public/governmental domain. A problem and solution oriented approach is clearly expected by many students. It is interesting to note that the felt need for more ‘insight’ appears to be primarily related to processes within or between governmental bodies/organizations, while ‘solutions’ expected from PA mostly have to do with societal steering and external functioning of government. Students seem to be puzzled by how things actually go within government and with how government should operate in society. Understanding of societal processes and solutions for organizational problems seem to be less dominant in their needs and expectations.

This picture may become somewhat different if we turn from the general level towards issues our students are confronted with in their occupational setting.

The second questions, then, was: *What are the main public administration issues you are dealing with in your own work?*

- In 55% of the items mentioned there is a clear reference to the need for solutions. In the other 45% issues are formulated without reference to a need for insight or solutions. Both categories can be broken down as shown below.



Theme	general	solution oriented	total
policy process	15%	9%	24%
policy content	3%	8%	11%
(formal) organization	9%	9%	18%
management(strategies)	10%	17%	27%
intergovernmental relations	3%	3%	6%
societal network relations	6%	10%	16%
<b>total</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>100%</b>

- 52% of the respondents mentioned one or more 'general' theme, while 67% mentioned one or more specific puzzle in search for solutions. Almost all (90%) respondents in this latter category mentioned internal organizational issues; 60 % mentioned external issues.
- 45% refers to a specific policy area, distributed as follows:

social economic policy	36%
care and welfare	21 %
safety, livability, integration	14%
spatial planning and environmental protection	11%
other	18%

The practical problems with which students are occupied in their jobs appear to be quite diverse, which is consistent with the heterogeneity of the group reported earlier. It seems as if the orientation is somewhat more on problem solution and somewhat more on 'internal' questions compared to the general picture on question 1.

At face value there seems to be some (but most often not a very strong) relation between answers on the first and the second question for about 55% of the respondents. For 45% there is no direct relation at first sight. So, it is probable that students either do not expect a solution to all their professional problems from PA or they have a broader interest than their own professional problems alone, or both.

What they do expect may be further specified by looking at the third question.

The third question was: *What do you consider the most important competences of an academic PA professional?*

- A number of competences are mentioned frequently, in almost the same wording. The highest scores are presented below.

analytic capabilities	mentioned by 42% of the respondents
communicative competences	23%
sensitivity for the environment	22%
helicopter view	18%

- Classifying the specific competences mentioned in more general and somewhat more neutral categories gives the following image
  - communication (50x)
  - analytic thinking (41 x)
  - personal qualities (30 x), especially creativity, independence and leadership
  - operational qualities (28x), especially dealing with different views and interests
  - knowledge and insight (27x), of which 63 refers to overview and general knowledge and 37% to specific knowledge
  - sensitivity (26x), of which about 50% refers to the societal environment and also 50% to political and administrative sensitivity
  - research and analysis (4x)





Although these competences are not explicitly related to the study of PA, they reflect a clear need for analytical and interactive skills, as well as to personal development and sensitivity. These might be interesting entrance points for teaching and learning strategies.

***Culture and attitude***

To complete my account of the profile of this group I describe some observations on cultural characteristics and dominant attitudes I have met in working with this type of group during the last 12 years.

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**The Rotterdam part time MPA program**

What do we offer to the student population characterized in the preceding sections? I give a short description of the structure and strategy of the program<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details of the program, its philosophy and its methods I refer to two early papers presented at the Pedagogical Workshops in Rotterdam and Birmingham (Van der Meer and Ringeling 2004; Van der Meer 2005; see also Van der Meer and Ringeling 2007)



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