

BEING COMPETENT AND BEING TRAINED: CHALLENGES FOR THE EMPLOYEES IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

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Abstract

The paper is focused on the particular relationship between academic education and career development of graduate students in Public Administration as a transition towards a new model of public service.

The results of the public sector are highly dependent not only on the regulation of this sector, but largely on the preparation of the new generation for the civil service. Preparation is understood as competence, commitment and possibility for integration within the institutional system. As the standards for the academic education in Public administration exist, the biggest challenge in this regard is the philosophy of recruitment of the new graduates in Public Administration, the transition from the academic status to the status of practitioners and the sustainable development of the established models. Quite different is the challenge for training of experienced civil servants. This issue is particularly important in regard to the standards, purposes and values which the trainer is expected to fulfill.

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The empirical basis of this paper is a decade experience in conducting the internships for students in Public Administration at Sofia University as well training courses on leadership for practitioners in the training programs of the Department of Public Administration. Conclusions concern the impact of the Academic internship program on the recruitment, competence, job satisfaction and sustainable career of young employees in the civil service.

The paper is based on the two types of case studies:

- Reports of students of the internship program of the Sofia University Department of Public Administration
 - Basic criticism of students, based on their experience in variety of institutions of Public administration (negative experience, symptomatic issues; most repeated skepticism in the field of “real life” to the field of Public administration)
 - Positive issues (good practices, successful experience)
 - Factors for the positive results:
 - the role of the leader (institutional, educational, situational)

- the time factor (period of establishment and development of the programs in Public administration)
- alumni factor
- communication factor (intra organizational and inter institutional)
- Cases, developed by civil servants, trained in the programs of the Department of Public Administration in leadership (MA programs) and in communicative skills (training programs).
 - What was the most needed know-how by civil servants during their training;
 - What are the topics picked by trained civil servants as issues for their case studies (as good and bad practices and basis for benchmarking);
 - What is the role of the analyzed leaders in terms of improvement of administrative service and modernization of this sector.

I. Internships: From Competence to Training

The conclusions made in this report are based on ten years of experience accumulated with the Internship program of the Department of Public Administration at Sofia University. I mention the ten-year period purposely.

Taken alone, this is neither long nor short a period. Within the context of fundamental political and social changes experienced by the country, however, ten years seems to be a lengthy period. The late 90's was still the time to launch academic programs in Public Administration in Bulgaria. The old *Law on Civil Servants* in Bulgaria from 1922 was finally substituted with a new one to regulate civil service as late as 1999. At that time Bulgaria was actively engaged in the harmonization of its legislation with the EU legal system so as to reach one of the most important events in its modernity -- becoming a full EU member in 2007.

Why do I mention these facts? The reason is that they comprise the most essential elements of the situation in which both training and practicing of students in Public Administration were started in Bulgaria. Their importance lies in securing a positive environment in the country supportive of the idea that management requires expert knowledge as well as skills. Expertise in the area of management was represented for a very long time by the way of thinking of lawyers and economists. These are the two main approaches to formal rationality in management –i.e., a decision is considered good either if it conforms to normative prescription (identifying good governance as the legitimate government) or if it is grounded in financial efficiency (“the best price wins”). However if quality of life is considered as well as other related sociological motives the logic of public administration naturally goes far beyond these formal limits. In public sector management it may even happen that the more expensive alternative

could accumulate enough social motivation to be considered as the better one because of its special social consequences for the quality of life of people. Deploying a solution within the legal framework is only the first though sufficient step. Often decision alternatives conform to legal frameworks but still remain diametrically opposed –e.g., should a school be moved to a neighboring village or, rather, classes should be downsized, are 2 opposing though legally correct decisions. In their content, however, these decisions remain fundamentally different and reflect different philosophy -- what is good for people.

The academic program in Public Administration teaches students all this. They learn many law subjects in order to get acquainted with the legal framework regulating the decisions in the public sector. They acquire knowledge additionally in the area of public finance and economy via a number of economic and financial subjects. In this way they get familiar with the principles and good practices of securing economic efficiency and the relevant motivation of public management decisions. Furthermore the curriculum includes a definite number of social and political science subjects. This helps students become the kind of managers and experts who are close to the elegant definition of Herbert Simon for public administration as a “joint activity to achieve a non-profit goal.”

Our students are the product of the type of reasoning outlined above. Factors such as the good secondary schools students come from and their motivation to select Public Administration as their future occupation form a community of ambitious and interested young people who possess trust and understanding that the institutions of Bulgaria’s young democracy need better trained respectable young professionals who can make their living out of their work in their country precisely in the field they are prepared. The very atmosphere at the relatively young Public Administration departments is encouraging in that regard. For the entire four years of undergraduate studies students have the opportunity not only to get prepared by following a fundamental interdisciplinary program, but also participate in numerous scientific conferences and research projects. Cooperation between the founder of the department, Professor Tanev and the Brisby family from London led to the creation of the emblematic annual competition for student essay in the field of Public Administration which became emblematic of Sofia University’s PA school. It was founded as long time ago as the very first year of existence of the baccalaureate program. In addition to this practice there is organized also a permanent scientific seminar, annual conferences as well as the so called “Day of Public Administration at the University”. These initiatives contribute to the scientific integrity of the Department of Public

Administration at Sofia University and also to an inspiring and creative atmosphere for the individual development of each student not only as a knowledgeable future specialist but also as a positively thinking and well-oriented “artist” in the field of public sector governance.

This idyllic picture outlined above, however, is seriously challenged when students meet face to face with the world of practice. With the passage of time some problems in this regard are not as sharp as they used to be a decade ago but they still have some recurrence.

Here I would mention at the first place the prejudice of many Bulgarian civil servants graduates of Law or Economy schools who work in the area of public administration for a considerable period of time. Such civil servants tend to underestimate and misunderstand the specific education in PA and therefore have a negative attitude for the students. For many civil servants with law or economy background it is unclear why students in Public Administration who study so many law and economic subjects have not chosen to become directly lawyers or economists.

Another prejudice against getting qualified in Public Administration is the idea that this field is an occupation for the lower rank employees working in the front office. This becomes an obstacle to the understanding that knowledge in this highly professional area is a competence to participate in the upper levels of the civil service and management. Surprisingly, but even today it is possible to meet government officials who believe that students in Public Administration are prepared to work in offices as secretaries. As far as this issue remains at the level of psychological bias it can be resolved by the very fact of the abilities of our students. Many cases have been tackled exactly in this way. Therefore, competition with time is sufficient because graduates who refute skeptics are growing in number each year steadily.

Developing a multidisciplinary expert is combining approaches of different fields of study and appropriately balanced knowledge and practical training, students in Public Administration (I guess far not only from Sofia University) are suitable for any different types of occupations. They also *get more easily trained* to meet the specific requirements of their working assignment. It is interesting to note that our students make very clear distinction between these two different types of training -- to be competent and to be trained. Especially for this report, I conducted a survey with students undergoing internship. Virtually all the respondents replied that the most essential for them is the solid academic knowledge which they regard as their most important asset for the successful professional realization. Training is expected to be received at a later stage by the experience to be accumulated within the organization of their future assignment. Moreover, with surprising maturity for their age of 20 many respondents argue that to get trained

without prior possessing of the fundament of exhaustive theoretical knowledge makes no sense. This would be irresponsible and even dangerous because it would transform the civil servant from a morally responsible and knowledgeable expert into simple transmission of the will of high ranking officials who might pursue partisan or private goals regardless to the public interest and common good.

A far more serious prejudice against the discipline of Public Administration is contained in certain *recruitment policies*. The competitions for obtaining positions in administrations are organized in a way that limits the number of candidates only to those having economics or law diplomas. At the same time the description of the positions clearly demonstrates that the specificity of the job relates par excellence to the area of general administration.

This problem persists and is a serious obstacle to the career of graduates according to their actual training and specialization. Actually, this is an important topic for a separate analysis. It refers to the standards for determining the profile of the eligible candidate. Skepticism to the “Public Administration” brand (when demonstrated) interferes negatively with the possible recruitment of graduates of Public Administration for a public service

The reflections on the internship experience in the students’ reports mark a clearly recognizable trend of their values and attitudes towards professional training in the real working environment. Students are constantly critical of all cases where the host institution acts formally and is disinterested in their contribution.

There are several typical cases of underestimation of this sort:

- Treatment of internship students as technical assistants and secretaries;
- inability in the host institution to create organization in the workplace so as to integrate the trainee;
- students are given a document for the entire period of the internship on the very first day, as the supervisor has been convinced that this activity is a compulsory element of the academic program which is not really required by the students themselves;
- persistent indifference during the entire internship period of the representatives of the administrative office toward the trainees and acceptance of trainees as formal physical presence;

Fortunately, my experience in the organization of internships in the past 10 years has registered no more than 20 percent of such a treatment of students during their internship. The reason I comment these sporadic cases is due to the symptomatic reaction of the students themselves. They have always sought to overcome the problem and find ways to raise the interest

the host institution to their ability to contribute. Moreover, students have repeatedly discussed these cases during the preparatory lectures so as to prevent similar cases in future. All this is a clear evidence of how much PA students are concerned about their internship. The survey with the current participants in the program of the Department of Public Administration at Sofia University showed that almost each respondent believes that internships should expand their presence in the curriculum and obtain the statute of compulsory subjects included in the curriculum of each of the years of the Bachelor's program.

The opinions expressed in the open ended questions in the survey show that students identify clearly the difference between the knowledge they get from classes and from their experience as participants in the internship program. The academic part of the curriculum is understood as a form of basic *competence* one achieves as a student, while the knowledge obtained from the internship and from further assignments of the student is identified as training – particular algorithm of procedures and of the job requirements and duties. It is important to add that as far as the internship format and contents is concerned students have an unstable and not clear cut understanding unlike their perceptions about the academic part of education. The picture of the ideal internship shared in the answers to the survey is far more unstable and without clear standards when compared to the picture of their expectations from academic lectures in class.

The way in which students develop their skills during their course of study is entirely a product of the university departments of PA. No other instances participate in this process. In fact, this should be different. The creation of the standard for conducting the internship must be made by active dialogue with government officials and representatives of public management agencies since the internship is concerned with the important problem of human resource management in civil service. *Depending on whether the institutions of government have an active policy for recruitment in shaping their future employees and whether the state uses its capacity to influence the motivation of the most talented students to seek professional career in this field is a prerequisite for the capacity these institutions could have in future.* Their active role both in the formation/training of students would enable them to ensure both the reproduction of their institutions but also to improve the level of the entire output. This is a topic that deserves to be discussed in the international scientific community in public administration. In this number fall issues such as sharing of best academic practices in organizing training programs and the expansion of internships in public administration in European institutions, so as a step is made toward the formation of *a critical mass of common patterns of professional administrative culture in Europe.*

- **Positive issues (good practices, successful experience)**

The greater part of the internship experience, however, is in a different and much better situation. Although there are no standards of internship to follow and government officials themselves are not obliged to accept trainees, it is a true fact that, within the decade of organizing the internship program, I received only one single refusal for admission of students for internship by a particular office. The responsiveness of all addressed institutions so far is a symptom for a general positive attitude for cooperation with academic units and mainly for support of students in their future careers. It is also important to note that students are admitted to practicing despite the lack of due process and without financial compensation of anyone of the representatives of the offices or tutors. It becomes clear that the *diferentia-specifica* of this approach is the general positive attitude and commitment of each of the units concerned.

This is a sign of a favorable situation in which the accumulated experience allows that patterns are developed for academic internship programs to be followed further as templates instead of inventing them each year as unique arrangements. The internship for students is at the same time a good tool for the institutions of public management for identification of the type of knowledge and training that should be required from the newly recruited personnel. A more active role of state and local administration in the realization of academic internships could be a factor for better motivation of good students to connect their career with the civil service and also to help them discover the great variety of assignments in the field of Public Administration.

The cooperation between the academic units in Public Administration and the structures of government could positively influence resource availability of institutions with trained personnel. This would help graduates possess excellent academic competence but also adequate level of practical skills to work in institutions of public management. Moreover, the internship experience gives the opportunity actual preferences to be shaped by the real working environment. Thus, the behavior of fresh graduates at the labor market will be a purpose oriented action of those who seek professional development rather than of people who are just looking for a job.

The rule is that deeply committed and highly motivated employees contribute in a different way and at a different scale for the achievement of the objectives of the organization when compared to employees with formalistic behavior who work with the minimum skills required while looking for a better place for themselves.

- **Factors for the positive results:**

- the role of the leader (institutional, educational, situational)

The positive experience in the internship program is a result of several factors. First of all, these are the very personalities involved in the internship process. In fact, everyone who has contributed to the implementation of internships has done this out of responsiveness or foresight. The *responsiveness* concerns mostly academic entities and students who get the chance to be part of the real working environment. The foresight at the same time is demonstrated by all those institutions which manage to lead active policy in the recruitment through internship programs.

In this regard, the Department of Public Administration at Sofia University has a good experience with practicing a *network of inter-institutional partnerships* that lead to excellent results. Such collaborations gave the students an opportunity to participate in all stages of the organization of forums (e.g. with the Institution of the National Ombudsman, a State Institute of Culture Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diplomatic Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) to become an integral part of the daily activities of the directorates Public Administration and Strategic Planning at the Council of Ministers; with the Municipality, through its Department of Human Resources which provided the trainees with brief experience from many sections of the Municipality; and many other structures, which over the years has been found appropriate model for each case.

Part of the Internship program of the Department of Public Administration includes contact hours, which are designed for meetings with professionals from different sectors and occupations. All such meetings are dedicated to a particular topic. This helps students to understand the specificity of a certain approach to “self-actualization” – namely, these are discussions on the way individuals discover what kind of occupation they are looking for. The participation of students leads to the development of specific research tasks they get charged with by the partner institutions. Thus, trainees become familiar with the variety of issues in the everyday business of the institutions.

This ad hoc developed type for the organization of internships has by now led to positive results. Therefore the organizers can suggest patterns for academic internships in order to make them more efficient and productive for all of the parties involved.

- **the time factor (period of establishment and development of the programs in Public administration)**

The fact that Public Administration in Bulgaria is still a relatively new academic discipline is both an opportunity and a problem. It is an opportunity is contained in the

opportunity to start with an up to date program that corresponds to the latest developments in this field in leading European and American Universities. The problem on the other hand is that the development of this academic field is actually ahead of time in the local context, fighting with certain inertia in the perception on the side of the administrative institutions.

▪ **alumni factor**

The involvement of alumni in recent years turns into a rather positive factor. The presence of graduates of the PA school in virtually all public management institutions makes it easier to maintain internship activities. In addition to their *active support in the conduct of practice* within the particular institution, alumni make a significant contribution in strengthening the *integrity* of the Public Administration by taking part in events throughout the school year.

The Alumni Club initiated by the department lately turned out to be one of the important mediators in the organization of the internships. It made the organization process more efficient and reduced sufficient amounts of time spent initially for building contacts and introducing the entire process. The use of the Alumni Club is particularly helpful in taking greater care for the trainees during the period of the internship at the institution. It is also a better source of the feedback about the entire process for future improvement.

▪ **Training of civil servants: from training to new competence**

Cases, developed by civil servants, trained in the programs of the Department of Public Administration in leadership (MA programs) and in communicative skills (training programs).

○ **What was the most needed know-how by civil servants during their training;**

The University has always been a focus of new knowledge and free thought. In a sense, the University does the opposite of what an employee needs to learn to do in practice – it provides alternatives, questions the findings and a critical view on reality. Training of public officials offers them an opportunity for theoretical reflection on their experience:

- The very interruption of work rhythm is already helpful for each participant. The ability to find the focal point of different theories with specific, banal episodes from the working every day is an occasion for the employees to think of their experience in a new way. The idea of just how many opportunities there are to achieve a different result even with a small piece of change in the approach is a part of the achievement.
- Development of cases outlines a wide variety of topics: from trivial mistakes in the organization or non-ethical relations to serious deviations from the responsibility of a manager who neglects the proficiency of experts and fails in the fulfillment of a particular policy. Another group of cases deals with positive situations that describe a variety of

achievements of civil servants based on their wits, high sense of responsibility and commitment to the outcome for the community.

- Civil servants are not only educated but also trained to fit practice. Often this training is knowledge of the procedures for carrying out particular occupation. However, the shift from the competence to the training gradually interferes with monotonous rhythm which could substitute the needed level of inspiration for the work. When the organization of work in the civil service limits itself to formal implementation of procedures, it becomes a simple routine in turn and thus a prerequisite for bad practices.
 - **What are the topics picked by trained civil servants as issues for their case studies (as good and bad practices and basis for benchmarking);**

Briefly, these are cases that investigate the ability to influence development in a positive way through change in the organization as well as in the attitude of civil servants in order to cause advance in their work. Some ways to achieve good results stem from either improved communication or better relations and team building.

Training of civil servants in an academic program *allows identifying problem areas that do not require financial resources* in order to have them resolved. Good and bad practices are based not only on organizational, but very often on psychological reasons. Some bad practices require only a good will in order to get changed. Thus, the cases identified for educational purpose possess bigger potential. Indeed, their immediate purpose is to apply theoretical concepts to cases from real life. However, they are never used beyond this boundary. They remain unexploited as feedback to practice where they could exert their influence to improve the environment.

Compared with students who are just forming ideas of their future occupation and who have very little insight into the practice of civil service, the symptomatic stories, identified by civil servants are a valuable resource for academic training.

Certainly, students are very critical in respect of their internship experience. They are sensitive to both the lack of interest to them as trainees, as well as to any irregularity and poor organization noticed in the workplace. In a way, they are shaped as perfectionists by the universities and so they act during their first experience with the imperfection of practice. Students during their internship tend to never miss even the smallest inconveniences such as listening to music at work when this apparently interferes with the work of other, but remains not penalized either by supervisors or of equal ranking colleagues. They criticize the waste of resources due to poor organization (e.g. duplication of work already undertaken because of

unwillingness or inability to find ready-score). The reason for these trainees to share specific and seemed petty comments is due to their status of still outsiders to the system. Their point of view is actually purely theoretical and any deviation is seen as a matter of good will to be solved. So, for them bad practices are symptoms of certain deficit in the institution – lack of administrative capacity or indifference of some individuals. Deviations from the standards in organization and behavior in the workplace were of critical analysis and also by civil servants received training in academic programs on this matter.

- **What is the role of the leaders in terms of improvement of administrative service and modernization of public sector?**

Interpretation of cases in the context of leadership (according to concept of Burns) meets great interest and lively discussions. Understanding of leadership as a way of doing things is a good theoretical basis for reconsidering the number of practices. One of many illustrations of possible positive action is the case of the mayor in Kavarna. This is a particularly striking example in recent years in Bulgaria, which illustrates the potential of public authority to lead change and to lead to sustainability of results.

The parameters of this case are as follows:

This is one of the regions in Bulgaria, which is regarded as backward and without much potential for development. However, the local authorities have achieved massive change. In 2003 collected local taxes were about 450 thousand Bulgarian leva, and for 2006 year they raised up to 4 million leva. Unemployment was 22 percent and by the end of the first mandate of Kavarna's mayor it dropped to 6 percent. This example concerns the topic of this paper as key answer. It says that if there is will, it would be possible to find way to integrate the team towards achieving its goals. Amazing results can be fulfilled when it all starts with a dream and with someone who can point the community to the goals of its development and then have the will to put the necessary organization and perseverance into place. The 'carrier rocket' of Kavarna is called "rock music". But it wasn't exactly the rock music which made Kavarna an example of good governance. It was the management of the municipality, their vision and organization, which succeeded in linking their town with rock music and thus brought out the potential of their region.

Based on the conclusions by now, it is possible to agree that the new model of public service would mean well prepared, well trained, but mostly concerned civil servants. Indeed,

improving communication of public administration with the audience increases its potential for achieving results.

Creating this type of social integrity of the structures of public administration is a challenge that can be resolved only by truly dedicated to their profession staff. Achievements of this scale are possible when the new generations of students in Public Administration are not simply taken for short internships. They must be accepted as part of the reproduction of the administrative culture of the institutions. Until the establishment of standards for conducting training courses and special policies of the institutions of state administration for recruitment of personnel, the active entity for the connection of "education" with "practice" in fact remain academic units.