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A shared purpose? Public administration education on the island of Ireland

¿Un objetivo común? La formación en administración pública en la isla de Irlanda

Connaughton, Bernadette

University of Limerick. Department of Politics and Public Administration (Irlanda – Ireland)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6362-5110>

Bernadette.Connaughton@ul.ie

NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

Bernadette Connaughton is an Associate Professor in Public Administration at the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick. Her main research interests include politico-administrative relations, Ireland's relationship with the EU, and environmental governance. She has published on those areas and with particular attention to Irish public administration in authored, co-authored, and edited books, and journals.

O'Connor, Karl

Ulster University. Centre for Public Administration (Reino Unido – United Kingdom)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5098-5141>

k.oconnor@ulster.ac.uk

NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

Karl O'Connor is Research Director and Professor of Public Administration at the Centre for Public Administration, Ulster University. His main research interests include the role of civil servants in managing conflict and implementing peace processes. He has written on representative bureaucracy theory and policy implementation in the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe. He has a particular interest in Q Methodology.

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The environment in which public administrators work on the island of Ireland is increasingly confronted by demographic profiles, cross-cutting policy complexity, and so-called 'perma-crisis'. We argue that the relevance of Public Administration (PA) education is more pertinent than ever for practitioners, and query how, and to what extent, the higher education settings of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Ireland) have responded with convergent or divergent education and training offerings in higher education institutions and bodies. In Northern Ireland the durability of graduate PA education is reflected in a strong practitioner-academic nexus. In Ireland, PA education has largely developed in interdisciplinary programmes, often led from Political Science departments, and the Institute of Public Administration (Dublin), the main executive education provider to the civil and public service. **Methodology:** Using secondary sources, the article takes a diachronic approach to explore the development of public administration education in both jurisdictions. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are informed by similar administrative

traditions, but their experience is conditioned by different historical developments in public administration.

Results: The evolution of Public Administration as an academic study and the delivery of education/training programmes is systematically discussed in three distinct phases—origins, partition and separate jurisdictions, modernisation and professionalisation. Further, the article presents an overview of the major drivers, disciplinary features and curriculum design in programmes, North and South, and considers to what extent these programmes are convergent. **Conclusion:** We identify the primary challenges facing Public Administration and then suggest several initiatives that could be put in place to enhance the quality of education on the island of Ireland.

KEYWORDS

Ireland; Northern Ireland; Public Administration; education; practitioner.

RESUMEN

Objetivos: el entorno en el que trabajan los administradores públicos en la isla de Irlanda se enfrenta cada vez más a perfiles demográficos, a la complejidad de las políticas transversales y a la denominada «crisis permanente». Defendemos que la relevancia de la formación en Administración Pública (AP) es más pertinente que nunca para los profesionales, y nos preguntamos cómo y en qué medida los entornos de educación superior de Irlanda del Norte y la República de Irlanda (Irlanda) han respondido con ofertas de educación y formación convergentes o divergentes en las instituciones y organismos de educación superior. En Irlanda del Norte, la durabilidad de la educación de posgrado en AP se refleja en un fuerte vínculo entre los profesionales y el mundo académico. En Irlanda, la educación en AP se ha desarrollado en gran medida en programas interdisciplinarios, a menudo dirigidos por los departamentos de Ciencias Políticas y el Instituto de Administración Pública (Dublín), el principal proveedor de educación ejecutiva para la función pública y los servicios públicos. **Metodología:** utilizando fuentes secundarias, el artículo adopta un enfoque diacrónico para explorar el desarrollo de la educación en administración pública en ambas jurisdicciones. Irlanda del Norte y la República de Irlanda comparten tradiciones administrativas similares, pero su experiencia está condicionada por diferentes desarrollos históricos en la administración pública. **Resultados:** la evolución de la administración pública como estudio académico y la impartición de programas de educación/formación se analiza de forma sistemática en tres fases distintas: orígenes, partición y jurisdicciones separadas, modernización y profesionalización. Además, el artículo presenta una visión general de los principales impulsores, las características disciplinarias y el diseño curricular de los programas, tanto en el norte como en el sur, y considera en qué medida estos programas son convergentes. **Conclusiones:** identificamos los principales retos a los que se enfrenta la administración pública y, a continuación, sugerimos varias iniciativas que podrían ponerse en marcha para mejorar la calidad de la educación en la isla de Irlanda.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Irlanda; Irlanda del Norte; Administración pública; educación; profesional.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The environment in which public administrators work on the island of Ireland is increasingly confronted by demographic profiles, cross-cutting policy complexity, and so-called 'perma-crisis'. We argue that the relevance of public administration education is more pertinent than ever for practitioners. To this end we pose the question: How, and to what extent, have the higher education settings of Northern Ireland and the Republic

of Ireland (Ireland) responded with Public Administration programme offerings, and are they convergent or divergent? To address this, we ask: how have Public Administration education and training programmes developed over time on the island of Ireland? In Northern Ireland the durability of graduate PA education is reflected in a strong practitioner-academic nexus. In Ireland, PA education has largely developed in interdisciplinary programmes, often led from Political Science departments, and the Institute of Public Administration (Dublin), as the main executive education provider to the civil and public service. Akin to the UK (Elliott *et al.*, 2024) the teaching of public administration across both jurisdictions in Ireland could be described as, at best, multifaceted or fragmented. In this article we emphasise the importance of public administration education for achieving better governance outcomes, as espoused by governments in both jurisdictions.

The article is organised as follows. The first section presents a discussion on the seminal features of Public Administration as a field of study and the challenges in delivering relevant education offerings to its practitioner base. We then proceed to trace the development of Public Administration education in both Ireland and Northern Ireland whereby both jurisdictions remain influenced by the Westminster-Whitehall model. Taking a diachronic approach we explore three distinct phases: the impacts of the partition of the island, attempts towards modernisation of economy and society, and drives towards professionalisation to address socio-demographic and economic developments. We conclude with an appraisal of the state of the field of Public Administration on the island of Ireland.

2. WHAT IS PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

An important feature of Public Administration (PA) as a field of study is that it both *informs* and is also *informed* by practitioner activities and scholarship (Marini, 1971; Pollitt, 2010; Bouckaert & Jann, 2020). In the USA and parts of Europe, its emergence as a profession and academic specialism date from the nineteenth-century ideas and concepts influencing the reform of government business and its personnel. This was interpreted in Woodrow Wilson's seminal essay 'The Study of Administration' (Wilson, 1887) as discovering what the appropriate functions of government are, and how to efficiently execute them. In the early decades of the twentieth century the consolidation of public administration, both in theory and practice, became more pronounced in a traditional bureaucratic model, particularly after World War II and the expansion of the welfare state in Europe. The development of the profession is also characterised by a progressive entrenchment of democratic institutions and an awareness that solving societal problems requires a strong and stable government apparatus, frames of reference, commitment to public ethos, and expertise. Civil and public servants therefore need to demonstrate a detailed understanding of government and contribute to its effective operation in policy and procedure. The nature and quality of their public service contributions are, in turn, influenced by the nature and quality of their education system (Randma-Liiv & Connaughton, 2005, p. 348).

In terms of PA education, the academic commentary reminds us that it is difficult to identify a unified model or preordained curriculum (Hustedt *et al.*, 2020; Hajnal, 2014; Randma-Liiv & Connaughton, 2005). In part this reflects how studying public administration is traditionally focussed on understanding the national administrative system which motivates the observation that it is an 'inward looking' field (Verheijen & Connaughton, 2003). In a national context, PA is generally understood as supporting practice by delivering graduates who are deemed employable in national and sub-national administrations, implying that this requires transferring PA knowledge that is of necessity local (Brans & Coenen, 2016). Further, as 'a subject in search of a discipline' (Waldo, 1968), PA's identity as one supported by other disciplines affects how the academic community within Europe and beyond perceives and defines its caucus in education and teaching (Brans & Coenen, 2016; Verheijen & Connaughton, 2003). In Continental traditions the *Rechtsstaat* principles and public law are traditionally the main area for Public Administration analysis and teaching in the university setting. Apart from Germany and Hungary, the geographical scope of the legalistic tradition continued to shrink in the 2000s, whereas attention to political science and managerial components has grown (Hajnal, 2014). Countries that link public administration to government practice, like the UK and Ireland, are more influenced by political science, although, as argued, Public Administration is much more than that (Hustedt *et al.*, 2020).

Temporal dimensions and public administration reform have also shaped PA curricula and research. The impact of public management reform, albeit implemented asymmetrically, and contributions from management theory and economics have influenced the education field. For example, as public management became a central concern to research and practice in the UK, PA migrated from Political Science departments to the business schools in higher education institutions (Pollitt, 2016). As public administration teaching and research

departments at UK universities were subsumed into business schools, a private sector ethos and norms were embedded into education offerings. Apart from a recent initiative at King's College, London, the majority of civil service education in the UK is to date provided by the market, a market that generally consists of former civil and public servants rather than public administration researchers and academics.¹ The 'hollowing-out' of the state, and the emergence of network governance and its activities in the shadow of hierarchy, have also prompted studies on how to join up government and coordinate the complex activities of stakeholders participating in the delivery of public services. The Minnowbrook Conferences in the United States have, for example, been an important forum for debating the future of PA (Bouckaert, 2008). The first Minnowbrook Conference held in 1968 is credited with innovating PA in the USA and shifting from an emphasis on efficiency to stressing the democratic character of public administration and concerns with social equity (Frederickson, 1971).

A challenge for twenty-first-century public administration is providing the policy relevant education and fostering the skills and ability to operate in an environment marked by sudden transition, increasing complexity and considerable ambiguity. Further, the increasing internationalisation and Europeanisation of governance is remodelling the context in which public administration operates (Carstensen *et al.*, 2023; Bouckaert & Jann, 2020). Senior level officials must be equipped with the knowledge and competences to navigate global affairs, engage in international fora, and craft effective policies (van der Walldt, 2024). Arguably, the response from the PA education field is rather fragmented, although the number of comparative and European/international courses has increased (Brans & Coenen, 2016). A trend in the past two decades is increasing specialisation in universities (Bogason & Brans, 2008) and the range of 'specialised fields' for research, training and teaching PA, such as 'policy, management, and institutions' (Bouckaert, 2008). The number of specialised programmes is most evident at the master's level, reflecting a combination of inter/cross disciplinary programmes and specialisms, e.g. applied policing, social policy, environmental or health management. To some extent these advancements align with current patterns in open recruitment to public service, professionalisation, and moves from career systems towards features of a position system. This is reflected in structured efforts to appoint civil and public servants with the appropriate competences and leadership skills. Competency based approaches focus on the candidate demonstrating the skills, behaviours, and capabilities aimed to match the competencies demanded by the organisation to achieve its aims and objectives (Vidè *et al.*, 2025).

It is against this backdrop we reflect on the development of public administration across the island of Ireland. Ireland is a relevant case to investigate as it represents two jurisdictions derived from similar traditions but characterised by different institutional trajectories and governance challenges which have implications for the interpretation and delivery of public administration education and civil service training. To proceed, we briefly outline the development of the university sector and professional institutes and explore how Public Administration education emerged on the island. The discussion is framed chronologically through identifying three discrete phases to illustrate public administration education developments: Partition, Modernisation, and Professionalisation. We pay attention to how the evolution of education and training programmes on the island are aligned with disciplinary approaches, public sector reform, trends towards specialised programmes to deliver specific skills and competencies, and relationships between academia and practitioners. This is set against the unique political-administrative and historical contexts of Northern Ireland, as a divided, post-conflict society, and the Republic of Ireland which has undergone significant demographic, economic and social transformation in recent decades. We then reflect on the state of the art of public administration professional education today and whether it converges or diverges between the jurisdictions, followed by suggestions on how existing Public Administration education can be enhanced to improve public service outcomes.

3. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND: ORIGINS AND CONSOLIDATION

3.1. Origins

The university sector in Ireland originates from the sixteenth century when Trinity College Dublin received its Royal Charter in 1591 (Coolahan, 1981). It was established as a distinctly Protestant institution and

¹ In January 2026 the UK government announced a new 'school of government' will be established to train civil servants in skills including AI, marking a potential return to a dedicated institution for Whitehall training and a push to cut spending on contractors.

even after legal permissions were granted to Catholics, the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland prohibited them from studying there until the ban was finally lifted in 1970. The Queen's College Act, 1845 established three new educational institutions or 'Queen's Colleges' in Belfast, Cork and Galway. This was followed by the Catholic University of Ireland founded in 1851, whose first rector appointed was John Henry Newman. This became recognised as University College Dublin in the aftermath of the University Education (Ireland) Act, 1879. The higher education sphere further enhanced its independence when the Irish Universities Act was passed in 1908. It endowed the university senate to recognise programmes of study in other institutions for the purpose of degree awards (Clancy, 2015). This provided for the Queen's University of Belfast and the National University of Ireland (NUI), the latter becoming a loosely federated structure of universities with its seat in Dublin and constituent colleges initially instituted in Dublin, Cork and Galway.

3.2. Partition and separate jurisdictions

In 1921 the island of Ireland was partitioned into two separate jurisdictions: The Irish Free State (IFS)² and Northern Ireland (NI). Following the Anglo-Irish Treaty reached in 1921, twenty-six counties within an Irish Free State were established in 1922. The IFS constituted a dominion of the British Empire led by the Cumann na Gaedhael party (pro-treaty). The stability of a fledgling Irish democracy in the aftermath of revolution and civil war is partially attributed to the new government's retention of the state structures, constitutional values, and a bureaucratically entrenched civil service. Stability was also upheld in the religious composition of the top official strata who immediately transferred to the new state in 1922 and were quite evenly divided into Catholic and Protestant Irish, with a slight majority of Catholics (McBride, 1991; Lee, 1989). Despite this, a 'purge' of ranks in the senior echelons has also been observed where 'new men were brought rapidly to the fore' through promotions (Maguire, 2024, p. 227). Overall, the identity of this service was moulded in the British tradition with indigenous recalibrations of British institutional features, e.g., a Civil Service Commission for recruitment (Fanning, 2007, p. 10). In Northern Ireland a new civil service was established, initially located in the centre of Belfast before moving to Stormont, to the east of the city. From its inception in 1921, the service was regarded as a 'unique example of a regional civil service' in the UK (Carmichael, 2002a, p. 981). The service dealt, and still deals with, 'transferred' matters. Such matters have changed from the initial Government of Ireland Act, 1920, to the more recent transfer of justice powers following the agreement at Hillsborough in 2010. The regional, devolved government deals with all but 'excepted matters', those that cannot be legislated for in Northern Ireland, and 'reserved matters', those where the Assembly/Parliament can make laws, but only with the consent of the Secretary of State.

The administrative staff in the Irish Free State, were mainly British trained Irish nationals, with finance officials particularly attached to the orthodoxies of British administration and treasury control (Chambers, 2014). This did not change with the ascendancy of the Fianna Fáil party (anti-treaty) to power in 1932 as civil servants did 'not cut the coat of policy according to the political cloth of their new masters' (Fanning, 1978, p. 631). It is difficult to discern what role a 'Public Administration' curriculum played in the education and training of these civil servants. The onset of Public Administration as a disciplinary field of studies was circa 1928 at University College Dublin and at University College Cork from the 1950s, whereby it was offered as an option for students studying in undergraduate Arts and Commerce degrees. Following this a Diploma of Public Administration was introduced by Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in 1941 and at UCD in 1942 (Millar, 1999). Such programmes were aimed at practicing civil servants as opposed to students. In general, the proportion of students in higher education during this period was small and the Catholic Church played a significant role in the education sector and across all classes. This was evidenced by the 'Christian Brothers' educational background of many civil servants. It was not unusual for individuals to enter the public service in their teens and slowly rise through the service ranks, and continuity of personnel was mirrored by continuity of procedure (Fanning, 2007, p. 14). The Administrative Officer grade, established in 1915 to attract the (few) university graduates, was retained in the IFS and it marked the highest grade that an entrant could join the service.

The most significant change in Public Administration education offerings during this period is the founding of the Institute of Public Administration (IPA). The IPA has been described as the Irish public sector 'management development agency' (Millar, 1999, p. 217) and its mission/goal is to deliver education, training

² Known as Ireland following the publication of Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937. With the introduction of the Republic of Ireland Act 1948, the state was recognised as the Republic of Ireland in 1949. In this article, we refer to Ireland.

and research services to the Irish civil and public service. It was founded in 1957 by a group of senior civil servants who perceived the need for professionalisation, improving standards and policy analysis among practitioners. In 1960, the Department of Finance instructed that Irish departments should assume corporate membership of the Institute, and this appears to have paved the way for the IPA's integration into civil and public service education and training. Its first programme offering was a Diploma in Public Administration, later replaced in 1963 by a degree pathway. Today, University College, Dublin (UCD) accredits many of the IPA education programmes. Preceding the IPA's establishment, its founding members convened a forum for publishing papers read to a discussion group within the public service. This was the forerunner of the Institute's journal, *Administration*, which clearly advocated that the contributions were concerned 'not with ends, which is politics, but with means, which is administration. We are not concerned with why a service is provided, but with *how* it is provided' (Barrington cited in Fanning, 2008, p. 193). This is an interesting insight into the mindset of the incumbent senior civil servants in Ireland. It also chimes with developments in PA as a field of study in this period, namely the formal recognition of the academic sphere of PA and applications of bureaucratic and scientific management principles to the public sector, while supporting an administrative system that is theoretically 'separate' from politics.

The continuity demonstrated in Dublin was not reflected in Northern Ireland and for the first time a devolved parliament was established in the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Civil Service was set up under the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and was composed of seven departments. It is somewhat ironic that Northern Ireland as the 'fledgling statlet' remaining part of the United Kingdom required the creation of a new administrative apparatus (Collins *et al.*, 2007, p. 18). Catholic participation was influenced by strict rules enforced by nationalist associations, particularly in sport, and the advice of leading Catholic clergy against working in the new civil service where they may be viewed as unionist collaborators or with suspicion (Shea, 1981, p. 113). Those Protestants who felt excluded, or feared exclusion, from the newly created Irish Free State requested a transfer from the Dublin service to the new Northern Ireland Civil Service. These officials became known as 'Existing Irish Officers' and a Civil Service Committee was set up to provide oversight for the changeover of staff, for which a seven-year transition period was granted (Donnelly, 1984). This enabled the Northern Ireland government to retain experience and trained officials. In these early years, the NI civil service leadership, and indeed aspiring leadership, had been educated in Trinity College, Dublin.

The key 'regime-building' figure during this period was Sir James Craig, the leader of the Unionist Party. Craig was appointed as Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, and he recognised the importance of locking in control of the administrative machinery for unionists (Maguire, 2024). Civil service recruitment mechanisms became overseen by Unionist politicians who served on senior appointments boards, and this resulted in the service becoming a 'tool of the Unionist state' as opposed to upholding values of impartiality and discrimination was rife (Adshead & Tonge, 2009, p. 55). The British government did not intervene in what was regarded as sectarian methods of recruitment malpractice and Catholics were therefore often excluded from senior official positions. An exception is Andrew Bonaparte-Wyse, the only Catholic for forty-eight years to rise to the position of permanent secretary, where he served in the Department of Education between 1927 and 1939. In contrast, Catholic participation in UK civil service departments was far higher than in Northern Ireland (Carmichael, 2002b). Patrick Shea (1981, p. 178), in his memoir, claims the absence of Catholic representation was due to political decision-making rather than civil service decision-making as, in this period, the minister would be presented with a list and chose their favoured candidate for promotion to assistant secretary. During this period of upheaval, civil servants continued the Westminster tradition of public administration, be that in Dublin as part of the IFS, or in Belfast, as part of the newly created regional government in Northern Ireland.

3.3. Modernisation

In 1968 as the Minnowbrook delegates challenged the accepted orthodoxy of neutrality and debated the merits of social equity in public administration, events were unfolding in Northern Ireland that mark the beginning of 'The Troubles'³. Ironically, the catalyst was a civil rights protest held in Derry/Londonderry on 5th October. This was motivated by persistent discrimination against Catholics in the Northern Irish state and

³ 'The Troubles' generally refers to a period of political and violent conflict in Northern Ireland between unionists/loyalists who were mainly Protestant and nationalists/republicans who were mainly Catholic. It covers the years between 1968 and the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

the inequitable delivery of public services, particularly in housing and electoral gerrymandering. Ironically this was happening at a time when communication was improving between the political leadership on either side of the partitioned island.

In Ireland, the 1960s marked the advent of modernisation in Irish state planning, socio-economic development and increased multilateral diplomacy. From the late 1950s a new generation of civil servants and politicians began to raise questions about civil service culture and policy failures, including concerns about whether the civil service was attracting suitably qualified officials. The IPA's policy unit noted in 1971 that only five of the serving ninety-nine senior civil servants had been appointed in 1968-1969 (Fanning, 2008). This highlighted concerns that revitalised economic conditions were impacting top-level recruitment, and the civil service had not fostered methods to attract university graduates. It also emphasised that the top official levels in the Irish civil service largely remained built on the foundations of clerical recruitment (Fanning, 2008, p. 202). This is suggestive of a civil service that was living in the past despite the publication of the Devlin Report⁴ in 1969 that proposed a series of structural changes to facilitate the senior civil service's focus on policy formulation expertise and planning. Yet, on the eve of EU membership in 1973, Irish civil and public servants maintained a conservative ethos, had not engaged with reform, and had very little experience of internationalisation (Connaughton, 2015, p. 206).

Although the UK also entered the EU in 1973 the most significant change for civil servants in Northern Ireland was the proroguing of the Stormont parliament in 1972. Direct rule resulted in NI civil servants becoming directly responsible to ministers based in Westminster rather than locally elected politicians in Northern Ireland – a situation that was to last until the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Although the eruption of violence in Northern Ireland attracted significant international attention, the role and experience of its civil service during this period was under reported, even though senior civil servants were thrust to the forefront of policy making (Carmichael, 2002a). An important change was the creation of a Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and 'temporary' administrative arrangements involved the appointment of a Secretary of State and up to four junior ministers (Rouse & O'Connor, 2021). Much of the policy role during this period was in emulating reforms taking place in England (with territorial specificity), but only if they were required. For example, although this period brought more approximation with developments in the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland escaped many of the New Public Management experiments in England. Prior to direct rule a civil service training college, or institution like the IPA in Dublin, had not been established and many civil servants were trained at the National Civil Service Training College at Sunningdale in England.

In Ireland, the system was observed by civil servants who wanted reform (Barrington, 1982) and who were frustrated by beliefs held by members of the political and administrative class that the functioning of an old and well-tried machine was the best way to get results (McCarthy, 2005). This perceived malaise contrasted with expansions in general education provision, starting with the announcement of plans for free second-level education in 1966. Between the 1970s and 1990s the higher education sector expanded considerably in Ireland with the establishment of nine regional technical colleges. The government also established two national institutions of higher education, in Dublin and Limerick, as alternative higher education institutes. Their curriculum was set down by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) introduced in 1971. It recommended that the Institutes concentrate on 'technical education coupled with a significant admixture of the humanities' (Fleming, 2012, p. 126). This also nurtured a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary education and relationships with industry. The 1970s witnessed a revival in Public Administration education in the universities that at this time was an option for Commerce students in Cork and Dublin. In 1973, University College Dublin (UCD) offered a part-time Master of Public Administration and Trinity College Dublin (TCD) had a Bachelor of Science in Public Administration (abolished in 1986) (Millar, 1999).

In 1978 the National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) Limerick introduced a Bachelor of Arts in Public Administration as a multidisciplinary degree programme, incorporating politics, sociology, management theory, law and economics. From 1986 to 1998 it was the only full-time undergraduate degree programme in the university sector (Connaughton, 2008) but it is argued that its creation was due to 'economic rather than academic considerations' (Fleming, 2012, p. 141) and enhancing general employability. The period coincides with a marked growth in the Irish senior civil service that almost quadrupled between 1956-1957 and 1982, with a 148% increase in deputy secretaries and higher (Barrington, 1982, p. 98). But by the late 1980s the

⁴ The Devlin Report was published in 1969 by the Public Service Organisation Review Group (PSORG) that was chaired by Liam St. John Devlin and recommended a series of reforms for the Irish civil service.

dire nature of Ireland's public finances led to retrenchment, including the disbandment of the Department of Public Service in 1987 and a public sector employment embargo to frustrate the public service aspirations of graduates. With economic recovery and a reforming emphasis on delivering better government, a renewed supply of PA education programmes to meet demands from both graduates and the sector is discernible from the late 1990s. In 1998 the National University of Ireland, Galway introduced a BA in Public and Social Policy⁵, while a Bachelor of Science in Government and a master's programme in Government and Public Policy were introduced in University College Cork in 1999⁶. Despite this, the recruitment policy of the Irish civil service remained largely based on second level educational attainment and success in the generalist entrance examination. Public Administration graduates had no leverage against other disciplines when it came to competing for public service positions.

In Northern Ireland, the University of Ulster came into being in 1984 following a merger between the New University of Ulster and the Ulster Polytechnic. The former polytechnical college offered a part-time BA in Public Sector Studies which fulfilled in-service training for practitioners already serving in the public sector (Knox, 2018). It was composed of an interdisciplinary curriculum including public finance, law, statistics and public administration. In contrast, Queen's University Belfast provided full-time degree programmes oriented towards students exiting second level education. As the 1980s progressed, the proximity between academic and practitioner communities enabled the University of Ulster to develop part-time postgraduate programmes (Knox, 2018). An illustration of this is a MSc in Policy Analysis that was designed in collaboration with senior officials for prospective public service leaders in the fields of civil service, health, local government, policy and housing, and delivered in block teaching units (Erridge & Connolly, 1986; Knox, 2018). What is interesting is that new third level Public Administration programmes on the island were led by new regional universities, and universities outside Dublin. A difference between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is the role played by public sector employers who were actively involved in co-designing the University of Ulster programme.

3.4. Professionalisation

The late 1990s are a turning point in the relations between the jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and Ireland. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998 began the process of ending the violent conflict between both communities in Northern Ireland and was supported by 71% and 94% of the population of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland respectively.

Across Ireland, an injection of new thinking in the public service was apparent from the mid-1990s. The acceleration in economic and social development and deepening European integration strained the capacity of the public service in the Republic of Ireland and the challenges of managing the peace posed similar strains in Northern Ireland. It was also acknowledged that while the public administration performed well on some indicators, it could benefit from adopting aspects of corporate governance models to operate more effectively amid increasing public expectations of services (MacCarthaigh, 2017). The national investment in education since the 1970s, assisted by EU funding, had resulted in a more educated workforce and this also applied to the civil and public service (Callanan, 2007). The political and administrative environment had radically altered and upskilling the wider public service was now a political imperative to address challenges in cross-cutting policy issues, value for money, and deficiencies in strategic planning. In the Irish education system several legislative reforms were introduced from the late 1990s to integrate quality assurance systems into the university system. These reforms were consistent with the Bologna Process in Europe and aligned with best international practice. For example, a national framework of qualifications (NQF) was introduced in 2003 and complemented with the promotion of learning outcomes for taught programmes. Its implementation was the responsibility of several agencies under the Department of Education which merged into the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2012. Although not exclusively, the efforts to reshape education and training outcomes are influenced by a European skills agenda and, currently, the Future of European Competitiveness (Draghi, 2024).

In the mid-1990s the development of grade-based competency-based frameworks in the Irish civil service was introduced. The replacement of the Civil Service Commission with a Public Appointments Service

⁵ Revised to a BA Government (Politics, Economics and Law).

⁶ Now offered as a BA Government and Political Science.

(PAS) in 2004 embedded this methodology as profiles were employed in recruitment processes. A competency-based approach is also applied in the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC) procedures that are used for Assistant Secretary and Secretary General competitions. Arguably, the biggest shake-up of the generalist recruitment system came with Ireland's seismic fiscal crisis which erupted in 2008. At the end of 2010 Ireland temporarily lost its economic sovereignty as it availed of a bailout from the European Union and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The road back to 'fixing the country' was marked by a renewed emphasis on public sector reform and a new Department of Public Expenditure and Reform came into being in 2011 to guide this (MacCarthaigh, 2017). Reforms included the launch of the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012, reform of TLAC composition and procedures, moves to extending open competition at senior levels, and attracting specialist skills to the service to build capacity (Connaughton & Devane, 2023). In addition to technical and governance reforms for transformation and efficiency, a severe cutback management approach ensued that saw Irish public service numbers reduce from 320,000 in 2008 to 292,000 in 2012 (Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 2026).

In Northern Ireland, developments in public administration were impacted by the ushering in of a unique set of political and administrative structures that set it apart from governance arrangements in the UK and Ireland. While power is shared between political parties following the d'Hondt system, the civil service departments are designed to support the political level as separate legal entities (Gray & O'Connor, 2024). This means that each permanent secretary, while accountable to the Assembly, works for one minister. Not even the Head of the Civil Service or the First or Deputy First Minister can direct another permanent secretary. Initiatives that are not their priority rarely take precedence, including the education of civil servants. Compounding this is the political instability that has characterised NI governance. Northern Ireland has been without a government for more than 40% of the time since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was reached in 1998. Most recently, between January 2017 and January 2020, there were no ministers in charge. Due to a change in the rules of power-sharing agreed at St Andrews, permanent secretaries were to assume the role of ministers but could not instigate new policy. Intensifying matters, the lack of a Programme for Government from 2022 to February 2025 meant that permanent secretaries were working within a very constrained policy environment, meaning they had to work to mitigate the effects of unsuitable policies rather than change the policies to more effectively target the policy problem. In Northern Ireland, the governing parties generally do not share perspectives on the nature of policy interventions, the role of the state, social policies or national identities. Political agreement is difficult to ascertain, making the policy environment difficult, and different, for Northern Ireland civil servants.

Like Ireland, the NICS introduced competency frameworks to inform recruitment, promotion and performance (Knox, 2018). Civil service numbers in NI have, however, dramatically decreased over time, illustrated by the decline from 31,900 in 2013 to 22,818 in 2023 (Gray & O'Connor, 2024, p. 93). Unlike budgets in Ireland, financial budgets were cut to their lowest levels since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998), while at the same time facing the biggest challenges since devolution was restored in 1998: Brexit, the re-establishment of power-sharing, the COVID-19 pandemic, administrative rationalisation and the introduction of community planning.

From the 2000s a growth in Public Administration education is observable as postgraduate programme offerings expanded across all disciplines in third level institutions in Ireland. In 2003 the University of Limerick introduced a MA in Public Administration (MPA) for full-time and part-time students. Its curriculum placed a strong emphasis on governance and public policy as opposed to public management (Connaughton, 2008). The embargo on civil and public service recruitment from 2009 and cuts in public sector training budgets led to the retirement of this programme in 2012. It was relaunched in 2018 as an interdisciplinary programme underpinned by public administration, law, organisational behaviour, and economics. An accompanying, though stand-alone programme, the Graduate Certificate in Public Administration and Law (online) was launched in 2022 to diversify the flexible, professional programmes on offer to existing or potential public service employees. As the main provider of civil service training the IPA also expanded their suite of programmes during the 2000s. This ranged from certificates and diplomas in civil service and state agency studies to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in public management, the latter with specialist disciplinary streams.

The post-2008 reforms and a greater emphasis on leadership skills for a Senior Public Service (SPS) also cemented the IPA's role in executive education as it assumed a role in delivering senior leadership

programmes. Such programmes are specifically directed to the principal officer level and above. Its programmes are accredited by the National University of Ireland (NUI), and the IPA is a recognised college of University College Dublin.

In Northern Ireland, public service education in the early 1970s was provided by Ulster University's part time programme: BA in Public Sector Studies, out of which an MSc in Policy Analysis emerged in 1985. A unique aspect of the programme involved employers sitting on examination panels, a practice that continues today on the Ulster MPA programme. Following the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement funding was made available, often via Atlantic Philanthropies, to provide education opportunities to small cohorts of senior civil servants at the Kennedy School for Government at Harvard. Student numbers on the MSc Policy Analysis programme remained healthy until the late 2000s, when the course was redesigned again in close collaboration with the civil service. This resulted in the 2014, Master of Public Administration programme, co-designed to meet the needs of a more educated workforce.

From the phased discussion of how public administration education has developed on the island of Ireland we extract several features. Table 1 summarises how these features relate to NI/Ireland and inform the development and delivery of public administration education –convergent or divergent.

TABLE 1. EXPLANATORY CHARACTERISTICS OF PA EDUCATION

Characteristic	Northern Ireland	Ireland	Explanation
Dominant discipline	Political Science	Political Science	Convergent
Target group	Practitioners. Civil and public servants	Mixed. Third level students and practitioners	Divergent
Socio-economic environment	Divided/conflicted society	Demographic growth and socio-economic change	Divergent
Political and institutional environment	Power-sharing/GFA	Coalition government	Divergent
Impact of public sector reform	Declining public sector numbers	Expansion of public sector numbers	Divergent
Educational providers in PA education	University sector	University sector and Institute of Public Administration	Mixed
Programme specialisation	Public Administration and Social and Public Policy	Public Administration (interdisciplinary) and Public Policy	Mixed

Source: Author's own elaboration.

In the next section we consider the state of the field of public administration professional education today and the convergence/divergence between the jurisdictions. We then offer suggestions for enhancing current public administration education to assist in optimising public service outcomes.

4. THE STATE OF THE FIELD: PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

4.1. Issues arising for developing Public Administration

In the UK public administration teaching is described as at best multifaceted or fragmented (Elliott *et al.*, 2023; 2024), and this remark could also apply to Public Administration in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. Research in the field of public administration is lagging in comparison to our European colleagues due to a lack of academics in the field. Also, the subject lacks a learned society, although both Queen's University, Belfast and Ulster University, in Northern Ireland are members, and at the time of writing, hold

leadership positions within the UK Association of Public Administration (UKAPA). Overall, Irish public administration lacks a representative voice of universities that teach and research PA or a body that facilitates shared best practice among public administration scholars. In general, this role is fulfilled by the Political Science Association of Ireland (PSAI) which has a standing specialist group in public policy. Further, there is no island of Ireland practitioner-academic forum for deliberation, discussion or exchange of ideas in public administration.

As we outlined above, Public Administration is a field of study that informs but is also informed by practitioner actions. However, there is currently no Master of Public Administration (MPA) programme supported and codesigned with the Irish civil service in the Republic of Ireland and only limited civil service education available for civil servants in Northern Ireland. In a unique endeavour, Ulster University's Business School and Atlantic Technological University (ATU) have developed a 'Leadership and Innovation in the Public Sector' MSc programme, under the Shared Island programme: a cross-border initiative of the Irish government. This two-year programme is aimed at educating public servants at the mid-management level (Grade 7/Assistant Principal). The programme consists of six taught modules, and a work based research project and has a strong public leadership focus. Officials from Northern Ireland and Ireland study together providing impetus for shared learning and exchange.

A primary focus in both jurisdictions is task-specific training, that is often expensive and provided by private sector firms such as the big four accountancy firms or specialist training organisations. The IPA has retained its role as the main provider of civil service and local government education and training in Ireland, although its first director, Dr Tom Barrington, was disappointed that the institute did not become a civil service training college along the lines of the elite French *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA) (Barrington, 1982). The IPA's sponsorship from the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation cements its position in training provision and its role supporting government to deliver the Senior Public Service (SPS) programme and strategies such as the *Public Service Transformation 2030 Strategy*. Reflecting on the development of Public Administration on the island a key, albeit inadvertent, strength of the former Ulster teaching programme as outlined by Knox (2018), was the multi-profession (public service) focus. Police officers, civil servants, health officials and NGO leaders were educated together, creating lifelong networks. Education in Northern Ireland is now largely civil servant focused, with health officials and civil servants completing their taught work-based (dissertation) project module together. Overall, this chimes with interpretations of Public Administration in national contexts and the importance of supporting practice and knowledge that is of necessity local.

In terms of curriculum offerings, educational developments on the island reflect the diversity which chimes with observations that there is no pre-ordained curriculum for Public Administration programmes. Public and social policy courses are available at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University in Northern Ireland but there is only one MPA programme in Northern Ireland. In Ireland, the only MPA programme in the university sector is delivered by the University of Limerick. What can be observed is the introduction of several master's-level public policy programmes for which Political Science is the dominant influence. They range from a MSc in Public Policy (Dublin City University), a Graduate Certificate/Diploma/Master in Public Policy (University College Dublin), and a MA/Diploma in Public Policy (University of Galway). The three programmes, while not exclusively targeted at existing civil servants, stress leadership and building capacities to address challenges and complexities in public policy making. The MSc in Public Policy from DCU acknowledges that its module selection was completed in consultation with political and administrative actors.

It is also worth noting the content and structure of the two existing MPA programmes offered by regional universities on the island. The MPA programme in Northern Ireland contains seven equally weighted modules in core public administration, plus a practice based, taught, dissertation module. Modules include core disciplinary specialisms such as policy analysis, policy codesign and evaluation, strategic leadership and concepts of public administration. While this approach develops a deep understanding of the public administration discipline, its narrow focus may be inhibiting knowledge development in other areas critical to public administration. An alternative, interdisciplinary approach, is taken by the University of Limerick where students receive a grounding in the core theories of public administration, as well as economics, organisational behaviours and administrative law. A dissertation is completed for one third of the programme credits. No MPA programme on the island of Ireland is, however, nationally or internationally accredited by an external independent association. In a European context the main body for quality assurance and evaluation of public administration programmes is the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA). In a positive step,

the UK has, for the first time, recently developed a subject benchmark statement for public policy and administration education in the UK that serves as the guide for public administration course development.

Finally, the financial reality in both jurisdictions needs to be considered. Northern Ireland has a financial deficit with the rest of the UK and relies heavily on subventions from Westminster under the Barnett formula. As spending in England has been reduced, so too has spending in Northern Ireland. Civil servants are then suffering a dilemma in that they find it difficult, for example, to justify training Department of Justice officials as the numbers of police officers were being cut. While this trend is slowly reversing, following the election of the Labour government in 2024, public service financing throughout the UK remains under significant pressure. Conversely, Ireland has a budget surplus and is facing a different set of problems. Ireland's economy, while dependent on foreign direct investment, proved robust in regaining economic sovereignty in December 2013 in the aftermath of the EU-IMF bailout and against the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is reflected in public expenditure between the 2016 and 2026 annual budgets as reported by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (DPEIPSRD). Total expenditure was €68.1 billion in 2016 and rose to a projection of €132.1 billion in 2026. As a result, the civil and public service has expanded significantly with provision for 12,500 new staff across the public service in 2026 to meet demographic changes and demand for public services.⁷

4.2. Addressing the challenges in Public Administration

How then can the challenges in the status quo be rectified? We introduce some proposals for consideration under three headings: research, teaching and administration.

Research

Public administration education across the island has several strengths upon which to build. At present, there are two research centres for the study of Public Administration in Northern Ireland: at Queen's University, Belfast (since 2014) and Ulster University (since 2018). The IPA in Dublin is uniquely placed to lead on such an initiative as it has strong relationships with the Irish civil service and has contacts in most of the Irish and Northern Irish universities. The creation of an inter university, cross border learned society, led by the Institute for Public Administration could be the basis for academic research exchange and, funding permitting, commission small grant academic research into existing practitioner-defined policy problems across the island of Ireland.

Further, the IPA's scholarly journal *Administration* has endured, and it has a strong practitioner focus. The journal has recently been registered in Scopus. Consideration could be given to supporting university editorial of the journal, while remaining under the ownership of the IPA. University editorial would strengthen the academic ownership of content, while at the same time, IPA ownership would ensure the practitioner relevance of articles. Such an initiative would ensure the continued realisation of the Journal's founding principal aim: developing practitioner relevant studies that deal with the means through which political aims are realised (Barrington cited in Fanning, 2008, p. 193).

Teaching

In terms of teaching, public administration scholars in Ireland are not concentrated in one or two institutions or departments. As in the UK, they are spread across institutions and types of department. The development of a suite of programmes, funded by the civil service for civil servants, managed by the IPA, and delivered by established public administration scholars from three or four universities, could be the foundation for a multi-university, regionally balanced, civil service education initiative. Co-designed programmes, drawing on academic expertise from leading public administration scholars across a number of universities and senior practitioners, could provide a unique offering for civil servants. Given the small size of public administration scholarship in Ireland, such a pool would enable the IPA to draw on expertise from across the university sector, rather than one institution. While the IPA has a large suite of executive education and training

⁷ Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (DPEIPSRD) (2025). Public service numbers databank. https://databank.per.gov.ie/Public_Service_Numbers.aspx

programmes, accredited by the National University of Ireland (UCD), an academic-practitioner codesigned and delivered programme would complement, rather than replace, these programmes. Finally, the IPA and Irish universities engaged in public administration education could be informed by the UK subject benchmark statement on Public Administration from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 2024. This statement sets the standard for what constitutes a public administration course in the UK context. It outlines the nature of the study and the benchmark standards for academic performance in graduates. The details for public policy and Public Administration focus on the main teaching and learning approaches, assessment, and a presentation of the distinctive features of public policy and public administration degrees.⁸

Administering public service education

The IPA has no counterpart in Northern Ireland, but the Institute for Government in London could be a valuable partner. Both administrations face similar issues, and collaboration could be a tangible addendum to the British-Irish Council, enhancing civil service learning on an East-West and North-South basis.

Cross-country and cross-administration learning provide opportunities for policy learning, policy networks, and policy co-creation. Both Ulster University and the University of Limerick (the institutions with the longest tradition of teaching MPA programmes) are members of the European Master of Public Administration network (EMPA). This network provides an opportunity for civil servants/students to be educated with other European students as part of their MPA programme, thereby further developing their networks. Mobility is facilitated by the Erasmus programme in Ireland and there are also opportunities for cross country studies beyond Europe, including co-learning with practitioners from Asia. Ireland, with its reputation for quality education and its Westminster/Whitehall political-administrative system, could also be a hub for international civil service education. Developing bespoke Public Administration programmes with international partners could help in this regard. Finally, it would be remiss not to mention the impact of the UK exit from the European Union on relationships between North and South and East and West. Brexit has reduced the level of contact between civil servants in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and also changed the nature of this contact. Previously, permanent secretaries (NI) and secretaries general (RoI), and where appropriate their more junior counterparts, were in regular contact, attending bilateral meetings and developing informed responses to emergent issues. This contact went beyond the meetings required by the North-South Council, set up as part of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In the aftermath of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement a shared UCD-QUB North-South PhD programme was established to provide an advanced education to civil servants on both sides of the border. Civil servants from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland also attended residential courses at the Kennedy School at Harvard. A good example of this collaboration was the joint response to the foot and mouth outbreak in cattle during the early days of power-sharing. While such initiatives had stopped long before Brexit, they demonstrated the level of interaction between North and South. This stands in stark contrast to the absence of a joined-up (UK-Ireland/East-West and North-South) response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gray & O'Connor, 2024). Civil servants in Northern Ireland spent much of the year 2019 preparing for a no-deal Brexit. This focus necessitated reduced contact between civil servants on both sides of the border. Civil servants from Northern Ireland working on Brexit were designing standalone policies, rather than being part of EU negotiations with third countries. Further, the UK and Ireland had a long history of collaboration at the EU level, having joined together in 1973. Areas of previous collaboration were now areas to find agreement within a much larger socioeconomic environment. As Northern Ireland was a region, and Dublin a capital within the EU, the nature and regularity of the engagements substantially changed. The UK exit from the EU has therefore made informal and formal collaboration between a region of the UK and a national capital (Dublin) more difficult. Any joint education initiative of civil servants will need the implicit agreement of the national government in London.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, public administration education across the island of Ireland has a chequered history. While both systems maintain similar Whitehall features, the societies and political systems that each service

⁸ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2024). Public Policy and Public Administration. <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-public-policy-and-public-administration>

serves are inherently different. While there are opportunities for co-learning across the island, educating a public administration for a divided, conflicted society presents a set of unique challenges and solutions that need to be embedded into the administration curriculum. Civil servants in Ireland, working in a wealthy open economy and in a context of significant demographic change, have different challenges operationalising all of the functions of an independent state: foreign affairs, military, international trade, development etc. It operates in a more ethnically homogenous society than its counterparts in Northern Ireland. As Barrington (1982) reminds us: public administration involves the how, more than the why. As the societal and political context is different in both jurisdictions, the 'how' is also very different in both jurisdictions. This suggests a divergence rather than convergence in approaches to Public Administration education. There is much to be gained from developing shared education offerings involving civil servants from across the island of Ireland. Nonetheless, such are the societal challenges that face each administration, the primary objective should be to create closer links between researchers and practitioners to develop a suite of research and teaching programmes, designed to address the particularities in jurisdictional challenges.

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