

EDITORIAL

JOHN DIAMOND (*Edge Hill University*) and JOYCE LIDDLE
(*University of Nottingham*)

The need for constructive engagement or creative tension between academics and practitioners is a necessary element in framing any discussion on contemporary policy and practice issues within Public Administration. We are acutely aware of the need to avoid reinventing practices which have been well established or celebrating innovation which is current and “normal”. But in this Special Edition we want to suggest that it is possible to discern a number of trends which we cautiously describe as “innovative” and “distinctive”. In particular we wish to highlight both specific examples of innovative curriculum and professional development and developments in practitioner/researcher networks which indicate longer term change and innovation.

There have, in our judgement, been five developments over the past ten to fifteen years which suggest that we are in one of those phases of transition which signal a break with current practices and prefigure a process of more fundamental change. These developments are:

1. The impact of partnership and collaboration within and between the public and voluntary sector and their effects on management, organisation and administrative structures
2. The relationship between practitioners/managers and researchers and how these have informed developments in professional training, skills development and accreditation
3. The focus on addressing skills shortages in the public sector and the ways in which the newly formed sector skills councils have influenced programmes and post graduate (as well as undergraduate and foundation) degrees in higher education
4. The new significance afforded to the notion of the “reflective practitioner”
5. The emphasis on promoting both new styles of learning and curriculum design

In the papers which follow contributors to this edition of *Teaching Public Administration* address each of these developments. A key concern has been the cumulative impact of the changes to the public sector over the past 25 years. We

want to suggest that these changes have been primarily driven by two separate but related issues. First, there has been a focus on costs informed by a political desire to reduce budgets and to look for efficiencies within the public sector. This has resulted in new organisational structures and in an expectation that managers will drive down operating costs whilst maintaining, or even improving, the delivery of services. The second issue has been the stress on multi agency working with its focus on reducing professional (or boundary) disputes between different agencies and practitioners. Each of these separate developments has had an impact on the organisation and conceptual framework within which programmes on public administration have been designed and taught.

We would argue that over the first ten years of this change programme those teaching such programmes had themselves to reflect upon their organisational practice, and their identification with the particular subjects and disciplines which contribute to Public Administration programmes. In a real sense we have both experienced and observed some of the changes (and problems) which practitioners on our programmes were encountering on the front line. Over the last 15 years (and especially since the late 1990s and from 2000 onwards) we can see evidence - patchy and uneven though it is - of the higher education sector engaging the "real and lived" experience of those who attend programmes in higher education. In particular we can discern the following as evidence of these changes which suggest that they are not temporary or a "fad":

1. The creation of Childrens' Trusts to lead on the new Childrens' Agenda
2. The impact of Regeneration Partnerships on both localities and practitioners
3. The engagement by professional accrediting bodies in the design, development and approval of specific programmes
4. The imposition of agendas which stress accountability, new forms of governance and localised decision making - and the implications of these for professional development

In this special edition, Joyce Liddle (University of Nottingham) explores the changing context within which the skills and knowledge needs of professionals are understood by higher education. Veronica Coatham (University of Central England) reflects upon the ways in which she approached the curriculum design of a post graduate programme for housing professionals. Finally, John Diamond and Sue Roberts (Edge Hill University) reflect upon the collaboration of two departments within one institution and how each gained from the relationship as well as exploring the "loss" associated with the partnership.

Each of these developments has real significance both for practitioners and those who design or teach Public Administration programmes. They illustrate the ways in which externally driven social, professional and political change impact upon those who work within higher education. On one level these changes provide rich sources of research and evaluation but they also shape change *within* certificated programmes of study. In making the selection of papers for this special edition we have chosen those which illustrate this dynamic relationship.