THE CRYSTAL BALL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM: WHAT FUTURE PREDICTIONS TELL US ABOUT THE PRESENT

COCOPS Working Paper No. 15

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June 2014

About COCOPS

The COCOPS project (Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future) seeks to comparatively and quantitatively assess the impact of New Public Management-style reforms in European countries, drawing on a team of European public administration scholars from 11 universities in 10 countries. It will analyse the impact of reforms in public management and public services that address citizens' service needs and social cohesion in Europe. Evaluating the extent and consequences of NPM's alleged fragmenting tendencies and the resulting need for coordination is a key part of assessing these impacts. It is funded under the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme as a Small or Medium-Scale Focused Research Project (2011-2014).

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between future-looking research in public administration and past and present trends in the discipline and practice in an effort to improve the analytical capacity of futures research in public administration. Using theoretical frameworks developed from futures research in other disciplines – namely the concepts of forecasting, visioning, story-telling and scenario building – the paper first looks at the state of futures research in public administration and how well it utilises these frameworks. Then, the research takes an empirical look at the veracity of academics' perceptions of trends in public administration as compared to actual trends in research, using a survey of academic perceptions on trends and bibliometric analysis of the literature over a 13 year period. Finally, the paper provides the underpinnings of a more rigorous approach to futures research, using the case of public sector reforms. This paper shows that public administration futures research needs to embrace methodologically rigorous approaches to scenario building and story-telling. This will establish clear linkages between goals and processes, as well as present and future, and clearly identify problems and potential areas for diversion in developing current processes for future outcomes. This will not only improve the potential predictive powers of futures research, but also lead to a deeper understanding of current processes, their causes and their potential effects.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Public sector reform will inevitably and tautologically lead to the public sector of the future, although even with the past and present as guidance, scholars disagree about what that future may look like. This has not stopped them from prognosticating, however. This paper intends to examine the connections (or lack thereof) between literature on the future of public administration and academics' perceptions of public administration reform and performance. The main question of the research is:

- Are interpretations of the present and future of public administration as a discipline and in practice reflected in the literature and academics' perceptions of public administration reform and performance?

Secondary questions are developed as well:

- Which concepts were most likely to be mentioned by academics as key areas of reform, and is this reflected in the literature?
- Did literature on future public administration reform reflect perceptions on past public service performance?
- What is the correlation between experts' views on past reforms and performance and their views for the future?

The paper focuses on European academics (EU + accession countries) and their perceptions within their own countries of employment. This research is a useful exercise, as it provides insight into the development of predictive elements of public administration literature and its connection to ideas of reform and past and future performance, as well highlighting key aspects of reform that are seen to be particularly vital to the continued development of public administration academically and practically. In addition, it provides a clear way forward to further developing futures research in public administration.

The first section of the paper briefly outlines the methodology used in this research, before attention is turned towards the theoretical background of futures research. The article then contextualises futures research in a public administration setting by reviewing future-looking literature in the discipline. Then, the work looks at perceived trends in public administration before looking in depth at the case of public sector reform. Finally, the conclusions highlight the importance of this work in developing prescriptive and predictive literature in public administration.

2. Methodology

The paper will evaluate these questions based on three main sources of research. First, the work draws on a survey of public administration academics on their perceptions about current and future trends in public administration as a discipline and in practice. Second, past literature on the future of public administration will supplement the other primary research. Finally, a bibliometric analysis of key public sector trends was undertaken. Particular attention was paid to main areas of public sector reform developed out of the New Public Management paradigm.

The literature review looks at all articles dealing with the future of public administration as a discipline and in practice since 2000. Several journal special issues dealt specifically with this topic (for example, see Public Administration Review Special Edition, December 2010). While a European focus was paramount, the review also draws on American and other non-European sources. Articles were found through journal search tools (mainly Web of Science), recommendations from colleagues and bibliographic reviews, producing a total of 95 articles that were analysed. Representative works will be highlighted in this paper in order to shorten the bibliography.

The survey was conducted online in the spring and summer of 2013. The entire population of European academic presenters at four main public administration academic conferences – EGPA, IRSPM, IPSA-SOG and NISPAcee – was surveyed. European academics were considered to be those who worked in EU member states, along with Norway, Switzerland and any EU candidate and potential candidate countries (38 countries in total).

After removing bounced e-mails, those with no contact information, duplicate addresses and ineligible (ie. practitioners, administrative staff, PhD students and other non-academic respondents), there was a total population of 804, with 299 responses (37% response rate). The survey is part of a larger research project (COCOPS), and looked at three main areas:

1. Key journals in the field of public administration and the relative quality of these publications;
2. The state of the academic discipline, including work balance, connections to other disciplines, sources of funding and key trends in the discipline;
3. The state of public administration in the country in which they work.

It is on the last topic that this paper focuses.

3. Theoretical Framework

The main intention of this paper is a survey of the key trends in public service reform, and the interconnections between academic views on the future of public administration, the literature on the subject and the perceptions of the public service in practice. However, this work also draws on, and adds to, theoretical issues related to forecasting, scenario building and management (Schoemaker, 1993). First, the future is hazy whether definitions are employed or not, but there is a necessity to choose which fog one wants to live with. The most relevant distinction for this work is between focusing on one possible future, or focusing on multiple possible futures. While scenario building develops many possible futures, and along with it, different outcomes, forecasting and other related approaches (see below) aim to predict one particular future.

Several factors affect any sort of future-looking research. Uncertainty in forecasting is an factor that forecasters aim to minimise, as a higher level of uncertainty reduces the effectiveness of forecasting. In contrast, scenarios allow for certain types of uncertainty – specifically those related to actors – to be inbuilt into models for the future as multiple possible branching points exist and allow for multiple possible futures. As scenarios rely less on the possible outcome, they are able to build in different uncertain actions into an analysis of a possible outcome. Second, as forecasting relies on a single future scenario, it also relies on consensus-building and multiple stakeholders in order to maximise understanding of possible eventualities and develop a clear picture of the most probable future. In contrast, scenario building allows for 'creative disagreement' and multiple potential futures. While this allows for more nuance in evaluating all potential causal factors, it also necessarily limits predictive capacity. Finally, scenarios look at plausible futures, whereas forecasting looks at the more definitive, but troublesome, probable future. While both single-view (forecasting) and multiple view (scenario building) approaches to futures research have benefits, the aim of the exercise must be clearly defined in order to develop a proper approach to gauging potential outcomes.

In addition to forecasting, other forms of single-future approaches exist, namely visioning and story-telling. While forecasting takes a value-neutral approach to identifying what will likely be, visioning uses a normative and collaborative approach to identifying how things should be. This is a goal-focused approach, and one that emphasises goal-setting over the processes and actions through which these goals should be realised. It is closely related to forecasting in its goal-focused approach, but forecasting lacks the normative component and instead focuses on probable outcomes. This approach can help to make explicit the problems that are supposed to be addressed in developing from the present into the future. Finally, storytelling is a persuasive method intended to support a particular view of the future. This involves a clear recognition and framing of the problem in order to develop processes and goals to address this issue.

Scenarios are the main approach favoured in developing multiple possible futures that may be likely given certain events or approaches. As such, this approach requires a clear logic for delineating each possibility. State-driven approaches to scenario building focus on the likely outcome - how things may be. Process-driven approaches focus on the events and actions that lead to a certain endpoint. In process-driven scenario development, systematic study can either start from the outcome and work backwards through the process, or look at the process and see what outcomes may develop. Both approaches can be further divided into those used to plan for the future (a proactive stance) and those used to predict the future (a reactive stance).

However, development of predictive approaches is often marred by problematic research design and incomplete information. To that effect, predictive research may often be a) highly personalised without adequate reflection or methodology; b) difficult to compare; and c) innovative, but not reflective on actual outcomes, successes and failures (Wilkinson, 2009). In addition, it may be limited by vaguely-defined objectives or assumptions, weak structure, insufficient granularity or depth, lack of continuity and a poor balance of process and outcome. A larger problem is in testability and evaluation of effectiveness of scenarios, given their forward-looking nature. And, like most of the social sciences, cleavages exist between qualitative and quantitative approaches to scenarios, a methodological debate that cannot be avoided even when making predictions. In addition, scenario-building can in itself be activist in nature; that is, (publishing) academics have the facility to shape these futures, at least in terms of journal output, and sometimes in the case of real-world situations. Finally, many theoretical and methodological constructs are expressly developed for ex-post analysis, whereas futures research requires ex-ante consideration (Jarke, Bui and Carroll, 1998).

Consideration of the future can (and should) focus on several factors - organisational, decisional and environmental factors – and use these to develop a clear logic and implications for future development (Jarke, Bui and Carroll, 1998). To this end, public administration can draw on experiences in certain closely-related disciplines. Most notably, planning is, to a great extent, a research area that specifically focuses on future scenarios, as planning by its nature must consider the outcomes of any proposals (Myers and Kitsuse, 2000).

This work will look at both single-future and multiple-future approaches. Based on these theoretical approaches, if public administration prognostication is expected to be thorough (and there is no guarantee that is the case, even if this paper takes such an assumption as a starting point), then several conditional statements should be satisfied to fit into one (or multiple) approaches to futures research.

1. Visioning: If the work aims to provide a normative assessment of what should be, then it should be accompanied by a clear identification and orientation towards desirable goals.

2. Forecasting: If the work aims to identify one likely outcome, then it should be accompanied by careful analysis of input data, mitigation of unknowns and probabilistic assessment of this outcome.

3. Persuasive storytelling: If the work aims to develop a specific course of action, then it must provide clear problem framing and a causal events chain.

4. Scenario building: If numerous possible futures are developed, then clear events branching should be present to delineate potential scenarios.

The next section of this paper will present a brief review of future-looking research in public administration to see what role forecasting, visioning, scenario building and storytelling play in constructing visions of the future in public administration. Then, the paper will look at perceptions and realities of key trends in the discipline before using the case of public sector reform as a model for a more nuanced, multiple-future approach to public sector prognostication.

4. Future-Looking Research in Public Administration

Research on future directions for public administration as a discipline and in practice focus on several separate but interrelated and complementary factors.[1] First, relational factors play an important role in future-focused research. Common issues raised include the relationship between and interdependence of politics and administration (Svara, 2001), relations to the public (Moynihan and Ingraham, 2010), and relations with other governmental and non-governmental actors (Feldman, 2010). Procedural issues were also commonly discussed when looking at future trends, most notably in terms of e-governance (Norris, 2010; Barnes, 2010), strategic planning (Bryson, 2010; Poister, 2010) and contracting out (Breul, 2010). Finally, performance issues and their roles in the future were discussed. This took the form of performance measurement and management (Hatry, 2010) and accountability (Khademian, 2010). There was less emphasis on structural factors, including the interplay between structure and agency, resource constraints and power between levels, but this still factored into the analysis (Warner, 2010). While most work focused on the future state of public administration in practice, some also looked at the state of the discipline, and a potential move away from study towards public sector training and practical application (Perry and Buckwalter, 2010). These themes do fit with key considerations in futures research, where focus should be on organisational, decisional and environmental factors. While the research does focus on the former two factors, considerably less attention is played to environmental and contextual factors.

Based on the frameworks outlined in the previous section, certain patterns emerge in the structure of this future-looking work. In general, different authors have treated the development of future predictions in different ways, stemming from both normative and objective rationale. One clear thread

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[1] For a more detailed review of academic literature on the future of public administration, please see Curry, D. (2014). 'Trends for the Future of Public Sector Reform: A Critical Review of Future-Looking Research in Public Administration.' Available at http://www.cocops.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/TrendsForTheFutureOfPublicSectorReform.pdf.

is the reliance on single-outcome approaches, with little emphasis on scenario building. These articles use an admixture of forecasting, visioning and storytelling with little focus on multiple scenarios. In addition, the literature rarely applies these futures approaches systematically or methodologically. Instead, any claims remain implicit, couched in terms of what 'will be' or 'should be' without establishing (somewhat) objective criteria upon which these futures can be assessed in probability or path to these outcomes. Literature that could be said to fall into the forecasting mould draws heavily on past practices, focusing mainly on broader conceptions of reality rather than a thorough review of the past and current processes that may lead to these outcomes. This lack of focus on process is then carried forward to future forecasting, with little emphasis on what will bring about the forecasts that are predicted. Visioning is also present in some of the literature, as academics identify what should be developed in future research. This often is coupled with an implied forecast of what will happen if more normative visions are not incorporated and in general, most literature fits into this visioning approach. These visioning approaches fall into a trap of futures research by being seemingly personalised and lacking in deliberation or development of clear objectives that these normative changes aim to address. The approaches used in the literature also lack the clear problem framing and causal events chains of a more nuanced storytelling approach. This leaves most work in a normative realm that is not clearly connected to adequately framed problems or events chains that will allow for a clear through line from the present into the future.

The literature is likewise unclear in its focus on state or process. Much of the PA futures work focuses on specific issues but does not adequately define whether those are, in fact, intended outcomes, or processes by which a (usually unidentified) outcome can be achieved. To illustrate this with a simple example, while a significant proportion of the literature identifies network governance as a key trend in public administration, it often fails to identify whether network governance is a desirable end in itself (and if so, what processes will allow network governance to develop) or whether it is simply the process by which a desirable outcome (perhaps increased actor engagement) will be achieved. This conceptual muddiness in turn makes futures research difficult by creating a black box around consideration of how we move from the present to the future.

Therefore, it is not possible to identify a clear strand of futures research in at least a large proportion of the public administration literature. The framework that most closely fits public administration futures literature is a visioning approach, as normative and desirable futures are presented and, on occasion, even paired with some ideas of how to achieve these goals. While useful, visioning is in many ways the least rigorous approach to futures development, and in public administration it also lacks one key facet usually associated with visioning: the involvement of multiple actors and perspectives in developing this normative conception of what the future should be.

These articles lack key aspects of other futures approaches. Some research does focus on likely outcomes without a normative element, a la forecasting, but this is not coupled with a consensual approach to allow for multiple perspectives in establishing the most likely outcome, nor a clear assessment of the probability of this occurring. Persuasive storytelling, which in many ways is a more sophisticated approach to visioning that provides a clearer framework for establishing desirable outcomes, is also largely absent in public administration literature. One clear result, however, is the lack of engagement with scenario building. In almost all literature, only one possible outcome is analysed. This paper will now look at current academic perceptions of key public administration trends and then, through bibliometric analysis, determine how closely these perceptions match to reality.

5. Trends in Public Administration

Survey respondents were asked to provide up to three open-ended answers to two questions about trends in public administration as a discipline:

1. When you think about public administration as an academic discipline, which themes are gaining importance in your opinion?

2. When you think about public administration as an academic discipline, which themes are losing importance in your opinion?

3. While there was a wide variety of answers to these questions, the top ten key increasing and declining trends were identified and are listed in the table below.

Increasing	Declining
1. **Performance Management**	1. New Public Management
2. **Network Governance**	2. **Performance Management**
3. **Accountability**	3. Local Government
4. Regulation	4. **Network Governance**
5. Ethics	5. Bureaucracy
6. Innovation	6. Privatisation
7. Collaboration/Cooperation	7. **Accountability**
8. Co-Production	8. Institutions
9. Public Sector Motivation	9. Reforms
10. (Tie) Austerity	10. Human Resources
E-Governance	

These lists reveal a certain level of debate about the relative importance of different trends in the future study of public administration, with three concepts appearing in the top ten most mentioned trends that were both increasing and declining. Other trends were more clearly seen to be either increasing or declining. Most notably, New Public Management was seen to be in decline by over one third of nearly 200 eligible respondents, and only mentioned as an increasing trend by two respondents.

Simple bibliometric analysis was performed on all 18 trends identified as either increasing or decreasing in importance. Citation analyses were conducted for each term, tracking the number of citations of articles on each subject from 2000 – 2013. Articles were identified using the Web of Science topic search, identifying any articles that mentioned the trend in the title or abstract, in any public administration journal. The total number of citations of each term varied widely, from a high of 24.612 citations of articles on reform (admittedly a broad concept) to a low of 645 citations of articles on co-production.

Concept	Total Citations
Reform	24612
Institutions	16746
Local Government/Governance	10842
Regulation	10825
Accountability	9066
Collaboration/Cooperation	8478
Innovation	7095
Bureaucracy	6434
Privatisation	4768
Motivation	4735
NPM	4729
Human Resources	2284
Ethics	2119
E-Governance/Government	2046
Performance Management	1353
Austerity/Financial Crisis	1026
Network Governance	874
Co-Production	645

These numbers were then graphed, looking at the relative importance of a single concept year by year (total concept citations per year/total concept citations overall) compared to the relative importance of the year in terms of citation of all relevant concepts (total citations per year/total citations overall). This helped to more clearly present a picture of how important concepts were in general year on year.
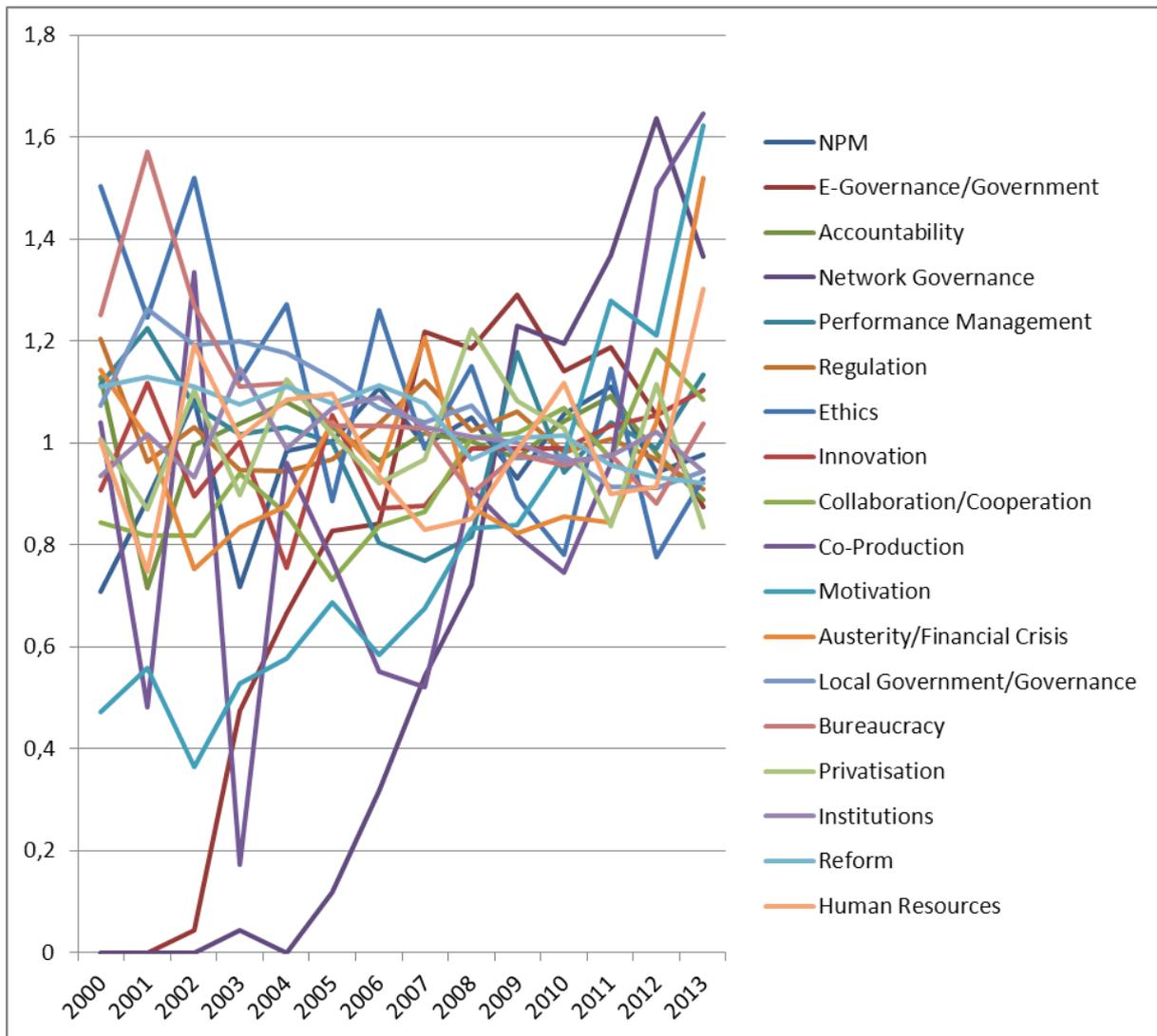
(Topic citations per year/Total topic citations for period)/(Total citations per year/Total citations for period)

This graph shows that there are some similarities and differences between what academics perceive to be increasing or decreasing trends, and the rate of citations of articles on these topics. Academics correctly identified the ascendancy of public sector motivation, and there was also a slight uptick in collaboration/cooperation. Network governance was the second most cited increasing trend and it was, in fact, also a strongly ascendant trend in terms of citations per year. However, it had also been identified as the fourth most declining trend. Performance management, another factor that was identified as both most increasing and most decreasing, was in fact rather stable over the 13 year period, with a slight dip in popularity after 2010, but also a slight resurgence in 2013 (maybe pointing to the fact that both ascending and descending groups may be right in their own way). Accountability, the third factor that appeared on both sides of the list, was also mostly stable. Academics correctly identified declines in bureaucracy, and slight declines were also seen in local government/governance and reforms.

However, there were many areas that did not match the perceptions of academics. NPM, by far the most identified declining factor, was in fact stable over the time period. Innovation, institutions and privatisation were also mostly stable and not declining or increasing as academics perceived. Bizarrely, articles on austerity and financial crises did not see a significant increase in the post-2008 period. This, however, could be a result of the keywords that were used (financial AND crisis OR austerity), and there was an increase in importance of this factor in 2013. While e-governance did see a significant increase in importance as measured by citations until 2009 (as predicted by academics), it has seen a significant decline in citations in the following four years. Ethics was also declining despite the view of academics, and there was a slight drop in citations of articles on regulation as well. On the other hand, human resources, identified as a declining trend, saw a significant increase in interest in 2013. Co-production citations did not follow any clear trend.

6. Implications for Future Research

Although the sources of evidence are not a perfect match, these findings do not paint a rosy picture for the accuracy of futures research in public administration, as correct trends were only clearly identified in five of 18 trend areas (and given the simple dichotomy of increased/declined that was used, a flipped coin would likely have performed much better). Coupled with the literature on the future of public administration, some tentative conclusions can be drawn on potential reasons for this predictive failure. Most obviously, there is little clear consensus on what futures research should accomplish in public administration. While this in itself is not a necessity, there should at least be clarity at the article level, in order to pair an appropriate methodological approach to the goal one wants to achieve in any article dealing with the future of PA. In that regard, it pays to go back to the conditional statements identified earlier in the paper.

1. Visioning: If the work aims to provide a normative assessment of what should be, then it should be accompanied by a clear identification and orientation towards desirable goals.

Visioning, or visioning-type approaches to futures research were used in public administration. These provided normative ideas of what public administration should be, and partially or periodically met the second half of this conditional statement. However, clear shortcomings have been identified in visioning approaches. This approach mostly favours goal-setting over the development of concrete ways and action sequences to meet these goals, thus limiting its usefulness as a tool of normative change and instead just presents an idea of a preferable future disconnected from current trends. In order to be effective, this normative prognostication should be coupled with feasibility studies and development of potential actions and scenarios to connect process and goals and marry present with future (Myers and Kitsuse, 2000, pp. 228).

2. Forecasting: If the work aims to identify one likely outcome, then it should be accompanied by careful analysis of input data, mitigation of unknowns and probabilistic assessment of this outcome.

While most public administration futures research does emphasise particular likely outcomes, this lacks the consideration inherent to forecasting. Even if PA futures research avoids the normative dimension of visioning, it does not provide explicit justification for why chosen outcomes are the most probable. And, like visioning, these assessments do not always provide an adequate causal chain to link present actions with future outcomes.

3. Persuasive storytelling: If the work aims to develop a specific course of action, then it must provide clear problem framing and a causal events chain.

Persuasive storytelling should, to a great extent, build on both effective forecasting and visioning, by clearly identifying a problem and forging a methodologically sound narrative that addresses this problem. Rein and Schon (1977) argue three points relevant to stories in a public administration sense. These stories must 1) be consistent in that they are able to develop a narrative of cause and effect from disparate sources; 2) be empirically testable; and 3) develop concrete ways in which this narrative can lead to action that address the perceived problem. At the present time, futures literature in PA fails to develop stories in this manner. Taken together, these applications have failed to provide any explanatory power to academics' assessments of key trends in the discipline or practice of public administration, or the future they may lead to.

4. Scenario building: If numerous possible futures are developed, then clear events branching should be present to delineate potential scenarios.

It is in scenario building where there is the greatest room for growth in public administration futures research. Whilst storytelling has a normative element in identifying problems and solutions, some PA research has (rightly) shied away from these normative claims in a discipline where best practices and approaches are not always clear or easily isolated. Scenario building provides a way in which the focus can be moved to possible futures or solutions (plural) and has the potential to provide greater analytical rigour and predictive capacity to any futures research done in the discipline. While some precision is lost (as well as bragging rights for the academics who manage to get single-future predictions correct), great benefit is derived from consideration of multiple possible future paths, outcomes and ways to deal with these potential outcomes. This will require a move from state-based approaches to prediction towards a process-driven method, where goals are clearly defined and processes to reach these goals are concretely developed. These can either use end-state approaches when a specific outcome is desired, where different ways of achieving that outcome can be developed, or beginning-state approaches, where potential processes are analysed from the present in order to identify different possible futures. These two types allow for development of both prescriptive and analytical predictive analysis.

This paper now considers one potential application of this scenario-building approach, looking at public sector reform in the present and recent past, and what this means for the future. This more

nuanced approach to analysis of past and current trends allows for a clearer and more rigorous development of potential future research and highlights the usefulness of scenario building in considering multiple possible outcomes. What scenario building lacks in the (alleged) certainty of one-future approaches, it makes up for in providing more ways in which researchers can prepare for possible futures.

7. Public Administration Reform in Practice: a Case in Point for Improved Futures Research
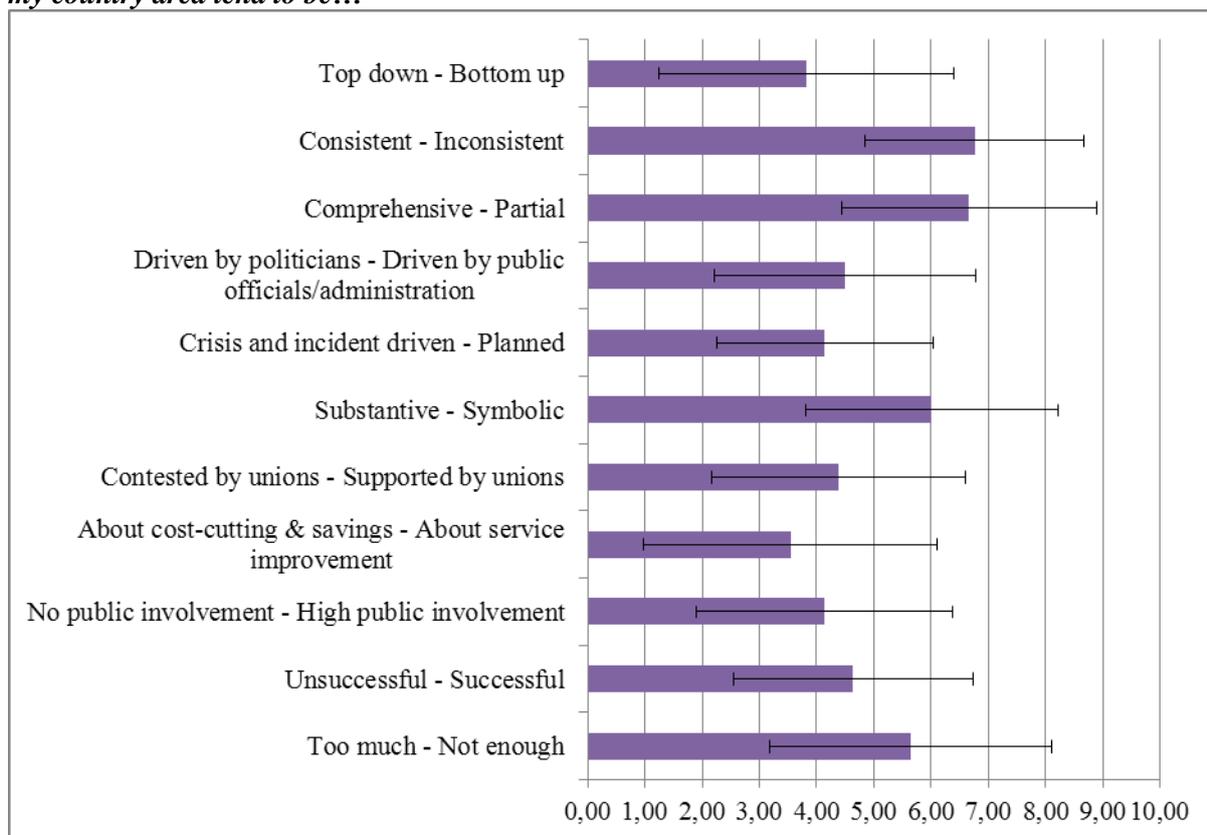
Academics' perceptions of public administration in practice in the last five years feed into futures development, as prediction, especially in the case of scenario building, is built largely on past experience. The case of public sector reform will be analysed a beginning-state approach, where the current state of reform is ascertained as a potential base upon which future scenarios can be built. Based on this starting point, key factors affecting the nature of public sector reform were identified, which allows for more finely-grained analysis of specific actions associated with reform, and that in turn creates the potential for branching in potential futures. Secondly, a way of assessing the performance of these reforms was developed, which adds analytical depth to determining the viability and probability of potential futures.

Within the survey, academics were asked whether they perceived public administration overall to have (1) greatly deteriorated or (10) greatly improved in their country as compared to five years ago. Results were mixed, but slightly more positive than negative.
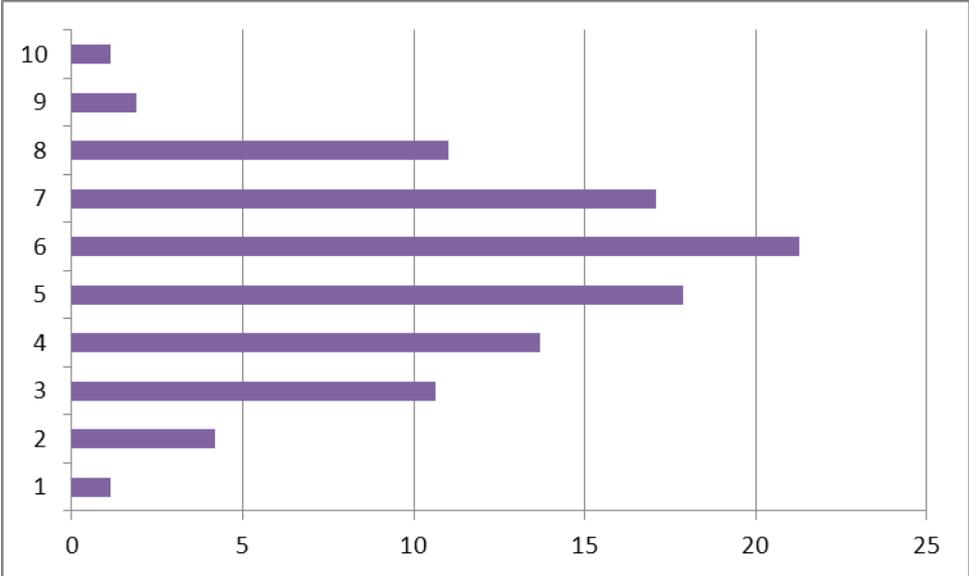
More nuanced results were also obtained in a question that broke down the nature of public administration reform into ten different spectrums of reform.
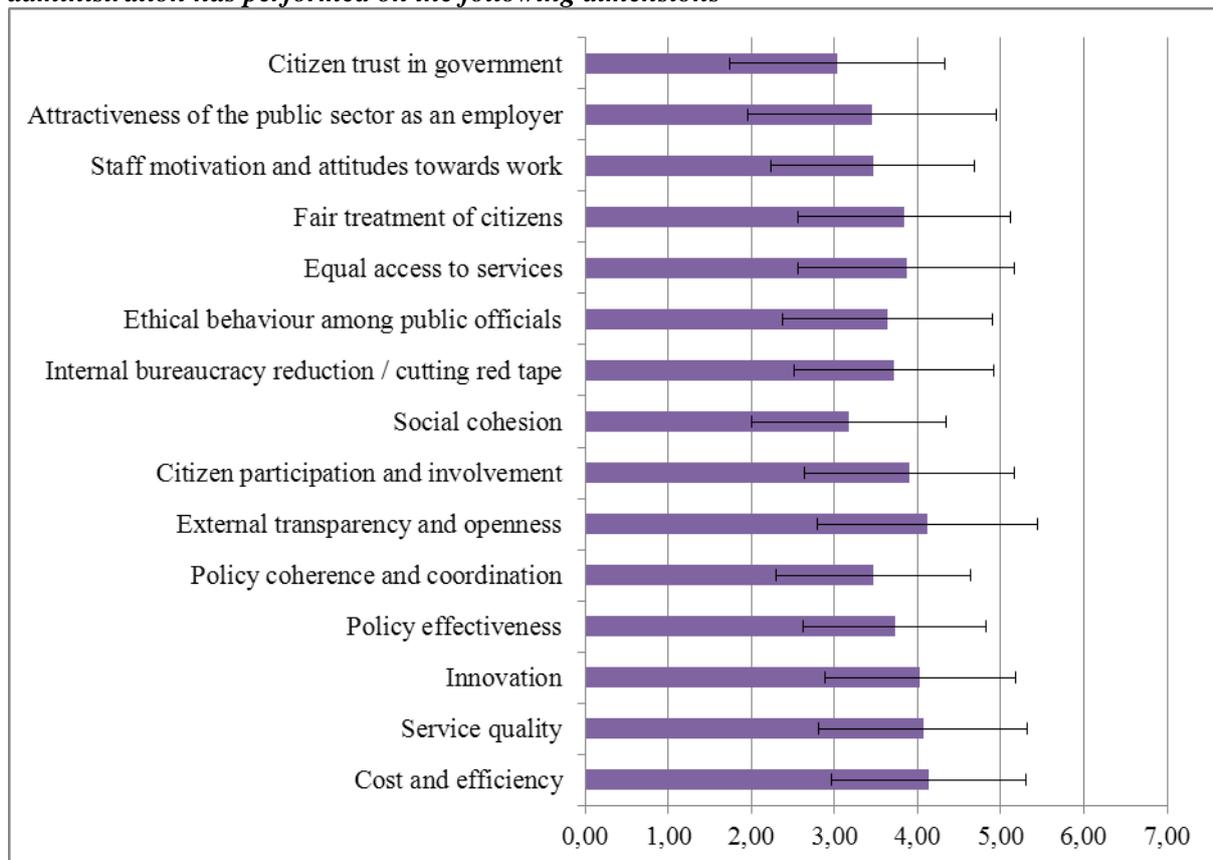
Please indicate your views on public sector reform using the scales below. Public sector reforms in my country area tend to be…

	Value
Top down - Bottom up	~3.9
Consistent - Inconsistent	~6.7
Comprehensive - Partial	~6.5
Driven by politicians - Driven by public officials/administration	~4.5
Crisis and incident driven - Planned	~4.1
Substantive - Symbolic	~6.0
Contested by unions - Supported by unions	~4.4
About cost-cutting & savings - About service improvement	~3.5
No public involvement - High public involvement	~4.1
Unsuccessful - Successful	~4.6
Too much - Not enough	~5.6

Here, there was more variation on results, with several themes emerging. The strongest views were that public administration reform was top down and about cost cutting and savings. In addition, these reforms were seen to be partial and inconsistent. There was little consensus about whether these reforms were successful or unsuccessful.

In addition to these questions on the nature of reforms, respondents were asked to rate the performance of the public administration in various areas.

Thinking about your country over the last five years how would you rate the way public administration has performed on the following dimensions

Dimension	Rating
Citizen trust in government	
Attractiveness of the public sector as an employer	
Staff motivation and attitudes towards work	
Fair treatment of citizens	
Equal access to services	
Ethical behaviour among public officials	
Internal bureaucracy reduction / cutting red tape	
Social cohesion	
Citizen participation and involvement	
External transparency and openness	
Policy coherence and coordination	
Policy effectiveness	
Innovation	
Service quality	
Cost and efficiency	

Here, cost and efficiency, service quality, innovation and external transparency and openness were the most positively perceived performance measures. On the other hand, social cohesion, policy coherence and coordination and especially citizen trust in government were rated relatively poorly.

While these issues were identified as key facets of reform (Hammerschmid et al., 2013), and reform was a heavily cited area of public administration research, this was not broadly reflected in the futures literature. Reforms in general were seen to be on the wane in public administration research, and few of the reform features identified were seen as key trends by academics. However, a deeper analysis of these reforms – one that identifies clear procedural factors relating to reform and a gauge of performance – allows for a more methodical and structured application of past and present actions to potential future outcomes. In addition, this granularity allows for the development of a futures approach that, as shown above, is mostly overlooked in public administration research – scenario building. Current views of ten factors influencing the nature of reform, coupled with 15 measures of performance, allow for branching of potential outcomes based on which aspects of reform might be promoted or suppressed depending on actors, events and perceived efficacy. This systematic approach can and should be applied to other key trends identified in the literature in order to produce a more rigorous futures analysis of public administration as a discipline and in practice.

8. Conclusions

To be fair, most forward-looking pieces in public administration are positioned as the views of learned academics and are not meant to be systematic approaches to futures forecasting or scenario-building in any technical respect. However, this does not negate the potential usefulness of systematic assessments of potential future scenarios in public administration reform and practice. This paper lays the groundwork for developing a more methodical approach to futures research in public administration. First, it provides a survey of existing literature on the future of public administration, and then, through bibliometric analysis of the literature and consideration of key trends in the discipline, it illustrates the limitations of PA futures research as it currently exists. This research then builds on existing theoretical considerations in futures research and shows how they can be applied in public administration research, illustrated with the case of public sector reform.

This research has several implications. First, a more systematic approach to prognostication not only (potentially) improves predictive capacity, but it also allows for a clearer and more detailed understanding of the present and near past by forcing researchers to consider where we are before they can consider where we may be heading. Second, and related to this, it more clearly links present with future and establishes causal chains in how certain public administration trends may lead to different (or similar) outcomes. In addition, a methodical approach to futures research forces a clear identification and framing of current problems in order to develop potential solutions, and also forces consideration of how actors or events may have an impact on development of different ideas in the discipline. This, in turn, will increase the ability of academics to tailor research to the realities of public administration in practice. Finally, it will create a clearer demarcation between outcomes and processes, a distinction that is surprisingly unclear currently, with most futures research in PA being unclear on whether they are presenting desired or likely outcomes, or the processes that may lead to certain outcomes.

These changes require that public administration research moves beyond the simpler futures ideas of visioning and forecasting towards more nuanced single- and multiple-future approaches, namely story-telling and scenario building, respectively. These approaches support both normative and analytical approaches to understanding trends and future outcomes and establish clearer causality and events chains that can bring about different futures. While these methodological approaches are by their nature forward-looking, their use also increases the rigour with which we view the present, as seen in the case of public sector reform.

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