

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Coordinating for cohesion in the public sector of the future (COCOPS)

The Future of Public Administration: Public Sector Reform in Europe

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This policy brief summarises the findings of the COCOPS project as they relate to (future) trends in public sector reform.

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CURRENT TRENDS IN PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

Public sector reform in Europe has shaped and been shaped by external factors – the economic crisis, demographics, political issues and others – and internal factors related to academic and practical views of what the public sector should be. COCOPS Work Package 8 examined current and future trends in public sector reform from the vantage point of academics, public sector trade unions and consultants, and built on Work Package 3 findings about trends identified by top public sector executives. As part of the work package, a survey of all European academics in public administration was conducted, and interviews with top public sector trade unions and consultancies were conducted in ten countries.

There was a high level of agreement between academics, public sector executives, trade unions and consultants about the key trends in public sector reform in the past five years. Cost and efficiency, transparency and openness and service quality were seen as the factors that had improved the most, along with some agreement that innovation in the public sector and fair treatment of citizens had improved. On the other side, all groups of respondents felt that citizens' trust in government, the attractiveness of the public sector as an employer and social cohesion had deteriorated from five years ago. In addition, public servant motivation and bureaucracy reduction/cutting of red tape were also lower than five years ago.

Improvement	Deterioration
Cost and efficiency	Citizens' trust in government
Transparency and openness	Attractiveness of public sector as employer
Service quality	Social cohesion
Innovation	Motivation of public servants
Fair treatment of citizens	Internal bureaucracy reduction/cutting of red tape

Table 1. Main public sector reform trends according to academics and public sector executives, trade unions and consultants

All groups of respondents agreed that the biggest driver of public sector reform and change in the past five years – both positively and negatively – has been the economic crisis and subsequent measures designed to address it. On one hand, the crisis has forced governments to reconsider budgets and has led to reduced costs of service delivery and increased creativity in dealing with public sector issues in a cost-efficient manner. On the other hand, respondents believe that the same budget cuts have decreased the motivation of public servants and the attractiveness of the public sector as an employer, and played a role in the perceived decrease in social cohesion. Respondents in all areas saw this austerity-driven public sector reform to continue at least in the immediately foreseeable future. In the near and not-so-near future, trends in public administration will continue to be driven by other external factors that will shape how the public sector must react.

Key Societal Changes	Effect on Public Administration
Demographic Change	Ageing populations will lead to increased stress on pensions and healthcare. Additionally, retirement of public sector employees may create a skills gap, and recruitment freezes mean older workers will not be replaced.
Climate Change	Increased environmental risks will require more planning, resources and investment from the public sector in infrastructure, disaster planning and other policy initiatives.
Economic Trajectories	Austerity-driven policy may continue, potentially creating a hollowing out of the public sector for short-term savings. More horizontal joining up of policy areas may occur.
Technological Developments	E-government initiatives will continue to develop. There will be more opportunities for smart use of public data.
Public Trust in Government	Public participation and engagement may be an area of development. Differing levels of trust in services may exist and public officials' trust in citizens must be considered.
Changes in the Political Environment	Factors such as increased electoral volatility, less party loyalty, more complex party competition, new media, personalisation of politics, unpopular policy decisions and network governance may play an increasingly important role.

These larger, external megatrends will in turn have a significant effect on the nature of the public sector and further reform in how public administration is practiced. Practitioners and academics had differing perspectives on what trends will shape public administration and public sector reform in the next five years, but there was some agreement that these trends would largely be a continuation of existing moves in public sector reform. Much of the focus of practitioners centres on service delivery and innovation in that regard. They look at moves towards further privatization and public procurement as ways of delivering services, while also highlighting increasing centralisation and development of cooperation and collaboration between different actors in delivering policy. To a somewhat lesser extent, academics also saw an increasing focus on cooperation and collaboration in the public sector. Public sector executives saw this trend being a continuation of reforms already enacted. Digitalization was seen by practitioners – executives, trade unions and consultants – as an increasing trend closely linked to transparency, openness, and to a lesser extent, improved service quality. This was somewhat reflected in academic surveys as well.

Future Trends (Trade Unions & Consultants)	Future Trends (Academics)
Privatization and public procurement	Performance management
Digitalization	Network governance
NPM-style reform	Accountability
Partnership and cooperation	Regulation
Centralisation	Ethics

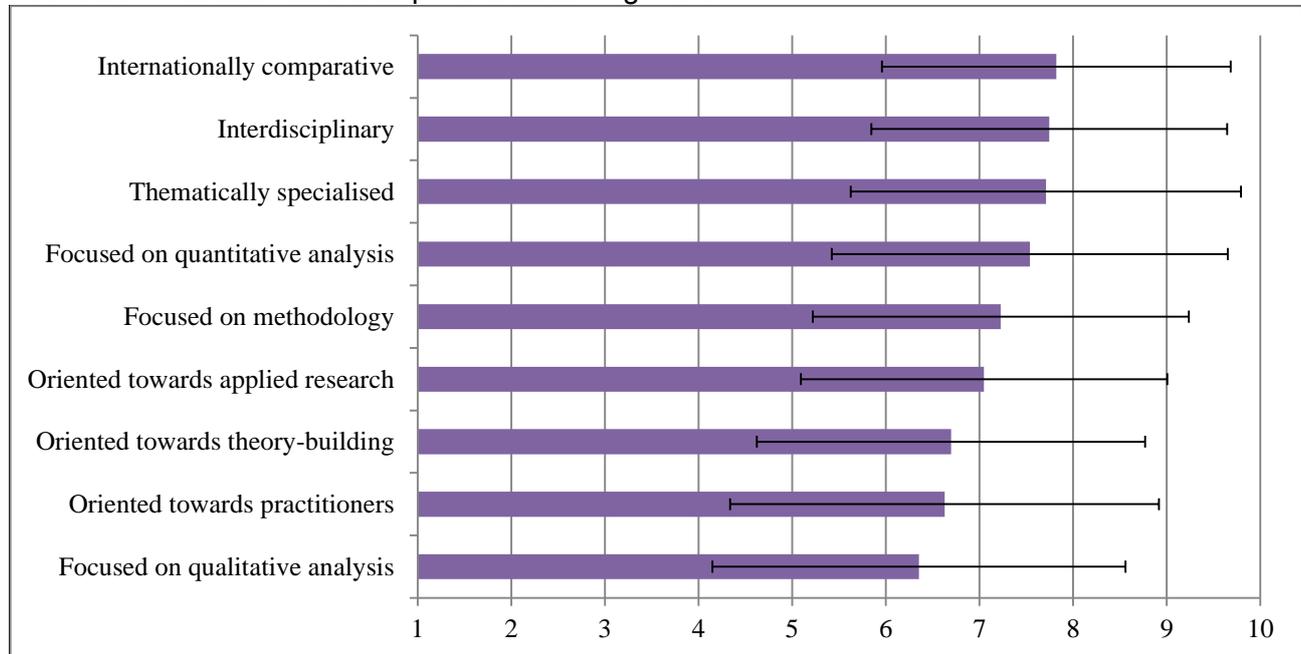
Table 2. Future trends according to academics, consultants and trade union executives

Efficiency and performance related measures will also play a significant part in future reform trends, according to both academics and practitioners. Academics predict a greater focus on performance measurement and management, whilst trade unions and consultants envision a continuation of New Public Management-style reforms. This also represents the biggest area of disagreement between different groups, as academics predict, by a wide margin, that NPM-style reforms will greatly decrease in importance in the next five years. The continued focus on efficiency is not viewed overly favourably by respondents, with practitioners (mainly trade union representatives and consultants) and academics feeling that short-term solutions will continue to be implemented without a greater focus on longer-term impact.

FUTURE TRENDS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

In addition to the larger trends expected in the public sector of the future in practice, the way in which public administration is studied and understood is also set to change. Public administration as an academic discipline is viewed somewhat differently in different European countries, but several overall trends can be seen about the direction in which the discipline is heading.

Public administration as a discipline is becoming more....



Academic respondents felt that the strongest trends in the discipline were a movement towards more international comparison, interdisciplinarity, thematic specialisation and quantitative analysis. On the other end of the spectrum, academics felt that qualitative analysis, practitioner-orientated research and theory-building research were the least significant trends in shaping the discipline. This does not always reflect the direction in which academics feel the discipline *should* be moving. While they do feel that international comparison and interdisciplinary research are important, academics also felt that there should be more emphasis placed on theory building and qualitative research.

These findings are a brief synopsis of the complex reality of current and future trends envisioned by academics, trade unions representatives, consultants and public sector executives. It should be remarked that the conclusions included in this summary reflect generalised conclusions at the aggregate level. Conclusions about the trends at the level of individual countries, along with more in-depth analysis of the views of academics and practitioners, are provided in reports available on the COCOPS website (www.cocops.eu).

PROJECT IDENTITY

Project name	Coordinating for cohesion in the public sector of the future (COCOPS)
Coordinator	Steven Van de Walle, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Public Administration, Rotterdam, Netherlands, vandewalle@fsw.eur.nl
Consortium	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bocconi University, Department of Institutional Analysis and Public Management & Centre for Research on Health and Social Care Management, Milano, Italy• Cardiff University, Public Management Research Group, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff, United Kingdom• Corvinus University Budapest, Department of Public Policy and Management, Budapest, Hungary• Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Public Administration, Rotterdam, Netherlands• Hertie School of Governance, Berlin, Germany• Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Public Governance Institute, Leuven, Belgium• Tallinn University of Technology, Ragnar Nurkse School of Innovation and Governance, Tallinn, Estonia• University of Bergen, Department of Administration and Organization Theory, Bergen, Norway• University of Cantabria, Department of Economics, Cantabria, Spain• University of Exeter, Department of Politics, Exeter, United Kingdom• University Paris II & Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), Center for Studies and Research on Administrative and Political Sciences (CERSA), Paris, France
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Website	www.cocops.eu
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Further reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Curry, D., Van de Walle, S. & Gadellaa, S. (2014). "Public Administration as an Academic Discipline: Trends and Changes in the COCOPS Academic Survey of European Public Administration Scholars." COCOPS Research Report 8.1. Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam.• Pollitt, C. (2014). "Future Trends in European Public Administration and Management: An outside-in Perspective." COCOPS Research Report 8.2. Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam.• Curry, D. (2014). "Trends for the Future of Public Sector Reform: A Critical Review of Future-looking Research in Public Administration." COCOPS Research Report 8.3. Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam.• Curry, D., Blijleven, W. & Van de Walle, S. (2014). "Current and Future Trends in Public Sector Reform: the Views of Trade Unions and Consultants in Ten European Countries." COCOPS Research Report 8.4. Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam.