

Educational Models for Public Administration: Limits and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study examines educational models in public administration by distinguishing between traditional theory-based models, legally oriented curricular models, competency-based and experiential models, digitally enhanced or hybrid models, and interdisciplinary approaches to administrative education. The aim of the paper is to assess the extent to which these models respond to the changing requirements of contemporary governance, particularly in relation to professional competencies, curriculum coherence, digital transformation, and the alignment between academic training and public sector needs.

The research has an exploratory mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative sources of evidence. The quantitative component includes secondary data analysis of admission results, student academic performance, bachelor's examination results, and survey data collected from first-year public administration students. The qualitative component is based on curriculum content analysis of public administration programs and individual interviews with graduates, allowing the study to connect institutional curriculum structures with students' educational trajectories and perceptions. The integration of these methods provides a more comprehensive understanding of both the structural characteristics of public administration education and the subjective experiences of students and graduates.

The results indicate that public administration education remains marked by a strong legal and theoretical orientation, especially in the Romanian context, where law-related disciplines have a considerably higher weight than in broader European curricular patterns.

At the same time, the analysis reveals the absence of a unified national curricular model, suggesting the coexistence of several competing interpretations of public administration as an academic and professional field. The empirical findings also show that admission indicators have limited predictive capacity for later academic performance, while students' profiles and attitudes reflect a heterogeneous and sometimes instrumental relationship with higher education. Although traditional models provide a necessary theoretical foundation, they appear insufficient for developing practical, digital, analytical, and adaptive competencies required by contemporary public administration.

The study contributes to the debate on public administration education by showing that curriculum reform should not be limited to formal structural changes, but should also address pedagogical methods, admission criteria, student motivation, and the connection between universities and public institutions. The findings suggest the need for stronger experiential learning, more consistent digital and methodological training, and better integration between undergraduate and master's level education in order to prepare future public servants for complex administrative challenges.

Keywords

Public administration education; educational models; curriculum innovation; experiential learning; governance competencies

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Introduction

Public administration education is an academic and professional field essential for training specialists capable of responding to the complexity and dynamism of contemporary public administration (Burlacu, 2005). In a context marked by globalization, digitalization and rapid changes in institutional structures, this educational field faces multiple challenges, both at the curricular level and in terms of developing the skills needed by future civil servants (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

On the one hand, there is an expectation that study programs provide a solid foundation of theoretical and methodological knowledge, develop practical skills and stimulate critical thinking; on the other hand, they must be flexible enough to integrate new trends in governance, public policies and administrative technology (Baniamin & Ramasamy, 2022).

The specialized literature highlights that the main dilemmas of public administration education are related to the tension between tradition and innovation, between theoretical training and practical training, as well as between local requirements and international standards of academic excellence. Also, the digitalization of administrative processes and the emergence of e-governance require continuous adjustments to curricula, teaching methods and assessment tools, while globalization and academic mobility generate pressures on the standardization of skills and international certification (Nurlybaeva, Hussin & Azazi, 2023).

The results of international evaluations in the field of pre-university education show us a not very optimistic situation. The 2023 PISA assessments of 15-year-old students (those who entered university in 2005) ranked us 34th out of 43 participating countries, with scores of 428 points for reading, 426 for mathematics and 441 for science, the OECD average being 500 points for each dimension. 40% of participating students have a low level of use of written information. The aim of this article is to analyze the main educational models used in public administration education and to assess their capacity to respond to the institutional, professional, and technological transformations affecting contemporary public governance. More specifically, the article pursues four objectives: first, to identify the major curricular orientations that shape public administration programs, with particular attention to the balance between legal, managerial, political, methodological, and interdisciplinary components; second, to compare the structure of Romanian public administration education with broader European curricular patterns; third, to examine the profile, educational background, and attitudes of students enrolled in public administration programs; and fourth, to evaluate the extent to which admission criteria and previous educational performance are associated with later academic success.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section reviews the scientific literature on public administration education, focusing on traditional, competency-based, experiential, digital, and interdisciplinary models. The second section presents the research methodology, explaining the exploratory mixed-method design, the data sources, and the analytical procedures used. The third section discusses the empirical results, including curriculum analysis, student profile, admission indicators, academic performance, and students' perceptions of the educational process. The final section summarizes the main findings, outlines the implications for curriculum development and public administration training, and formulates recommendations for future research and educational policy.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Public administration education has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, reflecting the evolving needs of public governance, organizational complexity, and societal expectations (Burlacu & Neagu, 2007). Early works in the field, such as Bryan et al. (2018) emphasized traditional, theory-based models. These programs prioritized the transmission of foundational knowledge in public administration, including bureaucratic structures, administrative law, policy analysis, and managerial principles. The strength of these traditional models lies in their ability to create a solid theoretical foundation; however, scholars have consistently pointed out their limitations, particularly in fostering practical problem-solving skills, adaptive thinking, and responsiveness to rapid changes in public sector environments (Rinfret et al., 2022).

With the increasing complexity of public governance, research began to focus on competency-based educational models, which aim to equip students with specific skills required in modern public administration.

Careaga-Tagüeña and Sanabria-Pulido (2022) and Burlacu et al., (2024) highlight that these models emphasize leadership, strategic planning, communication, negotiation, and ethical decision-making. Competency-based approaches often integrate case studies, project-based learning, simulations, and internships, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios. Despite these advantages, literature indicates that such models face challenges, including resource limitations, insufficient faculty training

in experiential methods, and variability in institutional commitment to innovative curricula (Diaconu et al., 2019).

The advent of digital technologies and hybrid learning has further transformed the educational landscape. Online platforms, virtual classrooms, collaborative digital tools, and policy simulation software are increasingly employed to enhance both accessibility and learning outcomes (Gaf-Deac et al, 2024; Haruna, 2023). Such tools facilitate experiential learning, foster digital governance competencies, and allow learners to engage with complex administrative scenarios in a controlled environment (Rădulescu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, studies emphasize that successful integration of digital tools requires not only technological investment but also pedagogical redesign, as traditional lecture-based methods often fail to leverage the full potential of these innovations (Jeong et al., 2022).

Another important trend in recent literature is the promotion of interdisciplinary approaches. Public administration education increasingly draws on political science, sociology, economics, law, and technology studies to provide a holistic understanding of governance processes (Harrison et al., 2020; Hergüner, 2021; Moldovan et al., 2024).

Several studies also underscore the need for global and comparative perspectives in public administration education (Ioniță et al., 2009). Programs that incorporate international case studies, cross-border internships, and comparative policy analysis help students understand governance in a globalized context, fostering adaptive skills and cross-cultural competence (Radulescu et al., 2020). Such approaches are increasingly relevant as public administrators face transnational challenges like climate change, migration, and digital regulation.

Despite these advances, the literature identifies persistent gaps and limitations. Traditional models still dominate many institutions, especially in regions with limited resources. The evaluation of educational outcomes remains inconsistent, with few studies measuring the long-term impact of curricula on professional performance in public administration. Additionally, the link between academia and practice is often weak, resulting in programs that are theoretically rigorous but less responsive to emerging administrative challenges (Selvanathan et al., 2023).

In summary, the scientific literature highlights a clear evolution in public administration education: from traditional, theory-based programs toward competency-based, experiential, interdisciplinary, and digitally-enhanced models. Each approach brings distinct advantages and challenges. While traditional models provide critical theoretical grounding, contemporary approaches aim to prepare students for the complex, dynamic, and technologically-driven environments of modern governance. For curricula to remain relevant, scholars argue for continuous innovation, stronger collaboration with public institutions, and systematic evaluation of learning outcomes (Rawat et al., 2023).

2. Research methodology

This study uses an exploratory mixed-method research design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods in order to examine public administration education from both a structural-institutional and a student-centered perspective. The exploratory character of the research is justified by the fact that the study does not aim to test a single causal model, but rather to identify relevant curricular patterns, educational orientations, student profiles, and possible relationships between admission indicators and academic performance. The mixed-method approach was selected because the research objectives require the integration of different types of evidence: documentary and curricular data, statistical information on admission and academic performance, survey responses, and qualitative insights obtained from graduate interviews.

The analytical logic of the research is structured around four main objectives. The first objective is to identify the main curricular orientations of public administration programs, especially the relative importance of legal, economic, managerial, methodological, interdisciplinary, and public administration-specific disciplines. The second objective is to compare the Romanian curricular configuration with broader European patterns in public administration education.

The third objective is to examine the profile, educational background, motivations, and attitudes of students enrolled in public administration programs. The fourth objective is to explore whether admission criteria and previous educational performance are associated with later academic success during university studies and at the bachelor's examination.

In order to achieve these objectives, the research was conducted in several interconnected stages. The first stage consisted of a documentary and literature-based analysis, used to define the conceptual framework of the study and to identify the main educational models discussed in the field of public administration education.

The second stage consisted of curriculum content analysis. This method was used to examine the structure of public administration programs and to identify the relative weight of different categories of disciplines. The analysis focused on 11 public administration programs, using information available through the Association of Schools and Institutes of Public Administration. The curricula were coded according to several disciplinary categories: law, economics, political science, management, public administration and public management, methodology and informatics, interdisciplinary or other social sciences, comparative studies, specific public policies, and EU-related disciplines. The purpose of this coding procedure was to determine whether public administration education is dominated by a particular disciplinary orientation or whether it reflects a more balanced and interdisciplinary educational model. The results of this stage are reflected in the comparative discussion of European and Romanian curricular patterns.

The third stage involved secondary quantitative data analysis. The data sources included the Public Opinion Barometer of May 2025, admission results for the period 2020–2024, student academic performance during the study program, and bachelor's examination results for the 2025 cohort. These data were used to examine the relationship between previous educational performance, admission indicators, and later academic outcomes. The quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and linear regression. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the profile of candidates and students, while correlation and regression analysis were used to explore the association between variables such as baccalaureate average, admission test results, high school average, average grades during university studies, and bachelor's examination performance. Given the exploratory nature of the study, these statistical procedures were not used to establish causality, but to identify patterns and associations relevant for evaluating the predictive value of admission criteria.

The fourth stage involved qualitative individual interviews with nine graduates from the class of 2024. Although the interviews were conducted in an open format, they followed a thematic guide focused on the graduates' educational experiences, perceived strengths and weaknesses of the study program, factors that influenced academic success, the relevance of courses for professional development, the attractiveness of teaching methods, and the perceived relationship between university training and the requirements of public administration practice. The purpose of the interviews was to provide contextual explanations for some of the quantitative results, especially those related to student motivation, academic performance, and the perceived usefulness of the educational process.

3. Results and discussion

Perhaps the most important way in which higher education can support public administration reform is to provide high-quality graduates, prepared to become true agents of change. Ten years after the establishment of public administration programs and at a time when Romanian education is preparing for integration into the European Education Area, an assessment of higher education in this field is required.

This will focus on two aspects: what is offered to students and who they are. For the first aspect, the analysis will be based on the comparison of existing curricula, and for the second, a research was conducted on fresh administration students from the first generation "Bologna" in Bucharest.

Currently, the study of public administration is based on four major sources. The first is law, especially administrative law and constitutional law, essential due to the "law in action" aspect of the administration and for the legislative framework that defines the action of public institutions. However, public administration goes beyond the legislative framework, and good legislation does not automatically guarantee efficient administration.

The second source is represented by political science, because administration cannot be viewed separately from politics, which establishes the tasks for public institutions. The connection with political science better explains the public component than the administration one. The third source is sociology, given that administration is integrated into society and benefits from numerous research tools specific to sociology. Finally, management is the fourth source, due to the need to ensure the most efficient functioning of the administration, and in the current context, in which the distinction between public and private is becoming less and less relevant, contributions from the field of management are becoming increasingly important.

It can be seen that law remains the dominant discipline, although it represents only 20% of the curriculum. The multidisciplinary nature of the programs is fully evident, while public administration and public management, which are closest to the defining core of the science of public administration, represent only 11.6%, thus highlighting the difficulty of building a specific body of knowledge. In Romania, the study of public administration emphasizes mainly legal disciplines, a trend similar to that found in most former socialist countries and in several Mediterranean states.

However, the academic landscape is not uniform. Due to the different history of the programs, their integration into various faculties — law, political science, economics — and collaborations with different external partners, the most frequent being France and the United States, the curricula vary significantly from one institution to another. Analyzing the 11 programs presented on the website of the Association of Schools and Institutes of Public Administration, these notable differences are noted.

Table no. 1. Public administration in Romania, 2024

Subject type	Percentage (%)
Law	46.5
Economics	15.3
Public administration	12
Other social sciences	11.2
Foreign languages and computer science	11
Specific policies	3
Methodology and research	1

Source: INSSE, 2024

From a critical perspective, the shift to three-year university education can be seen as a recognition of the mass education character that education has acquired in recent years, as a result of the continuous increase in the number of students.

Currently, the mass character and not the elite one clearly prevails, which is evident from the fact that, in 2024, 72.3% of high school graduates with a baccalaureate diploma became students, compared to 68.1% in 2023.

Another effect of the massification of education is the almost total abandonment of entrance exams, sometimes considered unfair — because they test at a given moment and not over several years — or intimidating for candidates. The system has thus shifted to a system based more on the baccalaureate average and on the averages obtained in high school years, sometimes on certain subjects, although there is still criticism related to the quality of the baccalaureate examination or the fairness of the grades awarded throughout school. For the class of 2024, a weak but significant correlation was found between the results of the admission test — a psychological test designed to highlight analysis, synthesis, memory, and intelligence skills — and the averages obtained in the baccalaureate.

Table no. 2. Baccalaureate-test correlation in 2024

	Average Baccalaureate	Admission test
Pearson Correlation	1000	367**
Sig (2-tailed)		.005
N	56	56
Pearson Correlation	367**	1000
Sig (2-tailed)	.005	
N	56	56

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

An analysis related to a potential relationship between the baccalaureate average and the average during the high school years has been attempted below. A linear regression applied to the baccalaureate exam grades and the averages obtained during the high school years shows that there is a significant relationship between these two variables, with the averages during the high school years explaining over 50% of the variation in the baccalaureate grade. The rest of the difference can be attributed to the quality of the high school — assuming that the demands are higher at a better high school —, to the different structure of the baccalaureate exam, which varies from profile to profile, including different subjects with varying degrees of difficulty and offering the possibility of choosing various subjects, or to specific conditions related to taking the exam.

Selection itself has not yet been able to provide an effective solution for identifying the best students. In the case of the 2024 class, it was found that there are no significant relationships between the initial data, such as the baccalaureate average or the result of the admission test, and the final data, such as the undergraduate average or the average over the years of study; moreover, the relationship between them even has negative trends. On the other hand, there are significant correlations between the baccalaureate average and the admission test, as well as between the high school average and the undergraduate average, which indicates a certain consistency between the measures of success at the high school and university levels.

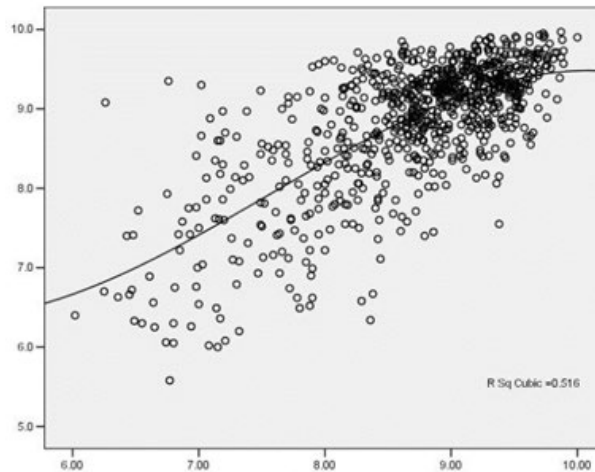


Figure no. 1. Relationship between high school average and baccalaureate average

Interviews conducted with the 2024 graduates reveal a certain degree of misunderstanding even among them, many of whom are unable to identify the factors that determined their greater or lesser degree of success.

Table no. 3. The link between high school and college success

	Bachelor's degree average	Baccalaureate average	Admission test	Average years of study
Pearson Correlation	1	.036	.106	.421**
Sig (2-tailed)		.795	.436	.001
N	56	56	56	56
Pearson Correlation	.036	1	.367**	-.118
Sig (2-tailed)	.795		.005	.385
N	56	56	56	56
Pearson Correlation	.106	.367**	1	-.057
Sig (2-tailed)	.436	.005		.676
N	56	56	56	56
Pearson Correlation	.421**	.118	-.057	1
Sig (2-tailed)	.001	.385	.676	
N	56	56	56	56

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

It is interesting to analyze what type of students end up in a public administration department. The 2024 admission candidates of the Public Administration Department at the University of Bucharest had an average baccalaureate score of 8.84 and an average high school grade of 8.71, which indicates a population of potential students above the average high school graduates. Other information comes from an opinion poll conducted among first-year students, the first generation that was to complete their studies in three years. The results show that good high school students become students, generally coming from good high schools, with a humanistic profile, mostly girls, from rural areas or small and medium-sized towns. They have solid knowledge in the field of humanities, but weak in the exact disciplines. Thus, 28% consider that they graduated from a very good high school, 59.1% from a good one and only 2.2% from a poor high school. Most come from high schools with a humanities profile (43.2%), followed by high schools with a mathematics-computer science profile (18.1%) and technical high schools (13.8%). In terms of performance, 6.5% were very good students, 63.4% good and 30.1% average.

During high school, 54.3% studied daily or almost daily, 31.9% two-three times a week, and 13.8% only for theses and extracurricular activities. Of the total number of students, 67.7% are female. In terms of their background, 23.1% come from rural areas, 33% from small towns, and only 22% from large cities with over 200,000 inhabitants, most likely from the capital itself. The knowledge acquired in high school is evaluated differently by students.

The best results are recorded in geography (8.63), Romanian (8.35), foreign languages (8.11) and history (8.06), subjects that largely correspond to the subjects taken in the baccalaureate. The worst results are in physics and chemistry (6.35) and mathematics (6.88), confirming the idea that humanities studies, including public administration, are often an option for those who avoid mathematical subjects.

Overall, the results show that public administration education is positioned between continuity and reform. The traditional and legally oriented model remains dominant, especially in Romania, where legal disciplines represent the central component of the curriculum. This model provides an important foundation for understanding the institutional and normative framework of public administration. However, the findings also indicate that this model is insufficient if it is not complemented by methodological, managerial, digital, interdisciplinary, and experiential components.

The main limitation of the current model is not the presence of legal education itself, but the imbalance between legal training and other competencies required by contemporary governance. Public administration increasingly involves policy coordination, digital public services, evidence-based decision-making, public communication, crisis management, and collaboration across institutions and sectors.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the presented data. First, there is no unified model, at the national level, of the public administration curriculum, which indicates the presence of several paradigms regarding what public administration represents or should represent. This situation has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it allows the expression of the specificities of each university, creating a unity in diversity and offering multiple perspectives on the same field, which facilitates a richer epistemic analysis of public administration. On the other hand, the lack of a unified model does not generate a clear image of the field, which can create confusion among both candidates and professionals. One way to overcome this problem would be to encourage student and faculty exchanges between different public administration programs, in order to build a coherent composite image.

Secondly, the public administration program, at least the one in Cluj, does not have a dedicated candidate population. Most candidates come from high schools with a humanistic profile, which shows that they choose the socio-human field as a whole, of which public administration is also part. Also, the fact that administration is more of a profession than a vocation contributes to the fluctuation of the candidate population. For these reasons, the attractiveness of public administration programs seems to be determined more by the image projected externally and the perception of the profession in society, than by tradition.

The lack of a consensus on the paradigmatic structure of the programs introduces a slight factor of confusion on the image of the profession, which may negatively influence the candidates' options. In addition, the fact that a good part of them choose public administration only a few weeks before the entrance exam underlines the need for a continuous recruitment process, which could contribute to stabilizing the candidate base. Considering that most candidates find out about the program "from friends", it is recommended to intensify marketing and recruitment activities, especially in urban areas.

At the same time, it is necessary to identify admission criteria with a greater predictive power on academic success, since neither previous aptitude tests nor the baccalaureate average, currently used, prove to be relevant predictors. One solution would be to create standardized knowledge and aptitude tests, closer to the requirements of university study and the labor market.

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