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During
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Policy Brief No. 8



Collaborating After Crisis

How Public Administration Scholars and
Practitioners Can Work Together

22 October 2020 | Janine O'Flynn

Summary

Key Points

This Policy Brief makes the following key points:

- (a) COVID-19 has laid bare the capacity challenges faced by governments and exacerbated entrenched disadvantage and inequality. The pandemic has acted as an accelerant of many problems that confront governments, shining light on how decades of reform have eroded government capacity and brought to the fore deep divisions in society.
- (b) Practitioners and scholars can work together on big challenges that confront us during the crisis and in the aftermath. We need a pivot from ‘big questions’ towards ‘big challenges’, so that public administration and management scholars can work closely with practitioners to address these challenges in real time.
- (c) To make a difference we need new ways of working collaboratively. If we are keen to collaborate in this crisis and beyond it makes more sense to look to successful collaborations rather than dwell on supposed tensions between scholars and practitioners.

Recommendations

This Policy Brief makes four recommendations:

- (a) **Transition from questions to challenges:** Moving from a focus on the ‘big questions’ to ‘big challenges’ provides a new opportunity to bring scholars and practitioners together for the post-COVID recovery and reform project. The questions we care about should focus more on the consequences and value for society in which public administration is embedded and where we can make a difference.
- (b) **Big challenges require deep collaborations:** Scholars and governments should work together to identify key determinants of capacity, and to rebuild governmental capacity. We need a more problem-oriented, context-driven, interdisciplinary approach; an ‘integrative public administration’
- (c) **Designing relationships for impact:** We need to build the principles for effective collaborations into relationships moving forward to ensure impact. We should draw on five key lessons learned from real-world collaborations to build collaborative teams that have the right mix of (i) *knowledge*, (ii) *skills* and (iii) *experience* to drive the work forward and deal with tensions or conflicts that arise. Finally, building in (iv) *communication* and (v) *team-building activities* ensures that the team works together rather than as buyer and producer of research.
- (d) **Investing in governance:** What the current crisis has shown clearly is that effective government can’t be conjured up at will; it requires investment over time. Far beyond financial investment, it requires fostering new forms of practice, thinking, and collaboration that allow governance to draw the very best from both practitioners and scholars.

Collaborating After Crisis

How Public Administration Scholars and Practitioners Can Work Together

1. Introduction

The commentary and debate about how practitioners and scholars need to work more closely together is as long as the history of the field of public administration itself. As a scholar who spends a lot of time engaged with practitioners, I have always thought the divide caused by the ‘research-practice gap’ between the parties was overblown, with both sides making more of the barriers than the opportunities. This does not mean that working together is easy, but rather that we need to be conscious of how we will do it.

In this policy brief I focus on how orienting more towards challenges can help bring parties together in a time of crisis. COVID-19 has acted as an accelerant of many problems that confront governments, shining light on how decades of reform have eroded government capacity and bought to the fore deep divisions in society. Scholars have a lot of expertise to offer in the post-COVID recovery and can help shape a new era of practice. In this brief, I focus on two big challenges and set out some recommendations for a collaborative way forward.

2. From Big Questions to Big Challenges

The global pandemic poses many challenges for governments across the world and offers new

opportunities for collaborating to address them. There has been plenty of debate between scholars about what the so-called ‘big questions’ of the field are or should be. These questions have swung between narrower organisational questions about motivation and measurement, for example, through to more normative questions about what matters for societies and the institutions that can shape society for the future.

In a time of global catastrophe, where COVID-19 is colliding with international social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, and populism and authoritarianism are on the rise, these questions only get us part of the way. The questions we care about should focus more on the consequences and value for society in which public administration is embedded and where we can make a difference.

This is why we need a pivot from ‘big questions’ towards ‘big challenges’, so that public administration and management scholars can work closely with practitioners to address these challenges in real time. This reorientation has been developing over the last few years: the National Academy of Public Administration in the US has sketched its Grand Challenges and public administration scholars have also been moving towards a more problem-oriented, context-driven, interdisciplinary approach; an ‘integrative public administration’.

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The fast-moving environment we find ourselves in means that many challenges confront us. In a [recent article](#), I focused on two big challenges, arguing that scholars can collaborate and work across boundaries more intensively to make a difference to the practice of public administration. Here I sharpen that focus to government capacity and inequality and entrenched disadvantage.

As it turns out, political leadership matters when we need to engage citizens and rely on behavioural change such as mask-wearing, hand-washing, and social distancing, to help control the spread of the virus.

Trust, after being at [historic lows](#) pre-COVID is having a [comeback](#), although there is plenty of potential for the 'trust bubble' to burst, if

There can be no question that the COVID crisis has revealed gaps in government capacity across the world, and in some cases governmental failure.

3. Government Capacity

There can be no question that the COVID crisis has revealed gaps in [government capacity](#) across the world, and in some cases governmental failure.

Despite [warnings](#) for many years that a pandemic of this type was coming, there has been [great variation](#) across nations in their ability to respond. For all the talk of collaboration and investments in joined-up government to confront fast-moving, cross-jurisdictional challenges, the pandemic is showing us that the combination of [austerity](#) and the [lack of investment](#) in the public sector has profound consequences. Some have gone as far as calling the UK a [flailing state](#), if not a failed one, unable to even provide hospital staff with basic equipment needed.

Despite this, it is clear that during crisis, [citizens expect](#) their governments to be 'out front' battling the virus and providing support for them. What the current crisis has shown clearly is that effective government can't be conjured up at will; it requires [investment](#) over time.

Capacity is influenced by many factors, amongst others: [political leadership](#), trust in government, [relationships with others](#) and whether or not we have [expert public servants](#) thinking about low-visibility problems with high risk potential. Together such factors, and many others, have positioned some governments as more able to cope with the pandemic than others.

government competence is lacking. And recent evidence is showing that some of the [worst performing countries](#) to date have leaders who have ridden a wave of populism to power. Populism is not only fuelling the current crisis but is also being stoked by it and these political determinants of health are giving us new insights into the link between politics and outcomes for society.

Government's capacity rests on the contributions of other parties, however this reliance always comes with risks as well as rewards. In crisis, overreliance on other parties is catastrophic, illuminating the erosion of internal capacity or creating new risks for government and citizens. The [test-and-trace debacle](#) in the United Kingdom, the [hotel security scandal](#) in Victoria, and the [international failures of aged care](#) have all demonstrated the importance of considering how the [work of government](#) is done, but also demands that these capacity deficits be addressed.

The [debate](#) about capacity that has been going on now for some time is intensifying and rebuilding capacity will be a critical challenge moving forward. Scholars have a role here in making clear the factors that matter and devising ways in which to restore capacity within government. Rebuilding capacity must be a priority for government's moving forward, not only to ensure they can address current and future challenges, but also to maintain or enhance trust which, in turn, fuels citizens willingness to contribute to the actions needed to address complex problems.

4. Inequality and Entrenched Disadvantage

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as an accelerant of many entrenched issues, highlighting injustice, systemic inequality and entrenched disadvantage across the world. Data shows that a growing sense of unfairness impacts on trust in institutions, and also that those with less are bearing more of the burden, suffering, and illness during the pandemic. Without concerted action global suffering will escalate, jeopardising lives and livelihoods for years to come.

Already the United Nations has predicted that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy will lose their livelihoods, and in the UK evidence shows that those with the least are being most impacted. Years of progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals are being wiped out in months, and it is predicted that of the 1.5 billion children already forced out of school, some 700million of them, mostly in developing nations, may never return.

We are also seeing strong links between poverty, race and COVID-19. Poverty is being shown to both exacerbate the effects of the pandemic, but also to be exacerbated by it. And, despite claims that COVID-19 does not discriminate, the evidence suggests it does, and powerfully so. In the US, Black and Latino Americans are contracting the virus and dying more than White Americans. In Brazil Black and Indigenous Brazilians are dying at higher rates, and in the UK, Black and Asian groups have been more affected than White groups; people with disabilities have also fared much worse than others. In Australia, some groups are faring much worse, and this will sharpen as supports are withdrawn or scaled back. For

example, as government support for people without housing is removed, we expect to see a surge in homelessness.

Whilst government support has helped many, in some nations it has exacerbated inequality and disadvantage. In even the richest nations in the world, getting help from government has been challenging for many people. The US welfare system, for example, has crumpled under the pressure as millions of Americans try to access the social security system or special COVID payments. Not just a capacity issue due to underinvestment or outdated processes, or a system overwhelmed during crisis, many parts of these systems have embedded administrative burdens designed to make it more difficult for people to access entitlements. These encounters with government, familiar to those reliant on welfare, have shocked the masses who must now engage with these systems, often for a first time. Australia, for example, has one of the lowest payment rates in the OECD for the unemployed which has kept many people in poverty.

We have seen catastrophic failures in aged care the world over, again, in many of the world's wealthiest nations. Tens of thousands of elderly people have died due to warnings being ignored, a lack of preparedness, and pure neglect. In some nations, elderly people were left to die in aged care facilities (Spain), or hospitals refused to take those who had contracted the virus (Sweden). And in Victoria we have seen the disaster in an aged care system which complex mixes of public and private, intergovernmental responsibilities, and lax regulatory enforcement; all predictable and perhaps even avoidable.

Tackling inequality and entrenched disadvantage has been an important policy area and research

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focus, however there are new lessons from COVID-19 that can provide insight into ways forward. By working together practitioners and scholars have opportunities to make a last difference in some of these key areas. Whether that be through co-designing new regulatory frameworks for aged care, housing first models to solve homelessness, or working together to reset Australia's social security system, through rethinking payments and lifting people out of poverty rather than pushing them into it.

capacity and addressing inequality and disadvantage. *Common purpose* is critical to driving successful collaborations, as is developing shared goals and articulating these clearly. *Time* matters for both parties; time to develop rigour research and implement it but also to do so in a way that will have an impact in crisis. Designing appropriate *governance* arrangements for collaboration rather than defaulting to consultancy or arm-length contracting is critical to ensure the parties work together. Ensuring that

Highly successful collaborations between academics and practitioners require efforts from both parties, not just behavioural adaptation by one, and mutual understanding of the somewhat different environments in which parties operate.

5. Collaborating to Make a Difference

There is an extensive debate and literature on how scholars and academics should work together, most of it focused on changing behaviours and incentives of academics. As mentioned above, I consider the focus on barriers to be exaggerated, which leads to lost opportunities. If we are keen to collaborate in this crisis and beyond it makes more sense to look to successful collaborations rather than dwell on supposed tensions. In crisis we can also expect some of the barriers to shift as a focus on making a difference and tackling immediate challenges motivates parties.

Highly successful collaborations between academics and practitioners require efforts from both parties, not just behavioural adaptation by one, and mutual understanding of the somewhat different environments in which parties operate.

Drawing on a large-scale multi-year collaboration between practitioners and academics, we drew out five key lessons that provide guidance on how to overcome challenges and produce work that is targeted at tackling enduring challenges. Building these principles into relationships is especially relevant for how we might work together in substantial post-COVID projects to rebuilding

collaborative teams have the right mix of *knowledge, skills and experience* to drive the work forward and deal with tensions or conflicts that arise. Finally, building in *communication and team-building activities* ensures that the team works together rather than as buyer and producer of research.

6. Conclusion

The global pandemic has laid bare a range of challenges; some new, but others exacerbated by the scale and scope of the crisis. In this brief I have focused in on two specific 'big challenges' where practitioners and academics can work together, in new ways, to make a difference.

By drawing on successful large-scale collaborative projects and building new relationships around key lessons and principles from them, we have the opportunity to reset how we work together.

Doing so will provide a platform for addressing some of these big challenges, such as government capacity and inequality and entrenched disadvantage.

Fig 1 Poverty, Race, Age and COVID-19

Poverty is being shown to both exacerbate the effects of the pandemic, but also to be exacerbated by it. And, despite claims that COVID-19 does not discriminate, the evidence suggests it does, and powerfully so. In both the US and UK, minority communities are contracting the virus and dying more than the majority white community. In Brazil, Black and Indigenous Brazilians are dying at higher rates. In Australia, some groups are faring much worse, and this will sharpen as supports are withdrawn or scaled back. For example, as government support for people without housing is removed, we expect to see a surge in homelessness. We have seen catastrophic failures in aged care the world over, again, in many of the world's wealthiest nations. Tens of thousands of elderly people have died due to warnings being ignored, a lack of preparedness, and pure neglect.



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Note: Additional references are provided as hyperlinks within the text.

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Author

Janine O'Flynn is Professor of Public Management at the Melbourne School of Government, currently on secondment to the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. She is an award-winning scholar and teacher who focuses, in particular, on public sector reform and relationships; more recently her work is exploring the intersection of morality and the use of market mechanisms to deliver public services. In her research, education and engagement activities, she is committed to better understanding how government works and contributing to improving the outcomes of those activities.

Janine has provided expert advice to governments in Australia and internationally and is a fellow of the Institute of Public Administration Australia (Vic). She has been a member of expert and advisory boards to the Victorian and Australian governments and was a co-author of one of the [research papers](#) that informed the Independent Review of the Australian Public Service. Janine is a co-editor of the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* and a member of the editorial board of several of the leading journals in public administration and management.

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