Consultocracy in South African public service: A case of repositioned public administration curricula

Background: This article attempts to make a reasoned case for re-thinking and repositioning public administration education curriculum in South Africa considering the emerging ‘consultocratic’ regime in the public service. It appears that public managers are determined to outsource private knowledge and expertise with little efforts made to build their own internal capacity.

Aim: To establish ways in which the higher education sector can help in preparing future public servants in South Africa.

Setting: The article is an extract of the study that was conducted in 13 Limpopo-based municipalities, including provincial Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and South African local government association.

Methods: Qualitative methods were used to obtain perspectives from officials and practitioners involved in local government in order to establish reasons why public institutions over-consult.

Results: The main finding of this study shows that public institutions, municipalities in this case, over consult because of limited inhouse talent and skills shortage. Participants agreed that while municipalities take blame for ineffective recruitment strategies, higher education sector can play a bigger role in building future skilled graduates. A lack of critical thinking skills was said to be the main problem. With the backup from critical thinking theory, the study proved the need for revised Public Administration (PA) curricula.

Conclusion: The repositioning of PA education is encouraged considering that the public sector governance approach is said to be inspired by the market – oriented ideology, the New Public Management, which favours outsourcing against the central role of government.

Contribution: Inclusion of critical thinking as module in the PA discourse is recommended. Public sector is also urged to ease legislative red tapes to encourage innovation in the public service. This will guarantee skilled and readily available recruitment pool from which public sector can source talent from, but most significantly, a cultivation of tactical, critical, and strategic thinkers will positively challenge the prevailing consultocratic regime.

Keywords: consultocracy; consultants; public administration; qualification; South Africa.

Introduction

This article is a report on the findings of the research project that investigated ‘consultocracy in the South African local government’. It is based on one of the objectives designed to establish ways in which the higher education sector can help in preparing future skilled public servants in South Africa. In their article titled ‘South Africa’s universities aren’t training future civil servants for what the country needs’ Maserumule, Ngcaweni and Nkuna (2023) blamed the public administration education curriculum in South Africa considering the emerging ‘consultocratic’ regime in the public service. It appears that public managers are determined to outsource private knowledge and expertise with little efforts made to build their own internal capacity. The reason the country is in this dilemma is that the training of the current and future public servants lacks interdisciplinary approach needed to meet the country’ complex challenges, failure to grasp new problem solving and effective governance solutions and prospects that comes with technology, and lastly relying on the colonial theorisation of public management (Maserumule et al. 2023). Unfortunately, this problem is also writ large in the emerging practices of consultocratic managerialism, which have now become a resident within municipal governments. ‘Consultocracy’ refers to the heavy influence of non-elected private consultants on the elected government or authorities in the...
execution of public or constitutional responsibilities (Hood & Jackson 1991:24). This concept is used in this study in order to characterise the growing usage of consulting practices within the South African public sector, and local government in particular.

According to Auditor General (AG) South Africa (2018–2019, 2020–2021), consultancies or consulting as practice in public institutions, has yielded nothing more than perpetual frustration on the part of public budget. One of the few studies that analysed this phenomenon in South Africa (Theletsane 2015) concluded that government should not entertain any idea that suggests complete 'stoppage' on outsourcing but rather should leverage skills from the consultantship processes to build own internal capacity. Meanwhile this study agrees on the need for public service to build own administrative capacity; it argues that the prevailing conditions call for a different analytical direction from which new contributions can be made. As such, this contribution sets out to establish firstly, the reasons why public sector organisations, municipalities in this case, over-rely on consultants advise for service provision and key areas that they consult on. This will then lead the second part, which explores the role of a university as a preparatory ground for future public servants to establish ways in which their public administration curriculum can be re-designed to frustrate the culture of consultocratic managerialism before it can permanently embed itself within the public sector. The study was guided by the following research questions: why do municipal governments outsource private advice? In addition, how can the higher education sector assist in building future skilled or fit for purpose recruitment base for public sector through social science courses such as public administration?

**Background of the study**

Historical discourse on the usage of consultants in South Africa shows that the practice can be hinged both during the apartheid period (pre-1994) and in the post-apartheid period (post 1994). As pointed out by Oothseizen (2003), in the late 1990s consulting was so widespread that one would hardly find a state organ without consulting team somewhere in their corporate structure. A similar trend could be seen after the 1994 elections under the new government led by African National Congress (ANC), and this time was even marked with greater demands for the services of consultants around the world (Oothseizen 2003:17). Currently, 7 in 10 public institutions are involved in the consultanthip programme in South Africa (AG 2021). Recent literature shows that South African public sector is faced with skills challenges and there is walter of evidence showing that public servants are faced with skills inertia, which perpetually hinders effective public administration at all levels of government (Auditor General of South Africa 2021; Human Science Research Council 2022).

To deal with such crises, public managers resort to seeking external backup from their counterpart private sector. For some reasons, this practice has become commonplace where service delivery institutions at all levels of government from time to time will engage management consultants for managerial solutions. In 2021, the AG found that over 70% of all the 258 municipalities in the country had a recurring use of management consultants (AG 2020–2021). Government departments at national and provincial levels have not been exempted from this situation as they recorded over R 102 billion consultant fees from 2013 to 2015 (AG 2015).

A literature search into the use of consultants in the South African public sector points to the following areas of consulting, and may serve as significant indicators to determining the kind of skills needed by students and public servants in the immediate and long-term periods: Planning (internal strategic planning, engineering, land, etc.); Designing of roads; Facilitation (negotiations, workshops, etc.); Organising functions; Compiling financials; Developing and compiling of asset registry; Conducting research; and Legal services (AG reports, 2009–2010; 2010–2011; 2013–2014; 2020–2021). The AG reports, on the use consultants at national and provincial departments between the financial periods 2008–2009 and 2010–2011, shows that R100 billion was used mainly in the areas of planning, monitoring and evaluation of performance. Recently, local government has used over R100 billion for planning, compilation of financials, development and compilation of assets registry in the 176 of 258 municipalities country-wide (AG 2021). As indicated previously, the regrettable outcome of this audit is that very little positive outcomes were realised as the bulk of such departments and municipalities continues to receive qualified audit outcomes.

Furthermore, consultants such as McKinsey & Company, Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) and Deloitte have recently come under huge criticism, after it has been revealed during the State Capture Commission of Enquiry 2021 that they have [allegedly] corruptly acquired contracts with state-owned enterprise during the Zuma administration (Mazzucato & Collington 2023). Apparently, McKinsey & Company agreed to repay R 1 billion to government for the work it did at the financial and operationally troubled Eskom, the state power monopoly, alongside with the Gupta family – a wealthy family that was accused of using its proximity with the former president Jacob Zuma to influence cabinet decisions. In light of the aforesaid, it must be highlighted that South Africa is unfortunately not the only country where the above-listed consulting companies were implicated in ‘problematic’ billions worth contracts. Indonesia and the Kenyan governments have also had a fair share of similar experiences (Mazzucato & Collington 2023:28).

Apart from the above-listed big consulting companies, the South African government is also consulting various other domestic firms at various levels of government. In the past, calls for government departments and local government to refrain from ‘consultocracy’ have been made. In 2013, 2015 and 2018, former ministers of finance, Pravin Gordan, Nhanhla Nene and Tito Mboweni failed to deal with this problem despite cautioning organs of government about the use of consultants (Gordhan 2013; Mboweni 2019; Nene...
2015). In the 2022 medium term budget policy statement, the current finance minister Enock Godongwana announced that allocation of consultant services has been capped, which means that public institutions will have to apply for funding and file a strong motivation why they need funding for consultancy services (Godongwana 2022).

During the State Capacity conference held in KwaZulu-Natal province in November 2022, the Director – General in the National School of Government (NSG) mentioned that over R 2 billion is spent annually to train and capacitate public managers in all state departments, to which she lamentedly said very little is realised in return. Against this backdrop, this article suggests that the search for a solution should go beyond the existing options such as the training workshops conducted by the NSG, Public Sector Education Training Agency (PSETA) and Local Government Sector Education Agency (LGSETA). ‘Consultocracy’ does not only signify a lack of in-house skills and competencies on the part of the public managers but also highlights the disconnect between the calibre of public servants needed and the kind of education and training offered within the responsible sectors for preparing the future labour force.

The foregoing is consistent with the National Development Plan 2030’s (NDP 2012) call for vocational education and training colleges and universities to actively serve as preparatory ground among other things, for future public servants. According to Department of Higher Education and Training (2014:5), the curriculum for post–school education and training in the higher education should be ‘critical thinking, be relevant and respond to the changing national and global environment, [and] rapid changes in technology’. We further hold a view that the continual use of consultants in the public service, to some extent, demonstrates a problem of skills transference and containment during the consultanship process, but more importantly, it exposes the disconnections between the calibre of public servants needed at a particular period and the existing public administration curricula within the higher learning sectors where future public servants are prepared. For this, insights are drawn from one of the learning theories found in the discipline of education known as critical thinking theory not only to respond to questions of inter-disciplinary approach as lamented by Maserumule et al. (2023) but to also try and build future public managers equipped with necessary critical thinking skills needed for innovative thinking, problem solving and big data management. Understood from this premise, we do not withstand other possible factors such as corruption, nepotism and favouritism that may be contributing to the declining state or municipal capacities in South Africa but the argument, which we make throughout the article, is that these factors are not a direct reason why municipalities over-consult. Therefore, there is a need to confront this question and this study is an attempt to address the problem of consultocracy through higher education sector, in particular through the repositioned public administration education curriculum. The curriculum aspects are further dissected in the literature section and the intention is to contextualise the curriculum from the disciplinary perspective, dynamics, and other related issues.

**Literature review**

The current section is important as it aims to contextualise the key units of analysis, that is consultancy and public administration, within the existing body of knowledge. This is in relation to what previous studies have established regarding these phenomenon. The first part presents dynamics of the public administration discipline and their related impact on how the educational programme is designed.

**Public administration: The identity crisis and its impact on the educational programme design**

As an academic discipline, Public Administration dates back to the 18th century, and it is a common knowledge that it first appeared in print in the famous article by Woodrow Wilson in 1887 (Woodrow 1887). It is a popular held view that discipline dates back to that period even though others argue that it predates Wilson’s era. It is one of the disciplines that have gone through perpetual hardships in academia, with its identity questioned at some point in history. Going into the 1970s, pessimists such as Parker (1965) and Mosher (cited in Stillman 2000:4) had already predicted the demise of Public Administration. Just like some political scientists who ‘systematically downplayed Public Administration as either a field unworthy of serious study or even an essentially non-political activity’ (Riggs 1994:25), Parker and Mosher (cited in Stillman 2000:4) were extreme in their views. They argued that Public Administration does not exist at all. However, credit to the young academics who called for a conference known as Minnowbrook I in 1968 to respond ‘largely… to a question of relevance of Public Administration to the contextual dynamics and realities of that time and its future as an academic discipline’ (Maserumule 2010:356). They were able to cover handful issues including acceding to the fact that there will be change in paradigms (New Public Administration, New Public Service, Governance and New Public Management–NPM) but not the demise of the discipline. Notably, the ‘predominance of the market ideology under the doctrine of NPM in the development of Public Administration has had significant implications for public administration education’ (Basheka & Dassah 2015:196).

However, despite criticism on the identity of public administration the truth of the matter is that this discipline is interdisciplinary in nature and its defenders have not disputed this. According to Kayuni (2015:167), the interdisciplinary nature itself is not a concern, rather the fear is that public administration tend to somehow lose its identity in the process. To this end, observations by scholars such as Moharr (2000) and Caiden (1994) are unavoidable because they aptly summarise some of the fundamental identity crisis facing public administration when they say:

http://www.apsdpr.org
Medicine borrows from other physical and social sciences but maintain their separate integrated identity as a profession, public administration has not been able to do that. [Yet, other disciplines] dictate the contents and orientation of Public Administration. (Moharir 2000:73–78)

The most pressing issue is the separate identity of something calling itself Public Administration… Public Administration has yet to decide whether it is a supra-discipline, or sub-discipline and whether its practitioners belong to a master profession that includes all public employees. It does not know whether it is any of these or just a special focus of interest … it cannot decide where in this universe of the administrative state it should confine itself … it cannot fend off powerful rivals that nibble at its edges. (Caiden 1994:51)

These are some of the problems that affect the public administration programmes in higher education. It is for this reason, as per Basheka and Dassah’s (2015:196) experience of Ugandan situation, that ‘public administration graduates continue to compete with business administration graduates, with the latter receiving, by default, preference from most government departments because of favourable policy directive’. The same observation was made in South Africa, where Shopola, Mudau and Mukonza (2021) stressed the need for ‘hall marking’ the discipline of public administration to avoid employment competition with graduates from other disciplines.

The relationship between public administration as a discipline and practice remain significantly important for this study because the former is considered an important antecedent to the latter, especially in the context of skills and labour production for the state. According to Kroukamp (2012:13), the complexities and ambiguities around government and its constitutional mandates in the 21st century calls for a properly designed Public Administration training or instructional programme, which aims to ‘capacitate future public servants to think analytically and critically’. Public Administration in South Africa is offered in the traditional universities, universities of technologies, and technical vocational education and training colleges, and it is also believed to be the biggest recruitment base for government institutions because of its the theory part, which is clocked around government processes and structures. The design of the public administration curricula and contents thereto in the higher education institutions is set out in Appendix 1. Related analysis and unpacking of the curriculum contents of Public Administration as offered in South Africa is performed during the analysis of findings.

Consulting as a practice in public sector organisations – From Reagan and Thatcher’s perspectives

Outsourcing of public management responsibilities to consultants and their reliance thereof in the global public administrations has been on the spike since 1980s. It was during this period that the two famous school of thoughts on why consultants complete so much work for governments advanced by the former United States (US) president Ronald Reagan and former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher emerged. The first one is on the capacity argument, where governments were downsized in favour of the NPM reform package (i.e. privatisation and austerity budgets) especially around 1980s. At this time in point, most governments lost their internal capacity to produce the intended policy outcomes thereby turning to private sector firms for advice, new knowledge, and skills (Selepe & Shopola 2023).

It is from this continuum of inertias demonstrated by governments that neoliberalism, the umbrella theory of NPM paradigm, gained influence and this is what has precipitated the private sector perception that government is a problem, and they are a solution (Manyaka & Mukonza 2022). It can be argued that despite the global spread of neoliberalism and neo-institutionalisation of NPM into states craft, there has not been solid proof that it can drive a democratic developmental agenda. South Africa being an example, particularly since the advent pro–neoliberal policies such as Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) to the current NDP, has been experiencing massive corporate corruption and poor governance despite the involvement of private sector through the contracting methods (privatisation or consultancy or public private partnerships). Overall, Reagan and Thatcher’s argument on capacity might be legitimate but consulting has failed to guarantee government the much-needed capacity to meet its constitutional obligations, instead evidence shows that it is responsible for breeding anti-social and or democratic practices such as ‘consultocracy’.

The second school of thought is that consultants are uniquely placed to offer a neutral advice to leaders and the assumption that they possess up to date knowledge clothed with sophisticated business-oriented practices. One is somewhat inclined to agree with this argument, especially looking at the academic history and qualifications of the likes of McKinsey and Company, the founder of McKinsey and Company, and many other professional consultants from the so called ‘Big 5’ international consulting firms. They have a demonstratable academic and experiential record from the worlds’ rated research-based universities. Nevertheless, critical authors have disputed this argument, on the score that in certain cases public managers or leaders are reluctant to use the existing in-house skills and rather favours external consultants, which is considered more objective (Lapsley & Oldfield 2001). Although there is truth in this contention, it can also be argued, certainly, that issues of trust and biasness from those in the officialdom can also be a source of fear to leaders. Public office is time-bound, with politicians often clouded by the desire to get re-elected, they are certainly afraid to fail; hence they often outsource advise from outside. Of course, this has nothing to do whether there is internal talent and capacity rather they believe that consultants are well placed to offer objective advise because of the inherent business knowledge but also that they can also be easily used as ‘scapegoats’ by leaders to escape public accountability (Steiner & Reichmuth 2015).

The educational perspectives

This educational perspective is an extension of the foregoing second argument by Reagan and Thatcher, and it lays a good basis for this study’s contention that perhaps the solution to
deal with consultocratic tendencies lie not only in the training of officials in the work environment but also in the public administration curricula. As such, the educational background of consultants could be another interesting angle from which the question raised through the heading of this section can be addressed. Indeed, some in the academia have observed that the national provision of business schools, and Master of Business Administration in particular, corresponds strongly with consulting usage (Momani & Malecki 2012). Therefore, it is equally important that the 18th century that saw the emergence of one of the first consultants in the engineering sector, Fredrick Taylor is revisited, and this provides a meaningful basis for the interrogation of the South African public administration qualification design, which is done at a later stage of the article.

Taylor worked for Manufacturing Investment Company of Philadelphia as an engineering consultant in 1893. In ‘Principles of Scientific Management’, written in 1913, Taylor raised the possibility of thinking management needs as a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws, rules and principles. Historical recollections show that Taylor’s managerial ideas influenced the curriculum of the first class of Harvard Business School in 1908 (StrategyU 2023). It also worth noting that although engineering disciple remain a point of departure, the history of consulting industry has reinvented itself many times and played numerous different roles. This part of history is important because it explains the consultants’ source of attraction. Harvard is a private research university and has consistently been ranked one of top business schools in the world. O’Mahoney and Sturdy (2016) noticed that in the US and the United Kingdom and other countries where business schools are highly valued, strategy consultancies specifically can better exert forms of direct and indirect power. Sturdy et al. (2009) concur, and further added that this relationship can be explained through ready supplies of recruits for consultancies, and more diffusely, via clients and consultants sharing a language or mind set and thus attributing greater legitimacy to this management knowledge. Therefore, as seen in the study by Engwall et al. (2016), the ties between business schools, publishers and or media and consultancies, in the US especially, are central to ‘defining management’ itself as well as enabling the dominance of a business education for elite graduates who often draw on consultancy-type problems and solutions.

Moreover, the orthodox literature suggests that consultants are those private persons who possess high level critical and strategic thinking skills, and have demonstratable ability to solve challenges of the business matrix; hence, it is by no surprise that many public administrations around the world have become the biggest consumers of consulting services (Consulting Readiness Index 2018; Source Global Research 2015). There is also a belief that consultants are problem solvers, efficiency experts or business healers who study the organisational or business matrix to understand certain occurrences and how such occurrences can be translated into actions in order to generate workable business solutions (Thleletsane 2015:276). And to greater extents, this is the reason why the consulting industry has been attractive to other businesses and largely, to governments. In addition, the global public administrations are increasingly ‘guided by private sector models and interests rather than democratic consensus and bureaucratic accountability’ (Ylonen & Kuusela 2018:243).

Theoretical insights

Generally, this study drew theoretical insights from a number of theories including the neoliberal theory, resources-based theory, the principal–agent theory, collaboration theory as well as the critical thinking theory. However, critical thinking theory is presented for purposes of the current article. Therefore, as aptly indicated earlier on, the modern-day public administration has proved to be complex and its constantly changing environment makes it very challenging to fulfil constitutional obligations. In this instance, the need for critical thinkers as part of the bureaucratic regime cannot be over-emphasised. Also, the introduction of neoliberal paradigm that involves outsourcing of public responsibilities to the private sector signifies among other things a gap in the state craft. Outsourcing of advice from private sector that has become a common practice in the post-World War II is an appreciation on the part of bureaucracy that they lack skills (analytical, problem solving, cognitive or otherwise). Higher education can therefore play a productive role for critical thinkers or future public administrators. As UNESCO (2015:39) correctly pointed out, education in the 21st century should include critical thinking, independent judgement, and debate. Resultantly, this study draws insights from the critical thinking theory, and this selection is informed by the theory’s reflective and analytical abilities as well as cognitive flexibility to interrogate the etymology and ontological base of a phenomenon for correct judgement and decision making.

Generally, critical thinking theory involves ‘thinking about thinking in an intellectually disciplined manner’ (Paul 2005:28), which amounts to a ‘purposeful, reasoned and goal-directed’ (Halpern 1998:450), aimed primarily at ‘deciding what to believe or do’ (Ennis 2011:1). From the perused literature there is no consensus on what critical thinking is but this is understandable because it is a highly contested concept in the discipline of Education where it originates. Some in the academia posit that critical thinking is a cross-disciplinary concept and is also found in ‘everyday life, when time comes for dialogical interaction and decision making and problem solving’ (Franco, Vieira & Tenreiro-Vieira 2018:133). However, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (cited in Franco et al. 2018) offers six-clustered innovative pedagogical framework from which critical thinking can be inculcated in the context of higher education, and public administration curricula stands to benefit from this (Figure 1).

Meanwhile some of the clusters in the OECD framework may be covered in the design of public administration curricula in South Africa, it can be said that elements such as experiential learning, computational thinking and multiliteracies and discussion-based learning are very crucial but lacking. Computational thinking that involves decomposition of
ethnomethodology, and results from other theoretical frameworks is not required for this study. The qualitative research methods were selected because the study focused on people’s experiences and understanding rather than quantitative data. The researchers employed open-ended interviews and focus group discussions to elicit the views and opinions of the respondents. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and guided by the themes that emerged from the literature review. The interview responses were transcribed and analyzed to identify patterns and themes. Throughout the study, ethical considerations were observed, including obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. The findings indicated that the public sector in South Africa faces challenges such as a lack of skilled employees, inadequate training programs, and the need for improved management practices. The study recommended the implementation of an innovative pedagogical approach that emphasizes critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovative thinking. The results also highlighted the importance of developing a culture of continuous learning and professional development. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the public sector’s workforce development and the need for innovative solutions to address the skills gap. The findings have implications for policymakers, educators, and practitioners seeking to improve the quality of public service delivery.
development plans, local economic development etc.), legal services, roads and transportation, environmental analysis, as well as development of by-laws and regulations. This information formed part of the findings and its significance is that it does not only inform the current questions but also provides a broader picture of that which municipal governments are seeking advice on but are not recorded or attended to during auditing by AG, usually on the grounds of scope and resources. Next we detail how the questions were answered and analysed as per the developed themes.

**Theme 1: A lack of in-house talent, skills and competencies**

We confirmed through interviews with officials in the municipalities that public managers are relentlessly seeking consultant’s advice on managerial functions because of limited inhouse capacity, skills and competencies. One senior official in Vhembe District Municipality had this to say:

> ‘[W]e are honestly handy capped because of lack of skills and internal talent. Look, in one of my division I have many officials who have been in the system for more than fifteen years, we train them after every two years, but we can’t see the results because when time comes to compile AFS they offer nothing.’ (P1, female, senior official)

The official further concluded that ‘in that instance we cannot risk …we hire consultants’ (P1, female). McMaster (2019) raised the concern about officials inability to develop skills and understand job description despite having spent more time in the same office. Ijioma and Nzewi (2016) recommended ‘right attitude’ for learning, and properly applying the work procedures. This recommendation complements critical thinking theory, which suggests that attitude, work and procedural applications, critical reflection of the envisaged outcomes and the immediate and long-term goals are needed to determine the kind of attitude from employees and their leaders.

Other participants from Mopani District Municipality, Balulalaborwa Municipality and Waterberg Municipality echoed the afore-quoted sentiment, with P5: male official in Waterberg Municipality plainly stating that ‘consulting is something we will not stop anytime soon for as long we hire people who are not equipped and ready to serve’. Despite the aforesaid, Capricorn District Municipality presented a completely different case in that they are the only municipality that did not hire consultants for the development of annual financial statements in the past five years. One of the senior officials in the Finance and Budget Unit revealed that their strategy lies in the higher education sector:

> ‘We hire student for 24 months…train them on the National Treasury materials and then we are done. Students are easy to train, and we take advantage of their eager to learn as they are fresh from class’. (P8, male, senior official)

Asked whether they think universities and colleges can help in developing skilled future officials, the majority of participants agreed. This brings us to the next theme that looked into the curriculum of public administration since it’s the biggest contributor of graduates to the public sector workforce (Shopola et al. 2021). One of the most important services that this theme rendered to the discussion herein is that it confirms that public sector is faced with the problems of skills and talent and consultocracy. In other words, the premise under which a proposal for repositioned public administration curriculum is made clear, thus justifying the author’s argument about the need to interrogate the role that universities can play in building the future civil servants.

**Theme 2: On the role of higher education in designing public administration curriculum**

The current theme is not born out of the primary data as with the previous theme. It is a finding from the reviewed authoritative and scholastic literature. Essentially, it reports and discusses issues of public administration curricula design and further assesses whether its current form can be trusted with the responsibility of producing critical skills that, as desired, can interrupt and counter the emerging consultocratic practice in the public service. Appendix 1 details the overall design of public administration curricula in various universities and colleges in South Africa. This it does by focussing the name of university or college, qualification type (which for sake of this study diploma or degree were chosen), course duration and levels, as well as key modules or subjects offered under each of the 3 years (see Appendix 1). As a matter of re-emphasis, and as indicated in the introductory section, it is expected that upon interrogating the design of learning and training programmes in South Africa, this study will establish ways in which the higher education and training sector can help in preparing future public servants to frustrate the culture of consultocratic managerialism before it can permanently embed itself within the public sector. Next, the authors offer their observations of the curricula in its current design (as outlined in Appendix 1) and in the process problematic areas are identified and dissected.

Firstly, public administration in South Africa is offered under different names but with not so different curricula content. For example, in Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) the qualification is called Public Affairs while in other institutions such as North West University, Unisa and in TVET colleges it is in different names. But what could be the reason for that? The cause might be the disciplines’ identity crisis that has been alluded to somewhere in the texts of this article. Thus, the likes of TUT have recently redesigned its programme to the name Public Affairs (TUT 2019), and the suspicion is that they wanted to address the criticism raised in Mount Grace conference in 2001 where upon evaluation it was said that the teaching and theory and practice of Public Administration is ‘too descriptive: lacking sufficient analytical, explanatory and predictive techniques’ (Cameron & Milne 2009:386). Most importantly, it could also be that TUT, in moving away from Public Management to Public Affairs, was trying to avoid the conceptual error by some scholars who in the past conflated public administration with
public management. The fallacious assumption that the introduction of public management into the theory and practice of public administration somehow relegates or subsumes the discipline of PA should be avoided. Schwella et al. (1991) are correct to say that public management represents only a foci which are ‘useful for teaching and for managing public institutions... [and] they do not negate the need to study other aspects of public administration’.

Therefore, such alignments and conceptualisations of the public administration instructional programme are quite important, especially in the context of the changing world of the 21st century and the challenges of globalisation that have, thus far, presented a compelling basis for developing countries such as South Africa to create a ‘sustainable intellectual capital for their effective competitiveness in the international economy’ (Maserumule 2010:77). Thus, with the intellectual capital it is expected that students will demonstrate the quality and relevance of knowledge that does not only place the country at competitive advantage in the broader scheme of global economy but also to build the envisaged skilled and professional bureaucracy, which is central to the developmental state discourse.

The last and second observation that authors made about public administration curricula (Appendix 1) is that it does not offer critical thinking as a module. None of the institutions does that. Of course, we now know from the theoretical discussion that critical thinking is one of the most important aspect of life and higher education is a strategic centre where critical skills can be cultivated for social good (Francho et al. 2018; UNESCO 2015:39). The call for critical thinking modules in this study stems from the need to produce critical, competitive and strategic thinkers in the public administration discourse. These elements, as the authors observed, are part and parcel of the educational package in business schools where the consulting industry recruits from. From literature, there is also no doubt that, as part of the education and training, business schools prepare their students to meet its constitutional obligations. The regrettable truth, again, is that once these dependencies thrive it makes it very difficult to ignore Barley’s argument in the context of skills transference is concerned. To clear that the consultantship programmes requires further alignment of skills from a consultant to municipal officials unless officials have the appropriate skills. Looking at the findings of this study and that of the HSRC (2022) study that informs this study, it is correct to submit that it is impossible to enforce the transfer of skills from a consultant to municipal officials unless officials have the appropriate skills. Looking at the findings from this study and that of the HSRC (2022) study that investigated municipal skills and capacity assessment, it is clear that the consultantship programmes requires further interrogation in as far as skills transference is concerned. To this end, it will be difficult to ignore Barley’s argument in the context of skills transference to the municipal officials.

In addition, it can be said that these dependencies are central to the creation of consultocratic managerialism in the public sector. Also, because of skills shortage and the inherent inertia to produce a pool of graduates with critical thinking skills by universities and colleges in the higher education, government is likely to sustain the consultocratic approach as a way to meet its constitutional obligations. The regrettable truth, again, is that once these dependencies thrive it makes it very challenging for the public managers and ordinary government officials to harness the needed critical skills from consultantship processes, as an expected outcome by guidelines on cost containment measures like the National Treasury Instruction 01 of 2013/2014 and many other guidelines.

The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (2021) is correct to submit that it is impossible to enforce the transfer of skills from a consultant to municipal officials unless officials have the appropriate skills. Looking at the findings from this study and that of the HSRC (2022) study that investigated municipal skills and capacity assessment, it is clear that the consultantship programmes requires further interrogation in as far as skills transference is concerned. To this end, it will be difficult to ignore Barley’s argument in the context of skills transference to the municipal officials.
Resource Based Theory when he says that the competitive strength of private firms lies in the protection of their main ‘skill’ or ‘ingredient’ against any form of exposure (Barney 1991). This might justify the criticism levelled against consultants that they sometimes deny public officials an opportunity to harness skills from consultancy process.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to establish ways in which universities and colleges as institutions of training and education can help in preparing future public servants to frustrate the emerging culture of consultocratic managerialism within public sector. To quote Ijioma and Okafor (2015):

[7] The public administration education and training should be designed to practically and theoretically prepare and motivate students through relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies to effectively, and efficiently deal with public sector challenges. (p. 118)

Indeed, the current dynamics presented by changing public administration environment where the business inspired dogma, the NPM, dominates the policy sector it will be prudent that higher education sectors also adjust the course designs and contents to produce the up-to-date graduates.

The study’s findings revealed two crucial things. Firstly, as confirmed by participants, the problem of consultocracy has to do largely with limited in-house talent and skills. The majority of participants also acknowledged that meanwhile their recruitment strategies are not perfect, institutions of higher learning such as universities and colleges can assist greatly by preparing graduates who are equipped with the needed skills to solve complex governance challenges. For this to happen, we suggested that students need to be taught critical thinking which is one of the commendable modules for resilience, knowledge and data management, among others (OECD 2018). Secondly, as the findings further revealed, none of the universities and colleges in South Africa offers critical thinking as part of public administration undergraduate qualifications. This presents a disconnect between the current public administration environment and the type of knowledge that universities and colleges equip future public administrators with. Resultantly, the authors submit that adding the critical thinking modules throughout the duration of public administration qualification will make a long-term solution to counter consultocracy. However, much as this recommendation is crucial for uprooting consulting dependencies in public service, government will still need to do the following things:

- **Adoption of the legal framework to allow innovativeness** – currently the legal framework is rigid, for, it is difficult for officials to propose programmes or new ideas. It seems although that new ideas or proposals are only valid if they are private sector sponsored. Hence, in Reagan and Thatcher’s understanding, leaders believe consultants are best positioned to offer objective advise or expertise.

- **Change in recruitment government philosophy** – the mentality that business administration graduates are better compared with public administration should change.

- **Hall–mark the discipline of public administration** – the competition with people from other disciplines is somehow caused by the lack of strict professional hallmarks for the discipline of public administration (Shopola et al. 2021).

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Competing interests

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Authors’ contributions

A.M.S., R.M. and R.K.M. contributed significantly in this study.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.M.S., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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## Table 1-A1: Public Administration course outlook in some South African universities and TVET colleges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergraduate Programme in Public Administration</th>
<th>University of South Africa</th>
<th>North West University</th>
<th>Tshwane University of Technology</th>
<th>University of Pretoria</th>
<th>Capricorn TVET College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>Diploma in Public Administration and Management</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts in Public Governance with Public Administration</td>
<td>Diploma in Public Affairs</td>
<td>B Admin (Public Management and International Relations)</td>
<td>Public Management: Offered under 191 Nated 6 (equivalent to National Diploma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key/compulsory modules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First level</td>
<td>Business Management IA</td>
<td>Public Administration; Political Studies; Sociology and History</td>
<td>Governance and Public Leadership IA</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public Sector Economics IA</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Public Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public Affairs IA</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Computer (9 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>Public Resource Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second level</td>
<td>Project Management IIA</td>
<td>Public Administration; Political Studies; Sociology and History</td>
<td>Communication for academic purpose IA</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Resource Management IIA</td>
<td></td>
<td>Public Sector Economics IB</td>
<td>Political Science OR International Relations</td>
<td>Municipal Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public Affairs IB</td>
<td>Communication Management</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship Business Management (9 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Managing Human Capital in Public Sector IIA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third level</td>
<td>Public Financial and Procurement</td>
<td>Public Administration; Political Studies;</td>
<td>International relations IIA</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>Experiential Learning (18 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public Affairs IIIA</td>
<td>Political Science OR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>