

# Executive programs for Brazilian mid-career public managers: Pitfalls and challenges

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**Regina Silvia Pacheco**

Getulio Vargas Foundation FGV-EAESP, São Paulo SP, Brazil

**Cibele Franzese**

Getulio Vargas Foundation FGV-EAESP, São Paulo SP, Brazil

## Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges of professional education for mid-career public managers at graduate level, pointing out pitfalls to avoid and obstacles to face. Analyzing the Brazilian case, the goal is to raise issues that may also be present in other cases. The main argument developed here is that the puzzle faced by graduate programs on public administration requires an equal distance from training and from academic programs. Education programs for professionals in public administration should address their own challenges – namely problem-solving and interdisciplinarity.

## Keywords

Professional education, interdisciplinarity, mid-career public managers, problem-solving approach

## Introduction

This paper discusses the challenges faced by professional education for Brazilian mid-career public managers at graduate level, starting both from the experience of Getulio Vargas Foundation (GVF), and the National School of Public Administration – ENAP. The challenges are due to several factors, involving preconceived views on the professionals' cognitive abilities and preferences on theoretical academic programs. Other

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### Corresponding author:

Regina Silvia Pacheco, Getulio Vargas Foundation FGV-EAESP, Avenida Nove de Julho 2029 – 01313-902 São Paulo SP, Brazil.

Email: [regina.pacheco@fgv.br](mailto:regina.pacheco@fgv.br); telephone: +55 11 3799-3446

challenges arise from the mimicry of evaluation criteria imposed on professional programs by the agency that regulates graduate programs – that tends to emulate the criteria from academic programs to evaluate the professional programs.

The main argument developed here is that the puzzle faced by graduate programs on public administration is not restricted to the binomial education versus training, as analyzed by Barberis (2012) in a previous issue of this journal. In our view, graduate programs on public administration require an equal distance from training and from academic programs.

In Brazil, education for public managers is inspired by two main models: on the one hand, the academic model of theoretical education and research, achieving a University degree as MSc or PhD; on the other, the French model, based in *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA), to form permanent high staff for the state. Universities and government schools tend to design their programs with reference to these two traditions.

The graduate programs specially designed for professionals have been developed in Brazil from the late 2000s, as part of a new governmental policy aimed at professional education. Until then, there was only the academic master (MSc), where are enrolled two groups with different profiles: young students who wanted an academic career; and professionals who wanted to reflect on their practice.

From the 2000s, with incentives announced by the Federal Government, especially with regard to professionals in the public sector, the universities started to offer master's degrees in public administration. Many of them aimed at a single governmental organization, to finance courses with classes composed solely by their employees. Some of these courses were similar to the academic program, while others were structured around “how-to-do tools”, more task oriented and job specific, in the words of Barberis (2012).

The program launched in 2008 by GVF differs from the others since it seeks to join theoretical education with orientation to problem solving. It does not fit within the dichotomy of education versus training. It embraces radically the goal to “encourage and develop processes of reflection and critical thought” (Barberis, 2012: 88), while it challenges its participants and professors to exercise applied thought and to use collaborative methodologies. Their courses are open, merging various types of professionals working around public affairs such as mid-career public managers, but also professionals of the third sector and the private sector working in close interaction with the state or under strong state regulation. Therefore, it merges critical and multi-disciplinary analysis with intervention, as well as theoretical and historical knowledge with real problems. It builds a bridge between knowledge, understanding and personal competencies to solve problems, from the interaction between the diversity of professional backgrounds of the participants and the solid theoretical perspective brought by professors.

## **The ENAP experience, the ENA influence**

Getting rid of ENA's influence is no small challenge, when speaking of preparing the staff for the public sector in Brazil. The ENA model has always held attraction for the

Brazilian bureaucracy and occupied a prominent place as a reference for the education of personnel for the public sector – especially after the democratization of the country in 1985 (ending 21 years of military dictatorship). It has also always been seen as a form of establishing permanent bodies of state who could oppose the authoritarian or populist politicians (based on their self-proclaimed superiority).

Thus, under the ENA model and collaboration, in 1986 the National School of Public Administration (ENAP) was created. ENAP is a government school inspired by ENA, with the aspiration to form the elite of the Brazilian federal bureaucracy (Pacheco, 2002)<sup>1</sup>.

Its initial project intended that the high bureaucracy should be educated within a government school (both in undergraduate and graduate programs) and thus outside of the academic environment. For this reason, the creation of ENAP provoked a reaction from universities – which finally managed to ban the granting of formal degrees by ENAP for not being a university.

The project of ENAP was ambitious but its achievements were modest from its creation until the mid-1990s, during which only one first group of elite bureaucrats was formed. Indeed, the project lost importance under the ultra-liberal Collor administration. And ENAP faced discontinuities in leadership: in a span of two years, ENAP had six different heads.

In 1995, the Brazilian Federal Government launched a broad program of reform of the state apparatus, in tune with international trends; in that context, ENAP's purpose and goals were reviewed (Pacheco, 2002). Distancing itself from the ENA model, ENAP designed short programs for intermediate managers and resumed induction courses to qualified careers – but under a renewed mentality not aimed at promoting the aspiration to an “elite”. The purpose emphasized the development of managerial tools, offering opportunities for large numbers of public employees (over 135 thousand in eight years)<sup>2</sup>. At that stage, the challenge was not about the opposition between education and training, but between long-term pre-experience education and managerial short programs (introduction of management by results, focus on the citizen, and cost-consciousness).

At that time, ENAP also formulated a Master to be offered by three Brazilian universities, financed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The project did not prosper because the IDB demanded an international competition in order to choose the universities that would offer the Masters, which was considered inappropriate by the Brazilian Government, since national universities were fully capable to offer it. From there, ENAP decided to create a program *lato sensu* of specialization in contemporary public management<sup>3</sup>.

The trajectory of ENAP shows the evolution of education for managerial staff in the Brazilian post-democratization period; initially marked by the influence of ENA, in the 1980s the model polarized tension between in-house education (via government school) and university education complemented by ENAP's shorter and managerial courses. The first model looked at promoting certain *esprit de corps*. The second model, more open, was intended to fight the idea of elite and their *esprit de corps*, and to support the proposals aimed at overcoming the bureaucratic model.

## **Getulio Vargas Foundation and a new Masters for professionals**

Going back to this trajectory helps in understanding the context of creation of the Masters by GVF, in 2008. The proposal of a Masters by GVF was based on a new meaning of professionalism in the public sector, one that focuses on leadership, commitment of managers and employees to the values of efficiency, results, accountability and transparency, in line with the strategic reorientation of the State apparatus.

The course is organized on a combination of theoretical approaches and applied analysis.

Its contents articulate politics, public policy and management, based on the main advances in these fields in Brazil and other countries. Participants should be empowered by acquiring a critical view of the complex issues related to the action of the government and its interfaces with a wide range of actors, including governmental, private and non-governmental actors.

Mixed audiences allow for the exchange of experiences and points of view. The participants have on average more than ten years of professional experience, coming from different governmental organizations, but also from the third sector and the private sector. This creates opportunity for interchange of views on the same issues – one of the highlights of the program.

Among the compulsory courses, most bring theoretical content in the analysis of the State, bureaucracy and public policy, coming from political science, sociology and economics. The contact with classical literature of these disciplines on those subjects gives participants a basis for overcoming the common sense view. With this basis, participants begin to develop a self-confidence that makes them suitable for new challenges.

Interestingly, this differs from the sense of superiority shared by members of the elite careers in the civil service. GVF-Masters participants appropriate these contents in order to deepen their knowledge and understanding of problems in the public sphere. They are not better than others because they passed a competitive exam and became part of a caste; they are better to themselves, in relation to their condition prior to the course, since now they are able to grasp the complexity of the State in its multiple dimensions.

Another aspect of the Masters is the seeking of adequacy to the needs of each participant, managing their demands with flexibility. It is a simple principle, but not always present in academic programs, which typically have preference for rigid and homogeneous rules. Participants are subject to new situations linked to their jobs, leading to enrollment changes or other adaptations. The detailed course design should allow participants to reconcile their professional, academic and family commitments – all of which are important, considering their age and life stage.

It is also very important not to confuse the Masters final work with an academic dissertation. Mimicry in this case causes disasters, both for the program and for the participant. The conclusion work is organized in the form of a Capstone Project. It is about a real problem, from an existing organization, which will be analyzed during six months by a small group of students (two or three). Each student should also develop an individual paper on a theme unfolded from their working group. The students are asked

to choose a subject outside their specialty and outside their employer organization (to avoid embarrassments and constraints against the critical analysis of the problem).

The challenge is to integrate the knowledge acquired throughout the course, facing the dilemma of multidisciplinary in order to deepen the diagnosis of the problem and propose and prioritize alternative solutions to the problem. The assessment takes into account the mobilization and integration of different fields of knowledge, the quality of problem diagnosis, and the relevance and applicability of the formulated proposals<sup>4</sup>.

This way of organizing the final work is not at all similar to what Barberis (2012) characterized as a “training agenda”. The students will not give immediate answers to problematic situations that they experience in their work. They will instead exercise interdisciplinarity, consensus building, critical analysis, insight and ability to quickly learn about a subject.

This is, in fact, applied research. While universities are looking to have impact through their research (Bastow et al., 2014), the work done at the end of the course by Masters participants should be of interest also for evaluators and financers of academic work.

## **Academy and hierarchy: The place of professional education**

Being able to be characterized as a mix of theoretical knowledge and applied research can differentiate the Masters for Professionals from simple training but does not eliminate the prejudice that surrounds the professional programs within the academic environment; in fact, a hierarchical ranking prevails in academia, in relation to both public administration and the professionals to whom it is intended.

Barberis (2012: 86–87) develops the argument that public administration is not an academic discipline but a subject that requires, for its analysis, distinct disciplines: political science; economics; law; sociology; organizational theory; and administration. The use of different disciplines imposes the challenge of interdisciplinarity, which we will deal with in the next section. What is relevant here is to highlight the other problems resulting from this disciplinary diversity.

The use of different disciplines, at least in the Brazilian context, confers certain fragility to the field of public administration – but the reasons are not the same as usually formulated by scholars. At international level, Box (1992), in a review of critics on public administration research, offered an important alternative approach on the field, challenging the narrow point of (academic) view.

In the Brazilian context, Pacheco (2003) points out as the main problem the fact that concepts and theories are borrowed without the establishment of an effective dialogue with authors from other disciplines. Object and methods are oscillating and also often borrowed, with extensive use of case studies. The result is analysis often descriptive, normative and prescriptive. If we add to this the militant tone that transpires in many papers and theses, the results are predictable even before the analysis. Moreover, there are few specific schools dedicated to public administration as their main focus; programs, professors and researchers are often installed in business schools, law schools or social sciences schools.

All these aspects make public administration a fragile area within academia, seen as a subject and not as a disciplinary field. Political science, a field of much greater prestige in the academic world, tends to be seen as a model and reference, with its canons, themes and fashions. In this institutional environment, rather exacerbated in Brazil, understanding the State from the inside and its transformations ends up being relegated to many steps down the hierarchy of the different disciplines in academia.

There is still another misjudgment, according to the dominant view in the academic world: the world of professionals. Candidates for mid-career professional education programs have not attended academic institutions for years. For the academic world, they can be considered far less prepared than young people fresh out of universities, because they are not familiar with the main authors and their works, nor disciplined under the rigor of scientific method, do not know how to make citations or organize references. Making the academic world interested in the development of these professionals is a challenge. The academic world largely ignores the specific challenges of professional education. It does not value and sometimes disdains them. This occurs even in areas as applied as public administration.

Evaluators of graduate programs in public administration in Brazil are very far from what is stated by Newcomer and Allen (2015: 43–44). According to these authors, the main outcome of public affairs education is to contribute to improve governance and to the public interest. Our evaluators would probably say that the desired outcome is to have participants begin using the scientific method. This would reproduce the deep unfamiliarity with the specific challenges of professional education, and would create incentives for professional programs to emulate the academic logic, thus confounding goals and creating second-tier programs. As a result of all this, the importance given to graduate programs aimed at mid-career professionals is diminished.

In this context, international accreditation can be a foothold for the quality and legitimacy of professional education. By examining programs based on specific parameters of public administration and professional education, the processes of assessment and self-assessment can contribute not only to improve the programs from the recommendations, but also to sustain the programs. An external seal can thus contribute to the recognition of the program within the institution in which it is offered<sup>5</sup>.

## **Cognitive challenges: Interdisciplinary approach and applied research**

Interdisciplinarity is very important for professional education – perhaps even more than for academic programs. Researchers tend to be specialists, while good professionals and public officers should be generalists and aimed at problem-solving. How to prepare them to analyze problems integrating various disciplines? What analytical methods are appropriate to the perspective of professional education?

Despite the debate on positive and negative consequences of interdisciplinarity teaching (van der Waldt, 2014), it should be considered as mandatory for programs in public administration devised for professionals. It is the fundamental perspective for

building a conceptual basis for understanding the State and its partners, facing concrete problems and outlining feasible and adequate solutions to these problems.

The academic programs are increasingly aimed at specialization. PhD programs aim to prepare researchers and have as strategy the focus on the individual student's trajectory in interaction with their advisor. Graduate programs for professionals have different objectives. Participants must have the opportunity, during the program, to expand topics, multiply perspectives of approach, integrate knowledge from several disciplinary fields and integrate knowledge with professional experience.

Professional education must therefore be oriented to problem-solving and offer participants the opportunity to meet new challenges (get out of their comfort zone and analyze new problems). These aspects were defined as central for the GVF-Masters. The program attempts to translate the challenges of interdisciplinarity in the pedagogical objectives.

These aspects were defined as central for the assessment of the Master in Public Policy and Management (MPGPP). Having adopted the Assurance of Learning methodology in 2013, the assessment framework focuses on student learning outcomes – the same orientation that is adopted by Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration as accreditation standards in the United States. The GVF program outcomes are assessed using the participants' final work – the Capstone Project, which is similar to other experiences (Ahmed, 2015)<sup>6</sup>.

How to prepare participants to integrate the knowledge in an interdisciplinary perspective? Some initiatives reorganized the curriculum around problems, for which contents were assigned; others adopted the problem-based learning (PBL). The PBL does not seem to suit the characteristics of mid-career professionals; the problem-based approach is more suitable when applied to younger students.

Instead, we seek to offer a variety of methods, from design thinking to georeferencing, foresight, techniques of scenario elaboration, as well as research tools – besides theoretical foundations.

An important mechanism to create demand for an interdisciplinary approach and applied methods is the existence of terms of reference for the Capstone Project, as stated above. The challenge, however, is not yet surpassed in terms of the choice of methods for applied research and interdisciplinary analysis. The advisor professors have a major role as supporters of the two perspectives – interdisciplinary analysis with the use of applied research methods – which lead to the question of the composition of the faculty group: what is the ideal mix? Surely not only practitioners; but it is probable that traditional scholars would not respond to the challenge.

## **Knowledge, values and self-confidence**

Programs for mid-career attract people aged 30–45 years. Some features associated with this age group are: they often opted for professional life after completing higher education and they often assumed financial and professional commitments over the years. At this stage of personal and professional life, applying for a Masters involves various efforts: to commit to a long program (one or two years) during which one must dedicate

much of their free time (which to many is already scarce); reconcile performance on the course with professional commitments; and take on a new financial commitment often important. In most cases, there is no guarantee that course conclusion accrues on financial progress for the participant<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the motivation of these people to the course stems primarily from intrinsic factors.

Participants acquire knowledge (conceptual basis) that opens to them different perspectives to understand the problems and dilemmas of public action. Moreover, they become confident in realizing that they know by what paths they can achieve more knowledge when necessary. They develop their skills aimed at resolving public problems. And they reinforce, throughout the course, their conviction that the best guide to solving problems is a better understanding of public value and public interest – a major set of competencies that are essential to public managers (Moore, 1997).

Providing these skills, the Masters' program helps its participants to develop not only new lens to identify public problems and process them (contributing to self-confidence), but also a support base rooted on values and engagement (improved insight). This is the core of professional education, its rationale and specificity – which goes beyond a set of formal knowledge.

On the other hand, values are a guide for choosing professors for the program – they should share the same values and a vision of the State as a strategic asset in unequal societies such as the Brazilian one. The Masters is committed to the creation of a professional ethos – managers engaged in improving performance in public organizations, in such a way that public interests can flourish.

These aspects are expressed by the mission and objectives of the Masters' program. Its mission is aimed to develop the professional potential of participants to boost their transforming work with governments, non-governmental organizations or in a close interaction with the public sector. If this result is achieved, professionals graduated by the Masters' program will contribute to a better performance in Brazilian public organizations; its alumni will essentially be innovative leaders who act with transparency and social commitment to provide quality public services and effective public policies.

The mixed audience, guidance for performance, and commitment to the solution of public problems are hallmarks of this Masters aimed at professionals; it is possible to realize the distance between this proposal and another proposal which aims to form an elite in the public sector. At the same time, this Masters' program turns away from *how-to-do* programs as well as academic distanced visions of concrete problems.

## Community and continuity

What comes next? Alumni do not want to depart from this environment that gave them self-confidence and growth, as well as new opportunity to network<sup>8</sup>. Thus some initiatives have been developed to articulate the network of alumni. Two measures stand out: the first is to permanently open elective disciplines to former participants, who could attend those classes for free and thus complete their program and remain always connected to the school and the Masters community<sup>9</sup>. The second initiative is the

Laboratório de Gestão e Políticas Públicas (GPP-lab), a laboratory of innovation in public policy and management.

GPP-lab is a laboratory for projects and prototypes of innovation in public services, using collaborative methods – inspired by Nesta in the United Kingdom. The idea is to keep a permanent space for collaboration involving professors, partners, students and alumni of the Masters who wish to dedicate their spare time to projects involving their expertise in management and public policies.

The idea for the laboratory came from a suggestion from MPGPP alumni who wanted to stay connected to the “MPGPP environment” after concluding the program. They want a space where they can collectively apply the knowledge acquired at the program, contribute with governments in developing countries and take part in public sector innovation projects using design thinking methods. The “laboratory” format allows to put these goals in practice and to offer a professional space meant to solve problems related to implementing public policies. This differentiates it from purely academic knowledge and from consultancy activities.

GPP-lab is intended to be a space for experimenting, and collaborating for the dissemination of expertise in management and public services. It aims to have an impact on the debate and to improve the public management agenda in the country, through analysis and proposals that address the major issues involving public policy and services.

## **Conclusion and future challenges**

Programs designed for mid-career public managers should consider combining theoretical and conceptual education with methodologies applied to solution of public problems. Professional programs are not aimed to form researchers, and should not emulate the academic programs. It is more important that professional education focuses on its specific challenges than on the dispute with the academic canons.

Professional education programs should keep searching for solid support for interdisciplinarity, the choice of applied methods, a faculty composition that meets the required characteristics and, of great importance, various forms of connection with the agenda and actors responsible for improving public management, policies and services. The aim is to enhance governance and the government’s contribution to the solution of social problems at the local, national and global levels.

Professional Masters needs to build a space of knowledge placed out of the dichotomy between traditional education and training. This new approach is based on the combination of theoretical content with interdisciplinary and problem-solving orientation, put together with the previous experience of participants that come from different areas of public administration and also from the private sector (profit and non-profit organizations).

There are some important challenges to face. One of them is to increase its internationalization through the interchange of students. This is especially difficult regarding the mid-career target – most of them continue working while attending the course. This makes it more difficult for them to spend time studying abroad. Maybe it is possible to find a different interchange design that would allow these participants to have international experience.

Another important issue regards to financing these programs. In Brazil, the federal agencies do not provide scholarships for Professional Masters. Wages of civil servants from state and municipal levels are usually lower than in the federal branch and sometimes not enough for the candidate to afford paying the course fees. This problem also makes it more difficult to have social and racial diversity among the participants.

There is a clear area of research and knowledge that emerges from the combination of students' experience with the courses content and the problem-solving orientation. Applied research is an area that is very poorly developed by Brazilian universities due to the ordinary academic standards frequently pursued. The systematic development of applied research is a very consistent way to strength more and more the impact of the knowledge produced by the universities, helping public managers to solve real problems through experimentation, prototyping and collaborative learning.

Laboratories of innovation can provide space to start designing and developing applied research, which could progressively drive professors to a new research approach, far from their comfort zone, but much more suitable to the experience they have inside the classroom with professional students.

To sum up, the Masters' program offered by GVF has been bringing new challenges and concepts to the academic world. Its approach and community of participants and alumni are starting to open new paths from knowledge to social impact.

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### **Notes**

1. Under the military governments, the senior servants of the Executive came from the best engineering and business schools. They were recruited through state-owned enterprises, which could pay wages comparable to the private sector, and were placed in strategic positions (Schneider, 1992). This model worked out with positive results until the state-owned enterprises were privatized during the 1990s.
2. Instead of the French *École Nationale d'Administration*, the National School of Public Administration chose as a partner in the French cooperation the Interministerial Service of Organization and Management Training, which had similar goals. Other important partners were the Canadian Centre for Management and Development in Canada and the *Escola Superior d'Administració i Direcció d'Empreses* in Spain, also aimed at the development of managerial skills, and distant from the traditional bureaucratic model.
3. The program was created in 2000 and is still offered today.
4. The exercise purposely skips the painful and long stage of delimiting the research question. The students receive terms of reference that outline the problem to be faced. The results of the different groups vary (as in academic dissertations), but in most cases they are relevant and applicable.

5. In 2014 the Masters from the Getulio Vargas Foundation obtained full accreditation (for six years) conferred by the International Commission on the Accreditation of Public Administration Education and Training Programs, in a joint initiative between the Division for Public Administration and Development Management, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration. The recommendation emphasized that these should be specific methodologies for applied knowledge rather than scientific methodology in general.
6. The author describes the case of the Northern Kentucky University Master of Public Administration using the capstone course as the student learning outcome.
7. This is an important difference with programs for entry into a prestigious career, as in the case of the French *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA), which attracts hundreds of candidates for its selection process. Larat (2015) puts the initial selection for entry and the influx of candidates as a parameter for the quality of training at ENA. In Brazil, some careers grant significant increases in remuneration to members who obtain graduate titles.
8. The possibility of creating a specific professional doctorate for public affairs is under discussion, which would be quite suitable for some of the Masters alumni.
9. The initiative does not involve direct costs for school and also enables the realization of elective courses that could be canceled due to insufficient numbers of students. Besides, it makes the classes richer with more participants, which enlarges the opportunity for greater exchange of experience. This model is also practiced by the Columbia Business School. It has been positively evaluated by alumni.

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