

JOINT UNIVERSITY COUNCIL Public Administration Committee

Response to Consultation on L7 Senior Leader Occupational Standard

Introduction

The UK Joint University Council for the Applied Social Sciences (JUC) is a registered Charity and UK Learned Society for public administration, public policy and social work. Our activities include funding research projects and seminars, annual conferences and the publication of two peer-reviewed academic journals – *Public Policy and Administration* and *Teaching Public Administration*. Our role as a Learned Society is to promote the discipline and represent UK universities that are engaged in the teaching and research of the above subjects. On behalf of our members, we wish to register the following response to the consultation on changes to the Senior Leaders Degree Apprenticeship scheme.

Recommendations:

- That the L7 Senior Leader Occupational Standard retain reference to achieving a “Master’s degree in management [either MA, MSc or MBA]” as part of the apprenticeship
- That particular consideration be given to the impact of any change to the qualification’s component of the L7 Senior Leader Occupational Standard to those in public service professions
- That further consultation is carried out on the knowledge, skills and behaviours required by public service professionals to ensure that the L7 Senior Leader Occupational Standard recognises different sectoral skills and requirements

Wider and historical context

The JUC was established in 1918 in response to the impact of WW1 and the subsequent recognition of a need for additional education and support for public and social services. We now find ourselves facing a different, but similarly challenging set of circumstances for the economy and society as a whole. Public services are perhaps

now being recognised truly for the value they add to our economy, society, and culture. As such, there is a greater than ever need for the support of education related to the management and leadership of public services.

There was significant growth in the teaching of public administration, public management or public leadership programmes in UK universities through the 1970s and 1980s (Jones, 2012; Rhodes & Dargie, 1995). However, since then there has been a very steep decline. In part, this has been due to universities being driven by the market forces of student demand; it has also been a result of reductions in training budgets across public service organisations including those in the Third Sector. This decline has been exacerbated by the austerity measures which have required public service organisations to focus resources on frontline service delivery.

Research has shown that in the UK, public administration has largely disappeared at the undergraduate level (Jones, 2012). However, it has remained a significant presence at the postgraduate level (Fenwick & McMillan, 2014). Most recently we held a joint roundtable event with colleagues from the Political Studies Association on the need for teaching and research in public administration and management, as a discrete subject but also as one that makes a significant contribution to other established disciplines, for example Politics and Business Studies. The resultant discussion again highlighted how the subject has been under threat for some time (Liddle, 2017).

The acute need for higher education for public service professionals

Budget cuts have affected different local authorities to varying degrees, but the Local Government Association Future Funding Outlook (LGA 2015) predicted a budget shortfall of some £9.5bn by 2019/20, and written evidence presented to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee highlighted a funding cut in real terms of around 49% across all local authorities (HCLG 2019). Uncertainty in terms of spending reviews has added to the inability of local authorities to plan effectively, including workforce development.

It has been found that public sector budget cuts have had a disproportionately negative impact on learning and development activities across the public sector, and that this,

in turn, is posing a barrier to meaningful change in the public sector (Elliott, 2020). Austerity policies since 2010 have particularly affected the availability of funds to support learning and development. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in citizen demand for services (Hastings et al., 2015; Lowndes & Gardner, 2016). Added to this, all local authorities appear to have reduced their staffing establishment through either redundancy, early severance, or failing to recruit to vacancies. These staffing reductions have resulted in a loss of what has been termed the 'competent middle core', i.e. middle-ranking, highly experienced technical managers (Glennon *et al.* 2019); these experienced staff cannot be replaced by newly qualified staff, and thus the need for advanced public sector education is particularly critical in local authorities and the wider public sector.

The modern climate demands a skilled public sector workforce (University of Birmingham Policy Commission, 2011) and Lord Kerslake drew attention to this in his evaluation of Birmingham City Council (2014). Managers must possess the necessary strategies and 'cognitive plasticity' to successfully negotiate and address the challenges of their role and mid-career education facilitates and shapes these competencies (Quinn, 2013), in a way that on the ground experience cannot. The Kerslake Report emphasised the importance of investment in training (2014) and research attests to this, highlighting the growing importance of entrepreneurial, commercial, networking and relational roles in the sector, and the need for informed types of training and support if they are to flourish and deliver (Needham and Mangan, 2014). This work also drew attention to a lack of adequate in-house training in the sector (Needham and Mangan, 2016). A particularly stark example of skill requirements in the Public Sector is evidenced in the Brexit situation, given that the repatriation of policy functions will require negotiators not only to be expert and competent but in possession of appropriate strategic skills. Thus, managers need to develop the capacity to question and reframe their positions. Professional education is needed to equip managers for these ever-changing roles.

The Public Services Leadership Taskforce and ongoing work by the National Leadership Centre have highlighted the need for greater development of public leadership skills across the UK public sector. Professional education provision is now recognised as an established route to transforming public practice (Oldfield, 2017)

and the introduction of degree apprenticeship programmes has provided higher education with an opportunity to place employer and stakeholder needs forefront in the design, development and delivery of public sector education (Mulkeen et al. 2019). The value of Masters degrees being attached to the SLMDA accreditation is particularly important for public services for three key reasons: 1) degree qualifications are more common in public services and due to the responsibilities attached to management roles, arguably a necessity; 2) higher degree qualifications are linked to more public sector professional bodies as a requirement for progression and 3) the particular skills requirements of public service work requires a skilled synthesis of knowledge and practice; an approach which underpins SLMDA degree programmes.

How Master's Degree Apprenticeships have helped

Since 2018 several SLMDA programmes have been developed, specifically for those aspiring to senior leadership roles within public service organisations. Currently, many more universities are developing programmes with this market in mind, and other general leadership and management programmes have a public service component. Having master's level qualifications linked to the degree apprenticeship standards has enhanced the rigour and depth of qualifications available by enabling public service organisations to use their levy funding to access MBA or other general management and leadership programmes. Through the SLMDA, the University Sector has developed an educational offer that is making significant contributions to knowledge and skill levels in the Public Sector and through this, better equipping professionals to make informed, confident and considered decisions.

The Public and Third Sectors constitute a larger proportion of total employment in areas, such as the North of England, that have lower overall rates of economic prosperity. Having degree apprenticeships linked to higher level awards, such as MBA's, may therefore support the levelling up agenda by enabling apprentices, who may not have previously attended university, to access this level of study. This has already helped many to enhance their CV's with internationally recognised degree qualifications. Completion of an apprenticeship without an associated higher education qualification has significantly less currency, especially outside the UK. After completion, apprentices will be looking for career progression and will be competing against other candidates who may be able to demonstrate achievement of recognised

degree qualifications. Indeed many senior leader roles require such qualifications. It is therefore advantageous to allow those completing an apprenticeship to also achieve an internationally recognised degree qualification.

The view from professionals

The latest Progress Report on the Apprenticeships Reform Programme presented to Parliament in April 2019 by the Department for Education states that: “[a]pprenticeships are at the heart of the Government’s drive to equip people with the skills that the public sector needs to support better delivery of our vital public services”.

The 2019 Universities UK report *The Future of Degree Apprenticeships* highlights the importance of apprenticeships in the public sector as a key mechanism for addressing skills shortages (UUK 2019, p,14), and the report recommends allowing public sector bodies to use levy funding for backfilling apprentices (UUK 2019, p,26) and that universities should deliver “flexible, integrated pathways for apprentices to progress to higher-level skills and degree apprenticeships (UUK 2019, p.38).

Conclusion

Senior Leaders Degree Apprenticeships in the public sector are demonstrably different when compared to the headlines of private-sector managers having their MBAs paid for them by levy funding. Senior degree programmes at level 7, i.e. master’s degrees, are vitally important for the development of an effective public sector that can meet the needs and demands of the 21st century. Therefore, it is essential that funding of L7 Master’s degree apprenticeships for public sector professionals are maintained.

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