The rationale for embedding ethics and public value in public administration programmes

Vanesa Fuertes
University of the West of Scotland, UK

Abstract
When crises occur, revisiting given knowledge and practices seems sensible and necessary. For instance, the recent financial crisis in 2008 lead to questioning the role played by financial institutions and business schools in precipitating the crisis by allowing questionable professional ethics to go unchallenged. There is a current crisis in public administration in the UK, visible in the growing challenges to public sector professionals in their practice and in the increased questioning of the government as a guarantor of public services and welfare. To understand the current situation, exploring the role of public administration teaching and professional organisations in the UK is key. Have we perhaps neglected the teaching of ethics and public value as crucial tenets to the profession and to its practice? This paper explores the necessity, merits, and difficulties of embedding ethics and public value concepts into the curriculum.

Keywords
Curriculum, ethics, public value, public administration, public services, professionalism

Challenges to ethical administration in the UK
The ‘age of austerity’ (Diamond and Liddle, 2012), has shaped for almost a decade now the level and mode of public service provision, our understanding of the role and the democratic functioning of the state, and the relationship between the state and its citizens (Clark and Nickels, 2020). This age of austerity has accelerate changes that began during the 1980s, when neoliberalism became the beacon in public policy and changed the...
role of government in society. Public sector governance, including the content and management of public policy, transformed from public administration to new public management, with the latter characterised by its key principles of managerialism and marketisation. Managerialism introduced business principles and processes into the public sector, while contractualisation transferred the design, management and/or delivery of public services to the private sector. Some public services were privatised, or marketised in what has been characterised as quasi-markets (Le Grand, 2003), under the banner of rolling back the state (Jones and Novak, 2012). The heralded aim was to achieve efficiency, effectiveness, and economic value (Hood, 1991), as well as reducing government involvement by increasing private operations in the public realm. New public management facilitated ‘the hollowing out of the state’ and its transformation from a provider of individual’s and society’s safety net (Jones and Novak, 2012) to the legitimate ‘handmaiden of the market’ enabling corporate welfare (Farnsworth, 2013; Poole and Mooney, 2006). The mixed economy of the welfare state has meant that the lines separating public, private and not-for-profit services have been blurred (Kennedy and Malatesta, 2010). Furthermore, government’s democratic accountability and responsibility has arguably been undermined by privatisation (Boyles, 2019). While government’s downsizing and hollowing-out could create greater opportunities for unethical behaviour in the delivery of public services, the same process may grant more autonomy to those in charge of delivering services (de Vries, 2002).

New public management has affected the role, values, and accountability of public services in a number of ways (Lawton, 2005). Greater managerialism and private sector involvement, means that traditional public sector values (such procedure-base and general interest) are replaced by market and business values (output-based and profit seeking). The post-WWII Keynesian welfare state has been reconfigured from providing entitlements and rights, to restricting services on conditionality and obligation (Jones and Novak, 2012; Wright et al., 2011). The economic efficiency calculus of markets may be inadequate to address the social values inherent in public services (Boyles, 2019) and these can be further undermined by competition, limited resources, and conflicts between individual and public interest demands (O’Flynn, 2007). Increasing profit, as the main aim of the private sector, could mean private profit trumping social benefits in contractualised services. Even the ‘traditional’ values of the third sector are tested under this system of competitive quasi-markets and outcome payments (Wright et al., 2011), where for instance entry into employment is a pre-requisite to secure payment for the provision of employability support to those unemployed. Some policies introduced by the UK government in this era of austerity, have recently been challenged in court for being discriminatory or against the Human Rights Act. For instance, the challenges to the treatment of severely disabled people (Butler, 2020), to the bedroom tax (Weaver, 2019), and the benefit cap (Croft, 2019) among others; in the first two cases the challenge was successful. Some other policies have raised national and international indignation and rebuke, such as the Windrush scandal (McIntosh, 2020) or the level of poverty in the UK (Alston, 2018; Chakelian, 2019).

The civil service was not unscathed as a result of these governance changes: numbers of public sector employees reduced, senior civil servants were transferred to agencies, and
those that remained close to government where operating in a changed apparatus (Peters and Savoie, 1994). Public sector professions and professional values were construed as an obstacle to the transformation of public administration, and a demonisation campaign of welfare professionals and occupations took place during the 1980s (Jones and Novak, 2012). New public management introduced key performance indicators, focused on results rather than processes, and in target-driven strategies (Carter et al., 2011). Processes and conditions of work changed substantially, with recruitment of civil servants transferred in different waves from department to agencies since 1983. In the design, management, and delivery of public services, professionals were substituted by managers and public organisations by private companies. As Jones and Novak (2012: 145) stated ‘Whitehall mandarins were substituted in important areas of policy formation’ by outsider special advisers. The role and influence of special advisers was highlighted by the prominence and influence of Dominic Cummings within Number 10. The undermining of civil servant influence is rarely seen and occasions where senior civil servants raise questions about professional standards are scarce. Nevertheless, we have recently witnessed a number of these cases such as the senior Brexit envoy to the United States resignation citing her impartiality being compromised (Smith, 2019), the permanent secretary of the Home Office resignation due to civil servants treatment (Thomas, 2020), and the UK ambassador to the European Union resignation where he urged officials to ‘speak truth to power’ (Foster, 2017).

The contractualisation of public services and administration continues unfettered to this day, with the public sector viewing its role ‘not as a provider of public services itself, but as a funder and regulator of services’ (Policy Profession Board, 2013: 9). While some recent scandals such as the G4S tagging contract failures (Kollewe, 2019) or the PFI school buildings disaster (Carrell, 2017), have resulted in fines and in some cases redesign of contracts, the system remains unchanged, with issues of problematic accountability, doubtful transfer of risk, questions concerning efficiency and also over public value. The benefits and advantages of the market seem elusive in these quasimarkets that bring unavoidable externalities. Alongside this situation, a political crisis has emerged, visible in the continued lack of trust in traditional political institutions (Jennings et al., 2017). In this context, as Fenwick (2018) anticipated, it is important to revisit the ethical underpinnings of the profession and the curriculum in public administration programmes.

In this context, this paper explores the role of ethics in the teaching and practice of public service professionals. It starts by exploring the teaching of ethics at undergraduate level in higher institution programmes in the UK through presentation of the results of a data gathering exercise. This section is followed by an examination of how the civil service profession is regulated. The paper then delves into the role of ethics in public administration, followed by a discussion of public value as a key, core concept of ethical behaviour. In the last section, some ideas are advanced on the necessity and format of introducing ethics in public administration teaching, as well as avenues for future research. The aim of the paper is not to offer solutions but to start what could be a fruitful discussion on these issues and put forward a future research agenda.
Ethics courses in the UK’s public administration programmes

Desktop research was undertaken to explore the extent to which ethics is a stand-alone subject in public administration undergraduate degrees in the UK. Public Administration was used as a key word in two degree-specific search engines (Study Portals Bachelors and Courses Abroad). The search showed 19 public administration or similar (public policy or public service) undergraduate degrees offered in 12 universities and three colleges in the UK. The course content (core and optional subjects) was reviewed for 17 of the 19 degrees, since two degrees did not provide easily accessible details of their syllabus. Of these 17 degrees, only two offered ethics focused modules: in one case a compulsory module, in the other a compulsory and an optional module. Table 1 presents this data.

The data indicates a lack of compulsory or optional ethics modules in the teaching of public administration, public management, public policy or social policy at undergraduate level. Subject Benchmark Statements define what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what graduates might know, do and understand at the end of their studies (QAA, 2019). These benchmarks are important regulatory elements of UK higher education, which provide general guidance, but not prescription, for the design, delivery and review of programmes. In the UK, there is not a Subject Benchmark Statement for public administration or public policy, but one for social policy, which includes management of public services as one of the topics. Within the benchmark, ethics are mentioned three times, exclusively in reference to research.

One reason behind the lack of ethics modules could be the ubiquity of neoliberalism as the taken for granted ideology not only in the organisation of society and the economy but also on educational institutions and curricula since the second quarter of the last century. Even if some scholars have questioned the given ideology of business logic efficiency (Glickman, 2009), universities had to become more businesses like in their structures and operations. Student satisfaction, progression, and graduate employment became the success measures for higher education institutions. Students, under this model, it has been argued (Molesworth et al., 2009), have been transformed into clients

### Table 1. Public administration undergraduate degrees ethics courses offer.

| Under Graduate Degrees Titles | Quantity | Ethics Courses |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------------|
| Public Services/Public Service Management/Leadership and Management in Public Services | 6 | |
| Social Policy with Management | 1 | |
| Politics with Public Policy/Political Theory and PP/Economic Analysis for Public Policy/BSc Business, Management and Public Policy | 4 | 1 (compulsory) |
| Community Development and Public Policy / Community and Public Service Management | 2 | 1 (compulsory) |
| Social and Public Policy | 2 | |
| Public Administration and Management | 1 | |
and education into a product to be consumed with promised results. New public management found its way also onto the teaching of public administration as a discipline. The aim and maxim in the formation of future public administration professionals became neutral competence (Reddick et al., 2020). Although most programmes will likely provide a plurality of approaches to public administration, ethics in public administration education and practice has been relegated by the managerialist philosophy with its new pragmatism pushing out the old ideological debates (O’Flynn, 2007). In many ways, there has been a focus on instrumental and liberal educational goals (Mearman et al., 2018): the former aims at equipping students with skills and techniques to perform tasks in a monistic way without accounting for a plurality of options, while the latter aims to equip students with intellectual capacities to make free and autonomous choices. Henson (2019) states that a ‘well-rounded educational foundation’ is needed to provide a well-rounded professional able to operate in any economic sector.

Another reason for the lack of ethics courses in these programmes could be that even though the Policy Profession is recognised (UK Government, 2020b), there are no requirements by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies for these programmes (UK Government, 2020b); a result perhaps of the lack of a Civil Service Act or a professional Code of Practice for many years. In the USA, where a variety of ethics codes for the civil service have been established by government and professional bodies, there is a strong focus on ethics in public administration programmes and departments. For instance, going back to 1978, the Ethics in Government Act committed ‘federal employees to standards of behavior believed to be in the best interests of the American public’ (Menzel, 1997: 224). The Code of Ethics adopted by the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) from 1984 through to 2013 stressed the public interest and professional excellence (see Svara, 2014), and the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) accreditation standards in 2014, highlights the need for public administration programmes to emphasise public service values including acting ethically (NASPAA, 2014). Since characteristics and formalisation of the public administration profession could shape the status of ethics in teaching and in practice, this area is explored next.

The civil service profession

There are 28 recognised professions in the civil service, one of them being the Policy Profession that ‘designs, develops and proposes appropriate courses of action to help meet key government priorities and ministerial objectives’ (UK Government, 2020b). Professions are often defined by the following characteristics: the use of professional organisations as referent, service to the public, self-regulation, calling to the field, and autonomy (Reddick et al., 2020). According to Shafritz et al. (2017), public administration meets the three core features of a profession. First, academic and practical knowledge is applied to the service of society; second, success is measured by serving those needs rather than personal gain; and third, there is a system of control over the professional practice that regulates education and maintains both a code of ethics and sanctions. The later feature has been discussed in the previous section, nevertheless the
government sees the Policy Profession as fulfilling the role of government as funder and regulator of services (Policy Profession Board, 2013).

Unlike in many other countries, UK civil service bodies and appointments have been the result of Orders in Council (the Crown’s Royal Prerogative) for many years: the 1855 Civil Service Commission was replaced in 1991 by the Office of Civil Service Commissioners and the Recruitment and Assessment Service Agency, which was privatised in 1996 (see Chapman, 2005). Although there have been numerous calls to establish a Civil Service Act, only the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act of 2010 established the Civil Service Commission on a statutory basis. A civil service code was also quite late to be introduced in 1996, after the 1994 Committee on Standards in Public Life, created as a response to the perception in declining standards, called for a code of conduct to be established. The Civil Service Code outlines the core values of the civil service: honesty, integrity, impartiality and objectivity (UK Government, 2020a). While integrity refers to putting the obligation of public service above personal interest, and basing actions and thoughts on values rather than personal gain, it does not explain what these obligations or values are. Interestingly, impartiality refers to carrying out responsibilities in a way that is ‘fair, just and equitable and reflects the Civil Service commitment to equality and diversity’, and not acting in a way that ‘unjustifiably favours or discriminates against particular individuals or interests’.

The focus in public administration on efficiency, effectiveness, savings, control, and key performance indicators introduced by new public management increased the standardisation of services (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016), thus reducing professionals’ autonomy in many cases (Jones and Novak, 2012), while in some other service areas, especially in contracted services, doing away with professionalisation altogether. A survey of policy officials in 2013 found that only 64% considered themselves members of the policy profession, decreasing to 61% in 2019 (Policy Profession Board 2013; Policy Profession, 2019a). While many policy professionals are also members of, or identify with, other professions, such as economists, lawyers, accountants, etc. one thing these civil servants have in common is that they are public sector professionals. Membership of professions should not be seen as exclusionary; however, the values of the public and the private sector would be different for the same economists. None of the reviews, prospectuses, or standards for policy professionals by the Policy Profession Board mention ethics, public value or public interest (Policy Profession, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), and only once does the Policy Profession Board review (2013) state the need to increase public interaction with policymaking. Public administrators have to consider the public interest in ways that other professions do not have to, if they are to achieve community engagement (Box, 1993). Keene et al. (2007) report on the ‘value propositions’ for local government professionals, that were developed from a Task Force on Professionalism: such as adding value to the quality of public policy in their communities, taking a long-term and community-wide perspective, and making a commitment to ethical practices, including democratic and community values, equitable and fair outcomes, and organisational excellence and innovation. Research has found a link between professionalisation and ethics, morality, neutrality and public concern (Reddick et al., 2020). Ethics is the focus of this paper, therefore the rationale of embedding ethics
in teaching (i.e. curriculum) and practice (i.e. code of conduct) for civil service professionals is explored next.

The role of ethics in public administration

Ethics have been said to be the thing that cannot be taught (Worthley and Grumet, 1983), even though ‘ethics provides the preconditions for the making of good public policy’ (Bowman and Knox, 2008: 627). Public administration ethics as a field of study began to appear in the mid-1970s (Cooper, 2004), with a new set of issues addressed concerning social justice, moving beyond the previous preoccupation with accountability and efficiency in administrative responsibility (for a detail historic account of the concept see Plant, 2018). Public administration was changing, and bureaucratic discretion seemed to be increasing (Kennedy and Malatesta, 2010). Ethical reasoning, added to the previous concept of responsibility, goes beyond civil servants’ behaviour as being based on the public interest understood as accountability, legality, integrity and responsiveness. Normative questions such as the expected behaviour of unelected officials in a democratic system, the role of ethics, and the balance between ethics and external demands became more commonly addressed within the discipline (Plant, 2018).

Ethics is also a key factor influencing trust in government agencies and public sector officials (Kennedy and Malatesta, 2010). Research shows that citizens include administrators in their assessment of the governmental system, suggesting that ‘public administrators are both part of the problem and part of the solution to declining trust in government’ (Marlowe, 2004: 94). In a context of greater distrust in politicians, advisors, and officials, increased marketisation and privatisation of public services, and growing politisation and precarity of administrative roles, the central tenet of obedience of the public official needs to be balanced with concepts of public interest in the broadest sense. On the pursuit of public good or social equity, a conflict arises when this comes against political decisions based on ideological positions or practicalities of policy making. Examining the limits of public service officials and the balance between them and elected representatives (Chapman, 2005) in the pursuit of the public good is essential in the protection of ethics and of good public policy. As Cooper and Menzel (2013: 8) state ‘public administration is ultimately a normative field based on the use of administrative power and discretion for the good of a democratic society’. The lack of ethical behaviour could result in ‘administrative evil’.

Administrative evil

Evil as ‘the actions of human beings that unjustly or needlessly inflict pain and suffering and even death on other human beings’ (Adams and Balfour, 2014: 3) differs from administrative evil. The latter is allowed by a culture of technical rationality (Balfour et al., 2019) rooted in individualism (Adam, 2011) as well as compartmentalisation, legalism, hierarchical accountability and dehumanisation (Hoffman et al., 2012). Administrative evil, which results in harm to people, is often carried out by ordinary people when doing their jobs, masked by the administrative apparatus and moral inversion (Clark and Nickels,
2020), is slightly different from maladministration that often results from inefficient or dishonest administration.

As argued before, public administration has been embedded in a culture of technical rationality that values individualism and expert knowledge, efficiency and universality in public policy in terms of instrumental and technical ends (Clark and Nickels, 2020). While expertise was to be key as a discretionary tool away from political control (Brodkin, 1987), compliance with neoliberal administrative environment frameworks and one-size-fits-all blind trust in the system and rules enforcement seems to be the norm. In this environment, the prevention of administrative evil in public administration can be jeopardised by the lack of clearly accepted values or ethical standards (Shafritz et al., 2017). Providing ‘a way out of the social and structural dynamics that foster administrative evil is difficult’ since the dynamics have been rationalised and strongly established, and since clear ethically loaded issues are rarely brought to the fore (Adam, 2011). Whistleblowing and public resignations are sometimes the visible acts of resistance against administrative evil. While other acts of resistance also occur these tend to be private, but subverting policy objectives other than at street-level bureaucrat level (Lipsky, 1980) seems to be scarce. Therefore, ethics, critical reflexivity, systems thinking, and courage can help to protect against administrative evil (Adam, 2011) and maladministration in public administration. How ethics is defined and operationalised in the teaching and practice of the profession is therefore important.

The meaning of ethics

In the case of public administration professionals, ethics have been understood in various ways: as the prevalence of efficiency, as a social contract, as a defence of core public values or of the public interest (Kennedy and Malatesta, 2010). From the beginning, the focus has been on the individual public administrator as a decision maker (Cooper and Menzel, 2013). For instance, the theory of public sector motivation (PSM) defines it as ‘an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations’ (Perry and Wise, 1990: 368), and links it to the pursuit of the public interest in administrative behaviour (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007). PSM theory has often focused on understanding or facilitating individuals’ public orientated motivations, describing public and public sector workers as knights, knaves, or pawns in policy making (Le Grand, 2003; Steen, 2006). It has linked public sector employees’ career choice and their motivation and values orientation to the common good and well-being (Carpenter et al., 2012; Perry, 2000; Perry and Wise, 1990; Wright, 2007). The theory not only pays attention to individual values, but also looks at organisational factors to explain public service (Wright, 2001, 2007): organisational structure and culture is seen as crucial in shaping individual thinking and behaviour, with whistleblowers highlighting unethical practices occurring and organisations condoning these (Cooper and Menzel, 2013).

However, ethics in public administration practice and teaching should not be understood as personal, organisational, or social ethics, but as professional ethics (Shafritz et al., 2017). Describing public administration ethics as anything other than professional ethics,
would leave the public administrator host to subjective standards instead of been guided by an immutable professional code established in theory and practice. For instance, if ethics are defined simply as reflecting the values of society (Rohr, 1976) or social norms (Perry, 2000), questions arise about how society’s values have been assessed and whose values those are anyway. In many cases, society’s core values are not ethical values (Farmer, 1998). Similarly, organisational ethics could stand contrary to personal ethics (Hoffman et al., 2012) or individual values (Perry, 2000), and could indeed be different within the same profession depending on the organisational setting. Therefore, the ‘ethics question’ goes beyond the individual, organisational, or social and political explanations, even though it needs to be situated within the social and political context of professional practice (Farmer, 1998; Moynihan and Pandey, 2007; Pickus and Dostert, 2002). Ethics has to be built on the principles of the profession and of its practice, and therefore the role of institutions will be key for defining values and behaviours (Friedland and Alford, 1991).

PSM theory touches on the institutional determinants of motivation, such as the role of organisations in shaping members’ ethical norms (Perry, 1997) and encouraging desired public sector behaviour by promoting clear organisational goals and emphasising employees’ contribution to a valuable service (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007). In the USA, professional associations, such as ASPA and the International City Management Association, are in charge of codifying professional guidelines: public service officials need to act in their professional practice with reference to their professional code of practice and to the USA Constitution (Johnson and Svara, 2015; Kennedy and Malatesta, 2010). Therefore, the institutional determinants of behaviour in professions is key and as a result, civil service professional organisations are crucial. Institutions are regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems that ‘impose restrictions by defining legal, moral, and cultural boundaries, setting off legitimate from illegitimate activities’ (Scott, 2008: 50), and that define appropriate action in terms of the relation between roles and situations (March and Olsen, 1989). Institutional influence could shape professionals’ self-concept and self-regulation. The former is explained as an individual’s identity and values that can be created as a result of membership of a professional body. Without a professional identity, public administrators are vulnerable concerning which ethics to adopt (Cooper, 2004). The latter, self-regulation, depends on individuals monitoring their behaviour against a set of internal standards, which could be a professional code of conduct (Brooke, 2003). Studies of ethical decision making in cases of whistleblowing or near-whistleblowing show that fear of professional career damage was one of the factors suppressing moral agency (Menzel, 2005). Organisational and contextual traits (i.e. regime values) and job pressures, affect and determine the public administrator’s behaviour (de Vries, 2002) creating ethical blind spots (Cooper and Menzel, 2013). In this sense, a professional code of conduct could shield the administrator against external pressures allowing individual agency.

**Public value as professional ethic**

Even if a code of conduct that regulates the identity and behaviour of professionals facilitating agency against external pressures is recognised as beneficial, how can ethical
behaviour for civil servants be defined? Since a characteristic intrinsic to civil service professionals is their work as civil or public servants, a behaviour that serves and pursues the public interest and public value should be the core principle of the profession. The concept of public value was coined by Moore in 1995, but has not been fully specified in theory or operationalised in practice (Williams and Shearer, 2011). Horner et al. (2006) identify numerous types of invocations of public value: public sector improvement, a mode of governance including strategic goals, and a performance evaluation framework. Public values often include a plurality of normative principles related to governance, such as the need for accountability, commitment to social equity, fairness and impartiality, and procedural due process (Plant, 2018). Research on public values by de Graaf and van der Wal (2017: 197) show that these were viewed as ‘inherently moral concepts – important qualities and standards that have a certain weight in the choice of public action and decision-making’.

However, public value could mean either the value and preferences created by government (Kelly et al., 2002) or by citizens (O’Flynn, 2007) through various means and processes. Public value could be decided by public service professionals, by citizens via expressions of public preferences and user satisfaction (Blaug et al., 2006), or through deliberation among key stakeholders (Stoker, 2006). The creation of public value is the central activity of public managers, just as the creation of private value is at the core of private sector managers’ action (O’Flynn, 2007). Public managers balance technical and political concerns to secure public value (Hefetz and Warner, 2004). According to Williams and Shearer (2011) the public value manager has to adopt flexibility and pragmatism over ideology, and their practice has to include adaptation and public engagement. Public value is seen as the necessary balance to address the supposed weaknesses of new public management. It has become a key factor in the new governance model referred to as network governance (Williams and Shearer, 2011), new public governance (Osborne, 2010), or new public service (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2011). This governance shift attempts to redefine how we think about the state, its purpose, and ways of functioning, operating and managing (O’Flynn, 2007). In the emerging new public governance approach, government delivers dialogue, facilitates networks, and responds to active citizenship in pursuit of what the public values and what is good for the public. The role of the strategic decision maker goes beyond policy implementation to embrace creativity and entrepreneurialism. Scholars have highlighted a number of weaknesses of this approach, such as levels of public knowledge, capabilities (Sen, 1985), and availability of information, as well as relative or misplaced public satisfaction, which could jeopardise public value in public services and policy. Blaug et al. (2006) highlight that attitudes to government regularly contaminate satisfaction with services. Furthermore, it has been questioned how much this governance model can flourish in systems that favour elites with odds stacked against ordinary citizens (Bryson et al., 2014), and where new public management principles are still operating (Fuertes et al., 2014). The limitations of this concept, such as the input and process of public value creation, its temporal and individualistic potential nature should be considered carefully before adopting it as an ethical reference point for public service professionals.
Utilitarian ethics or the interests of the majority should be supplemented with other conceptions of ethics such as the common good (Elcock, 2012) or Rawls’s theory of justice (Rawls, 1999). If an alternative to public value as a key concept underpinning or guiding an ethics code for public administrators is sought, social equity could be considered. Social equity aims at ensuring that ‘the members of all social groups will have the same prospect for success and the same opportunities to be protected from the adversities of life’ (Johnson and Svara, 2015: 3). This concept could guide public administrators when developing, analysing and implementing public services. The profession’s aim would be to promote ‘equal distribution, compensatory redistribution, and efforts to correct past discrimination’ in access, quality and outcomes of services and benefits (Svara and Brunet, 2005: 257). In other words, public administrators would pursue social justice, which would require employing ethical norms (Hubbell, 2018). Even though an agreement has to be reached on the content of ethics in public administration as a core guide for the profession, it is worth looking at how the teaching of ethics can be achieved.

Discussion: Teaching ethics in public administration

While public policy and administration governance shifts over time, public service professionals’ core principles – service to the public and the attainment of public good – should remain unchanged. The concept of public interest standing aloof from party politics has been eroded and ‘Ministers now wanted neither objective policy advice from civil servants nor objective facts from researchers’ (Jones and Novak, 2012: 167). Upholding technical rationality as the only approach to public administration is unlikely to meet the challenges faced by the profession. While structural and practical considerations, such as civil servant work being performed in a highly ideological environment, need to be part of professional ethics; the lack of an ethics code could facilitate public administration being used as an academic instrument at the hands of political ideologies instead of being a profession at the service of the public. If public administration teaching is to maintain the value of public services and generate good public administration and policy making, both of which could build public trust (Shand and Howell, 2015), what is taught in public administration programmes is of fundamental importance. This final section of the paper sets out suggestions on the way forward in teaching and research, with the aim of encouraging and opening up discussion on the three themes presented: rationale behind embedding ethic courses in public administration teaching; theory vs applied ethics teaching; and the role of professional bodies.

Embedding ethics courses in university programmes

Introducing stand-alone ethics courses or modules within policy related degrees and programmes in higher education such as public administration, public policy, and even social policy, would signal a break with objective technical rationality and a strong commitment to the role of public administration and policy in creating and upholding the public good. There can be multiple goals of ethics education but as Menzel (1997: 229–230)
mentions, the top goal should be to ‘foster ethical conduct in the public service . . . [which] if realized, must surely yield public service professionals committed to a principled life in the service of society’. Introducing ethics as a core subject could produce professionals that are ethically competent as well as professionally competent (Cooper and Menzel, 2013).

A discussion is needed on the concepts and operationalisation of ethics and the public good at a macro, meso, and micro levels. Questions on how policy is made, implemented and managed should be accompanied by normative questions concerning the adequacy and acceptability of actions and tools in the realm of public administration. Public good or social equity could be the key concepts on public administrators’ code of ethics in the service of society. While none of these concepts, including ethics, are easy to define the task is worthy. There have been numerous debates with regards to ethics in public administration in the USA, but the incorporation of these discussion into the UK curriculum is less clear. Menzel (2009), among other scholars, offers a proposal on ethics content in public administration teaching. Curriculum decisions should involve an awareness in a global comparative perspective, of the political, economic, and social environment where knowledge is being created and implemented. The starting point could be a relegation of the liberal individualism and technical rationalist approach in favour of a critical conscientisation (Freire, 1996) in the teaching of ethics in public policy.

**Theory vs applied ethics teaching**

How to teach ethics has been the focus of a number of studies in the USA, with a number of frameworks produced (Kennedy and Malatesta, 2010) and showing mixed results concerning the outcomes of such subjects for students (Menzel, 1997). Teaching ethics could take the form of an inquiry-based approach (Moseley and Connolly, 2020) alongside a more didactic format which includes reflecting on normative principles. Focusing only in practical teaching could obscure the importance of theories or ‘big picture’ explanations. The elevation of ‘practical experience’ over knowledge and research’ has been heralded as the way to get results and avoid getting entangled in complex debates (Jones and Novak, 2012: 165). However, other scholars stressed the importance of theory or conceptual teaching. For instance, Bok (1990) stresses that is not about imparting right answers, but about getting students more equipped to reason about ethical issues they will face in their professional lives. While Cooper and Menzel (2013: 7), highlight that public administration students should undertake a course devoted to the development of ‘normative professional ethics’ that goes beyond skills in recognising and solving ethical issues. Thus, the teaching of public ethics (Ongaro, 2019) from a philosophical standpoint (ethical positions, conceptions of the individual and society, public ethics and public values) is worth considering.

**The role of professional bodies**

Reddick et al. (2020) advocate closer and better linkages between professional associations and academics, in order to ensure ethical solutions in public administration
practice. However, compared to the USA, the code of conduct in the UK is recent and professional identity seems tenuous. The endeavour of embedding ethics courses in programmes should be informed by professional bodies and codes of conduct, since the role of institutions will be key for defining values and behaviours (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that curriculum decisions could also shape professional identity (self-concept and professional bodies) and practice (self-regulation and codes of conduct). Professional identity and practice could shield civil servants against ambiguity and external pressures, which could in turn encourage individual agency. This is worth bearing in mind as a problem of constructive alignment between the practice and the teaching of public administration.

Conclusion
Changes introduced by new public management in public policy and the civil service, and the continued lack of trust by the public in traditional political institutions, compel us to look at the current state of the public administration profession.

While public administrators have to consider the public interest in ways that other professions do not have to, the article has shown that in the UK context ethics modules are not a common feature of undergraduate programmes. Furthermore, the civil service code and the policy profession board do not mention ethics directly. Instead, technical rationality has been the heralded norm in the profession.

It is argue that a professional ethics code guided by the principles of public good and social equity would provide the preconditions for good policy. It could protect against administrative evil and facilitate professionals’ agency against external pressures.

While this paper does not provided answers concerning the shape that ethics teaching should take, it sought to demonstrate that ethics should be central to the practice and teaching of public administration. Further discussions and research is needed on the conceptualisation of professional ethics and ethical codes, on the role of professional organisations, and on the format that ethics teaching should take.

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ORCID iD
Vanesa Fuertes © https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2097-6628

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