

# On MPA Education Engineering in China

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The education for Master of Public Administration (MPA education), including Master of Public Affairs (MPA) and Master of Public Policy (MPP), is a new type of professional degree training in China. It is aimed at training qualified public administration professionals for government and other public institutions (Zhang, 2001). MPA education for professionals differs from the existing postgraduate education. The former Master's degree in Public Administration in China and the former lays more emphasis on the practice of public administration, while the latter looks more into the theoretical sides of public administration. Those who apply for the professional MPA education must have at least four years of work experience.

At the Conference for Founding the National Public Administration Graduate Education Directory Committee and the Committee's first working meeting, convened in February 2001, by the State Council's Higher Degree Education Commission, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Personnel, it was decided that MPA education should be started in China.

Our university has been chosen as one of the first 24 universities for the trial worksites for MPA education. As MPA education is still in its infancy, in order to realize gains from this degree training, we suggest that MPA education engineering is chosen as its development direction. This way, MPA education will be able to respond to the requirements of governance reforms in public administration institutions (Mao, 1998, pp. 2-

## Implications of MPA Education Engineering

Engineering refers to specific technologies which can best transfer, by following scientific principles, natural resources into certain structures, machinery, products, systems, or processes to benefit mankind (Britain Encyclopedia, 1999, p.70). An engineering process can be defined as a process during which some applied technologies control certain actions in practice. According to this definition, applied teaching subjects and practical classroom teaching activities characterize MPA education engineering. These involve technological teaching and implementing systematic education evaluation. MPA education engineering should have the following features:

### *The Courses Chosen for MPA Education Should be Applied*

Deruke (1998) points out that "management works as a social mechanism through which various resources are bestowed for productivity. In other words, the task of management is trying to realize organized economic advances." In accordance with this view, we can see the importance of providing management and administration personnel education on work skills and technologies. Before the 1990s, public administration education in China placed emphasis upon the teaching of political and administration macro-theories and basic principles. Such theories are often impractical when used in solving real-world problems. However, present

MPA education engineering is the process of utilizing technological teaching and systematic evaluation, and is characterized by applied teaching subjects and practical classroom education. The essential ways to actualize MPA education engineering include role simulation, practical teaching, case study, on-the-job training, etc.

public administration practice demands greater working skills and knowledge in relevant technologies from administrative personnel. Thus, in MPA education, the curriculum design must be practical, and must give preference to applied courses in order to improve the students' operational skills and professional capabilities (Xia, 1998).

#### ***Classroom Teaching Activities Should be More Practical***

In conventional public administration education before the 1990s in China, classroom activities concentrated on theories. Little attention was paid to training the students in practical skills and abilities in administrative operation. The teaching methods were often traditional and sometimes out-of-date. Such education practice not only held back the development of public administration as a discipline, but also reduced the significance and functions of public administration education. In contrast to this, present MPA education must pay adequate attention to the practicality of classroom activities and the creation of new teaching methods. The teaching of quantitative methods and case studies must also be emphasized.

#### ***Technological Teaching Must be Introduced into the MPA Education Process***

The faculty should include not only lecturers teaching theories and theoretical researchers, but also experts in public administration practice, entrepreneurs, and other administration professionals possessing theoretical and practical knowledge. We must adopt modern education theories, use the latest in information technology, such as multi-media and distance education, and compile new computer programs suitable for MPA students in China.

#### ***A Systematic Set of Education Evaluation Methods Should be Established for MPA Education***

Such an evaluation system should stress results as

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well as the process of MPA teaching. In other words, the evaluation standards should be designed to be able to measure the students' practical skills and abilities, instead of merely estimating how much knowledge the student has acquired. Evaluation methods must be varied and practical, including not only formal written examinations, but also oral tests, examinations with references permitted, research reports, experi-

ments, and actual role operations. A student's research and thesis as should be judged in accordance with its practicality and depth regarding new technologies. Purely theoretical contributions should be a secondary element to one's research.

In short, MPA education engineering aims at offering students opportunities to acquire, via systematic learning, professional knowledge for public administration, and to understand the basic principles and study methods of this subject area. The objective is to improve the students' administrative acumen, and raise their capabilities in analyzing and solving practical problems. The means to be employed will be such programs as on-the-job training, role playing, the use of case studies, and the emulation of actual public administration.

### **Framework of MPA Education**

This section is to illustrate MPA education engineering in terms of curriculum design and course contents. Practical skills and technological means should be initially considered when designing course contents. MPA education has some unique features, as compared with other forms of postgraduate education. It has some specific requirements and quality standards for its educational goals, admission, curriculum and methodology, as well as the students' academic background and capabilities. MPA education focuses on training administration professionals for government institutions and other public organizations, rather than for teaching or researching.

As mentioned previously, MPA education is different from the existing postgraduate education for a ma-

er's degree in Public Administration in China. Presently in China, post-graduate education for a master's degree in Public Administration emphasizes the instruction of theories in this same field. It offers few, if any, courses encompassing other disciplines, such as economics, general management, fiscal science, accounting, and computer programming. It also pays little attention to case studies and other instructional methods that have practical utility. The difference between the two courses mentioned is

due to the fact that the discipline of public administration stresses theoretical research and analysis of government development policies (Wang, 1998), while MPA education focuses on practical research and problem solving (Bozeman & Straussman, 1990). Masters of Public Administration (MPA) education is also quite different from Masters in Business Administration (MBA) education in terms of educational targets and value orientation. The Master of Public Administration (MPA) education focuses upon serving the government and the public, and training high-level professionals for government and public institutions so as to help develop coordination between the government and civil society (i.e., it is public-interest oriented). MBA education aims at serving enterprises (i.e., helping them make maximum profits in the markets) (Xue, 1999).

Having made a comparison between the existing postgraduate education for a Masters degree in Public Administration, MBA education, and MPA education for professionals, we think that the framework of MPA education should cover "one skill, two areas, three bases, and four levels" (Cheng, 2000).

"One skill" refers to the skill for computer operation. Modern technologies, especially communications technologies, have been developing very rapidly. The information explosion has had unprecedented impacts upon politics, economics, and culture. The ability to handle information has become one of the essential requirements for living in the 21st century. Higher-rank public administration professionals must, therefore, acquire computer skills.

By "two areas," we mean that MPA students are

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mostly from two either government or non-government public institutions. After receiving an MPA education, they are expected to have mastered enough basic knowledge in public administration and the necessary skills for public work. Upon graduation, they will be assigned to work in these two areas (Cheng, 1999).

"Three bases" refer to the three disciplinary bases of MPA education, which include economics, politics, and mathematics. Present public administration activities and public policy studies are

often related to economic problems, such as costs and revenues. Thus, economics is one of the bases for Public Administration and Public Policy studies. Public administration activities and public policy studies are complex processes, possessing both economic and technological components relating to political problems. For example, political institutions, political interests, political culture, and public opinions exercise great influence on public administration. And, mathematics offers basic tools for analysis. Very useful branches of mathematics include: statistics (such as mathematical statistics and non-parameter statistics), combinatorics (often used for studying counting, structure, and optimization), and mathematical programming (both mathematical and non-mathematical programming) (Greer, 1994)

"Four levels" refer to the fact that public administration has four types of administration, which include the following: basic administration, functional administration, comprehensive administration, and strategic administration. Basic administration deals with administration activities at the bottom level; functional administration uses the basic administration principles for specific functional purposes, such as planning administration, accounting administration, personnel administration, etc.; comprehensive administration refers to all-around administration of a certain department; strategic administration, which is the apex of the four, contains principally strategic policy and decision-making that demands higher professional qualities and skills regarding managerial personnel.

The framework of MPA education, with the bases of

"one skill, two areas, three bases, and four levels" as explained above, is actually a complete, systematic, integrated engineering project. Master of Public Administration (MPA) education will certainly develop into a discipline which "combines and intersects knowledge of different disciplines, using diverse methods and tools for its research" (Jim, 1998, p. 80).

### **Means to Realize MPA Education Engineering**

Taking into account the MPA education target, i.e., to train multi-functional and versatile professional talents for public work, I hold that we should learn from the advanced western countries and adopt their sophisticated techniques in MPA education. For this purpose, we must reinforce the following teaching methods in our education practice.

#### ***Role-play***

This teaching method has the advantage of creating an on-the-spot effect upon the students, inciting them to take an active part in the study. During the process, the students will acquire some personal experiences. They will have to look closely into the problems, learn how to make decisions, and to analyze the feedback afterwards.

#### ***Fieldwork***

After instruction and training on the basic principles and skills for public administration, it is necessary to let the student do fieldwork so as to promote their practical abilities in decision-making, implementation, administration, and adjustment. This is also an effective means of determining how well students have learned the theories. Almost all world-famous universities give emphasis to fieldwork for MPA education. The Springfield Work program in the Kennedy School, Harvard University, is one of the most prominent programs for MPA education. This program provides the students opportunities to use their knowledge and skills

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## **Balance is the answer to gaining the advantages of globalization.**

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to solve practical problems, and learn how to make professional analyses of the problems before finding solutions. The French National School of Administration is known for its emphasis on fieldwork. Out of the 27 months of training, 12 are set aside for fieldwork (Liu, 2000). The prominent feature of their fieldwork is the "follow-up" program. Instead of working in a certain public institution, the student is sent to shadow a statesman

closely for 12 months, observing how the statesman tackles actual political and economic problems. After the fieldwork, the student has to pass a strictly designed evaluation (Zhang, 2001, pp. 99-104).

#### ***Case Study***

The case study is the most common teaching method, widely used in various forms of professional education (Shan, 2000). First, the case study enables the students to have a deeper understanding of the theories learned, thereby allowing for more practical applications. By this means, their comprehensive administration abilities are improved. Second, the case study offers the students the rare opportunity to look into real problems. Through the short, but vivid, imitation of actual administration, students learn how to analyze practical problems by confronting various public institutions. Third, the cases used are often collected or produced by experienced teachers or public professionals having been involved in public administration from both a theoretical and practical standpoint. Such cases usually reflect the general principles contained in real-life work, thereby helping students adapt more easily to future work. In present MPA education in China, appropriate cases for class work are greatly needed. A call for experts and professionals who will make efforts to compile and write for MPA education in China is quite necessary.

#### ***On-the-Job Training***

This is a process through which MPA students are sent to work regularly in local government and other

public institutions for a period of time. On-the-job training has been an effective means for cadre training in China. If transplanted into MPA education, this training form will be more efficient and more challenging to the students than role-playing or case studies. On-the-job training affords students the opportunity to confront real-world problems, which, in turn, improves their administration capabilities. The students have to apply their knowledge and skills to specific contexts of decision-making and cooperation. On-the-job training can also stimulate the students' sense of duty and desire for competition, so that their potentialities are developed, and they learn more by "doing in reality."

## Conclusion

Master of Public Administration (MPA) education in China is new in China. In order to optimize gains from this degree training, we suggest that education engineering be introduced in curriculum design, classroom teaching, and education evaluation. Role-play, field-work, case study, and on-the-job training are the means we recommend for MPA education engineering. The aim is to train MPA personnel with both professional knowledge and practical ability in public administration, and for MPA education to be able to accord with the requirements of the governance reforms in public administration institutions.



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