

A Long Tradition of Dialogue between Research and Public Governance Development

The systematic development of public administration started back in the last years of the Second World War in 1944. At that point, the emphasis was strongly on rationalisation. Therefore, the perspective was that of work research. Another strong area was jurisprudence. During the following decades, it became obvious that a wider perspective was needed. There was a will to widen the knowledge base and get more information about the state of the Finnish public administration. As early as 1967, it was proposed that a research office should be founded in the department responsible for public administration development in the Ministry of Finance.

There was both a need and a wish for research from many different angles and in many areas. It was clear, for example, that information about the division of labour between administrative organisations was lacking. There was a demand for theoretical and applied research about jurisdictions and authorities and about the many challenges in personnel administration. The idea behind the new research office was that it would produce applied research to complement the basic research and theoretical work done by universities. The goal was to have these two work closely together rather than competing with each other.

The Ministry of Finance research office never got off the ground. However, that same year (1967) saw the founding of the Finnish national section of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS). Its special task was to encourage the dialogue between researchers and civil servants. For a long time, the emphasis in this dialogue was on jurisprudence rather than administrative science.

Even though no research office was ever established, the Ministry of Finance employed researchers and published its own studies. It also actively sought to distribute information to other ministries and agencies about research done in different fields on public administration.

The Ministry of Finance also organised joint events for researchers and civil servants, as indeed it still does. The first major event of this kind was held in Paimio in 1973. At this seminar on public administration research, over 70 experts discussed the state and development of research on national public administration. This seminar was the first larger gathering of civil servants and researchers around this subject. The event led to further reflection about a lack of communication between the worlds of research and the civil service. There were concerns public administration researchers were too far removed from the real world and that the civil servants were trying to develop public administration without an adequate knowledge of research findings.

Later in the 1970s, the Ministry worked together with the Finnish Academy. Towards the end of that decade, there was growing concern that the long tradition of Finnish public administration and its history had not been researched enough. A committee on the history of Finnish public administration was set up and produced a huge amount of research over the following ten-year period.

THE 1990S: AN ACTIVE PERIOD OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM

By the beginning of the 1990s, a series of active public management reforms had been going on for a couple of years.

After the big reforms of that era, including the introduction of performance management and turning government agencies into state-owned enterprises, there was much curiosity about how Finland and its public management were doing compared to other countries.

This started a strong period of international cooperation and evaluation. Right at the beginning of the 1990s, an international comparison project was launched. Its final report "World's Best Public Sector?" was published in 1993. Although written by Finnish civil servants, the report was based on Finnish and international research and reports from the OECD. The final report stated that even though Finland had started its public management reforms later than the countries of the first reform wave, such as the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher, it had managed to catch up with them in most areas of reform. The report noted, however, that Finland lagged slightly behind in two types of reform: regulatory reform (especially in improving the quality of regulation) and the development of evaluation. With regard to the latter, the report emphasised evaluations of public administration in general (policies, organisations etc.), and especially of public management reform.

A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION PROGRAMME OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM

Once the need for information from evaluations had been recognised, researchers and civil servants addressed the topic together. The first concrete result of this joint effort was a book called "Tutkimaton uudistus" (Unresearched Reform). It paved the way for a comprehensive evaluation programme on public management reform. This comprehensive evaluation programme that was started in the mid-1990s, marked the golden age for the evaluation of public management. No programme or input on the same scale has been seen since, although significant individual evaluation projects and surveys are still published regularly.

One of the special characteristics of this evaluation programme was that it did not deal with reforms one by one. Rather, it looked for mutually complementary perspectives and research fields.

The different perspectives on which the evaluations were based included those of decision-makers, civil servants' and citizens. The evaluation programme consisted of the following studies:

- Public Services Go to the Market
- Public sector reforms and how they have shaped the administrative fields of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Trade and Industry
- Performance management and leadership
- Reforms in regional and local government (internal and external focus, productivity and quality of services).
- Citizens' views – especially regarding the switching government agencies into state-owned enterprises and companies
- State-owned enterprises and financial success
- Public management reform through eyes of civil servants
- Views of political decision-makers on public management reform
- Economic impacts (micro and macro)
- An international comparison
- A Final Report (resume) – Possibilities of change

One part of the evaluation programme was also an international comparative analysis performed by Professor Christopher Pollitt and his team. This analysis showed, among other things, that Finnish public management reforms had been more moderate and more sustainable than in many other countries. Finland had carried out an extensive reform in converting agencies into companies, but had been able to implement it successfully without serious confrontations with for instance the trade unions during a period when this had not been the case in many other countries.

STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT DIALOGUE BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM

At the end of the 1990s, new cooperative structures were established in Finland for research and national public administration. The first "regional and local administration days" were organised in 1999. The theme was "Towards best quality of government in Europe". These joint days searched for an answer to the question of how the public

administration could support Finland's upward spiral. The last regional and local administration days so far were organised in Tampere in 2016. This was the tenth event of its kind. Whether the tradition will continue is still an open question, and depends very much on the current changing situation of the regional and local administration. The event was generally thought to provide a valuable forum for cooperation between researchers and civil servants.

The Ministry of Finance and the University of Tampere have held joint seminars each May since the early 2010s. Each year's seminar has had a theme aimed at serving research and the future development of public management.

A COMPLETE OVERHAUL OF RESEARCH INSTITUTES AND RESEARCH FINANCING IN 2013

In September 2013, the Government adopted a decision-in-principle on the overall reform of state research institutes and research financing. The decision stated that the preparation, adoption and implementation of social policy decisions should be based on research data. One aspect of the reform was the requirement that the Government adopt a yearly decision on a review and research plan to support decision-making. The plan directs review and research activities on the basis of the priorities chosen by the Government. The aim was to create a foundation for a wider and more systematic use of research data in decision-making, knowledge management and various operational approaches.

Research and review work on public governance has been carried out in the last few years in conjunction with the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities (www.tietokäyttöön.fi) in areas such as central government reform, leadership flagship reform and research on a lobbying register as part of open government.

A STRONG EMPHASIS ON INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

Finland held the Presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time in 1999. This brought the international comparative perspective to the forefront. It also put emphasis on the exchange of information between different countries and showcased best practices from organisations and comparisons between authorities. In addition, demand for the evaluation of public management reform projects increased, compared with evaluations of policy areas or viewpoints.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Professors Bouckaert and Peters and the OECD's former director Ormond evaluated Finnish central government for a new reform project. Many of the conclusions of that evaluation project are still valid today. In their review "A Potential Governance Agenda for Finland" they stressed the need for a longer-term vision, co-operation over silos, more input on effectiveness and consultation of citizens. Finland should not be too pleased with itself; continuous development was necessary instead. This last point was revisited in 2010 when Finland asked the OECD to review its public governance.

In its review, the OECD specified three challenges that were crucial for Finland: strategic agility, collective commitment and resource flexibility. According to the OECD, resource flexibility was a relative weakness of Finland when compared internationally. Nevertheless, the OECD stated, because it had been specifically asked, in response to a specific question that Finland had not been captured by its earlier success. In fact, continuous development remained a Finnish strength, together with active international dialogue in development work.

Before publishing this comprehensive Public Governance Review of Finland, the OECD had evaluated a number of specific areas of public management development in Finland. At the beginning of the 21st century, Finland was the first country to have an e-government review done by the OECD. The idea behind the comprehensive review of public governance was to obtain a more holistic view of Finland's strengths and weaknesses. Finland and Estonia commissioned a joint feedback review in 2015. While the OECD's reviews are not academic research, they represent high-quality assessment and analysis.

With regard to the knowledge base in public governance development, the OECD holds a very strong position – a fact we need to be aware of. Every piece of knowledge and analysis that comes from the OECD is truly valuable. It needs, however, to be balanced with public governance research from other sources. For this reason, cooperation in international administrative research with the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS) has been considered valuable.

Finland has taken an active role in the international work of IIAS. The most visible examples of this have been the EGPA conference in Vaasa in 2004 and the IIAS conference in Helsinki in 2009. In addition, Finland has been active in IIAS's administration.

The IIAS national section in Finland has served as a meeting point for researchers and civil servants for many decades. The national section has organised seminars, meetings and book clubs.

ABOUT DEMAND, SUPPLY AND TRUST

There are many ways to use data and knowledge from research. The debate on how to make better use of research has lasted for a long time, but it remains a subject that needs more attention and more investment. The OECD's observation that civil servants should be more concerned about the use of research than decision-makers should also be thought through in Finland.

Internationally, the problems on the demand side seem bigger than on the supply side. In Finland, there is an additional challenge in that research on state government has decreased, while demand for topical research within local and regional development has grown. If we wish to enhance research on state government, we should keep in mind the OECD's observation that, based on some cases in Britain, increasing supply also increases demand. Finland has challenges in both demand and supply. Nevertheless, we should pay attention to and emphasise the question of how research data is understood. In addition to data literacy, we must highlight research literacy.

THERE IS LOT TO RESEARCH

We interviewed academic researchers of public administration for our national state administration development work during the 2017 the annual Administrative Research Conference. The interviewees mentioned many subject areas that suffered from insufficient or a complete lack of research.

EXAMPLES OF AREAS WITH LACKING RESEARCH:

- *Reorganisation of state public administration and the centre of government*
- *Change in the status of civil servants*
- *Relationship between Ministry of Finance and Prime Minister's Office*
- *Management of Ministries*
- *Ministries as organisations*
- *State regional and local government – follow-up studies of reforms*
- *Relationship between administration and politics*
- *Leaders of ministries*

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Besides the challenges, Finland has also strengths in the dialogue between academic researchers and civil servants. In a small country, these include good cooperation, dialogue and mutual respect. Moreover, the quality of research is high and both researchers and civil servants have strong international networks. We also have traditional cooperative structures like the IIAS National Section and the Nordic-wide NAF (Nordisk Administrativ Förening).

Securing the knowledge base of public governance development is considered one factor in strengthening trust in development work, where challenges remain. One challenge is the previously mentioned lack of research on state government. The demand for research is often fragmented and linked to individual reform projects. Another challenge is the short-sightedness of this research demand. Demand for research only becomes topical when a comparison between Finland and other countries is needed in a particular area. The demand for research could and should be more proactive, and skills on how to obtain research and analysis could be stronger.

KNOWLEDGE BASE AND TRUST

Trust is a key theme in all areas of public governance development. In utilising research in this development work in the state government, there are many facets where trust is a fundamental ingredient:

- trust in the actors
- trust in the processes
- trust in the end result of the process
- respect for the other party's (professional) logic
- autonomy on both sides and clear roles

In Finland, these issues have not been problematic and today we are in a lucky position where there is trust between the actors.

The cooperation between public administration and researchers is still vital. How could we strengthen it even further? How could we, for example, increase the mobility between researchers and civil servants, mentoring, career paths and paths of doctoral studies in administration? It is important to emphasise cooperation that does not aim at short-term gains. Instead of asking about individual projects, we could, for instance, ask researchers' views on whether the Finnish Public Governance principles are still valid.

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