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Landscape of Globally Minded Leadership Development for Public Servants

Abstract

This study aimed to unravel how far the concept of leadership development for agility has gone into the curriculum of higher education institutions (HEI) as an indication of their preparedness for educating public servants in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) policy environment of today. A qualitative, systematic analytical method was adopted by referencing the public policy and administration schools of the world's top 100 ranked universities in The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024. The results were categorized into three executive programs with the potential for leadership enhancement through customized arrangements, two executive programs with the label of "leadership," and one executive program that specifically addresses agility-relevant leadership development for the VUCA era. The study concluded that leadership development focusing on agility is still at an infancy/early stage of adoption by the world's public policy and administration schools. This study made a step forward by identifying where the programs are already running, down to the point where the university is running, and which public policy and administration programs. The practical implications of the study reside in its referential value for those governments and/or their professionals in identifying where services are provided.

Keywords:

executive program; leadership; public policy and administration; VUCA

Introduction

Having characterized the world's public policy and administration degree programs of today as "diverse schools, convergent curricula' (p. 1587), Bice and Coates (2021) proposed the use of the Global Capabilities Framework as a menu from which public policy and administration schools can develop curricula to meet the evolving needs of public servants to navigate the increasingly complex global policy environment. The Framework consists of capabilities in global and specific dimensions, and is classified into four elements of five components each.

The availability of the framework was certainly a step forward for considering the professional development of public servants to better confront today's uncertain policy environment, characterized by the term volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). In this context, the illustration of the specific knowledge and/or skills to be cultivated emerged as the next imperative pursuit and was set to be explored as this study's research problem. Since the Global Capabilities Framework was proposed, especially post COVID-19, one component in the framework stands out, particularly fitting for the widely recognized needs of public servants to equip them with professional skills to navigate in the VUCA era, which is agility, a trait typically associated with management discipline's leadership. This context provides the background for this study.

The objective of this study was to unravel how far the concept of leadership development for agility has gone into the curriculum of higher education institutions (HEI) as an indication of their preparedness for educating public servants in the VUCA policy environment of today. This study used graduate-level public policy and administration programs offered by universities as a unit of analysis.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature, highlighting the link between public policy, administration, and agility in the context of public sector professional development. The methodology section outlines the systematic analytical approach employed in this study. The subsequent section presents the results and discussion, highlighting the integrative analysis of the empirical findings and their contribution to the larger context of public sector professionals' leadership development in the VUCA era. Finally, the conclusion revisits the study's contribution to the research on leadership development for public servants and notes the implications for future research.

Literature Review
Link between Public Policy and Administration and Agility

By framing today's public administration environment as a high-speed and turbulent society, Ansell, Sorensen, and Torfing (2023) called for the need for robust governance. This governance paradigm creates agile and developmental organizations that are capable of improvisation, experimentation, rapid learning, and systematic involvement of relevant and affected actors beyond the usual stakeholder groups. In their mind, robust governance is more than agile management, and yet the concept of agility is embedded to enable "agile adaptation' (p. 9) in the face of turbulence.

In an exploratory qualitative, multi-case analysis of how public organizations acted to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, Morton (2023) provided a practical definition of what agility means in the context of public organizations. The organizations that she analyzed demonstrated adaptive responses to changes in the external environment, even though these were institutions typically labeled as having rigid, slow-moving, and hierarchical bureaucracy under normal circumstances. This ability to adapt to changing situations is a key conceptualization of agility pertaining to the public sector and has received attention in the domain of public policy and administration research.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a life-size illustration of today's turbulent society. Moon (2020) examined how the South Korean Government managed the problem and concluded that agile-adaptive actions were part of the countermeasures that mitigated the surge of the pandemic in the case of South Korea. These actions included large-scale epidemiological surveys to grasp the unfolding situations and come up with arrangements as new situations required, such as the use of training centers and public institutions' facilities to accommodate infected

but light-symptom patients and drive-through and walk-through testing stations to minimize hospital infections, as well as to free up spaces at hospitals. This adaptive approach was made possible because the South Korean Government made decisions based on scientific evidence and standard operating procedures established based on the prior experience of handling the 2015 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) incident and adjusted the decisions based on inputs from the fields rather than by political calculations.

Janssen and Van der Voort (2020) observed the COVID-19 response of the Dutch Government, who opted for a smart-lockdown policy, and noted that this approach allowed the country to rapidly scale up intensive care capacity as required and keep the economy running. With this policy, anti-viral measures were encouraged rather than mandated, leaving the ultimate responsibility of individuals to adapt to local conditions and moving circumstances. Essentially, what was smart was the flexibility that came as the situation changed. Initially, the focus was on the prevention of spreading. Subsequently, the priority shifted to scaling up the intensive capacity. As the crisis unfolded, the emphasis was further moved to remedy the scarcity of testing capacity. Janssen and Van der Voort (2020) analyzed the way the Dutch handled COVID-19 and found that agility and adaptability could go hand in hand but conflicted at times due to their differences in nature: agility for seeking quick responses and adaptability to maintain fit with the changes. However, since they have complementary approaches, both traits, agility and adaptability, are required for turbulent challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ludviga and Kalvina (2024) examined the mediating role of perceived organizational strategic agility in relation to employee outcomes during the COVID-19 crisis in public sector organizations in Latvia. They found that employees performed with higher work engagement if

supported by leaders who sensed change, made timely decisions, and acted in an agile manner. Their results provide confirmatory evidence that agility is a skill sought out by personnel in managerial and/or leadership positions. The research also showed that the target platform of public policy and administration schools' programs for agility is not a regular master's program, with a standard curriculum for students who enter either pre-service or in the early stage of their career. Rather, studying and acquiring the capability for agile performance would be more relevant for aspiring public servants envisioned to move to managerial and/or executive positions. With such confirmation, the study focused on the executive programs of public policy and administration schools to see what kind of leadership development that concerns nurturing agility is included in their offerings.

Method

This study utilized a qualitative, systematic analytical approach to carve out leadership development courses that concern nurturing agility from public policy and administration programs that are out of the world.

Data source: The global rankings of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) illustrate a hegemonic structure with predominant, globally operating, handful universities governing the domain of the world's higher education industry. Tsumagari (2022) called the phenomenon "a symbol of today's higher education ecosystem" (p. 4). If one likes it or not, rankings are widely referred to by various sectors of society to make their own evaluative judgement. For instance, in Bangladesh under the Sheikh Hasina Government, the Prime Minister's Fellowship, a highly sought-after and prestigious scholarship arrangement for the country's civil servants to attain study abroad opportunities, required the candidates to secure admission at the top ranked universities: At the 100-highest ranked universities for PhD programs,

and at 200 top-ranked universities in the case of master's program (The Business Standard, 2023). For the ranking criteria, Fellowship used The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024 as a benchmark (Government Innovation Unit Chief Advisors Office, 2024).

Because of the pervasiveness of such ranking system for looking at the global HEI landscape, as a proxy measure, this study referenced The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024 (Times Higher Education, 2024). The study sorted the top 100 ranked schools by "public policy and administration" and used the resultant portfolio to see to what extent their leadership development courses concern nurturing agility.

Data analysis: A qualitative approach was adopted to analyze the portfolio of executive programs offered by the public policy and administration schools of the top 100 ranked universities in The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024. The study focused on how far the concept of leadership development for agility has gone into HEI education programs as an indication of their preparedness to educate public servants in the VUCA era.

The majority of the carved out 100-graduate public policy and administration degree programs offer a standard set of curricula on theoretical and analytical training in their master's program meant for public sector job aspirants and/or those in the early career stage of the civil service. While some had leadership-related courses, they predominantly covered learning about leadership as a subject, rather than how to exercise it. Thus, this study looked further into the landscape for a more appropriate subset and identified a small number of executive programs. They are classified into (a) three executive programs with the potential for leadership enhancement through customized arrangement, (b) two executive programs with the label of "leadership," and (c)

one executive program that specifically addresses agility-relevant leadership development for the VUCA era.

Results and Discussion

This section first presents the empirical findings of the systematic analysis of the portfolio of executive programs offered by the public policy and administration schools of the world's top 100 ranked universities in The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024, categorized into three types: three executive programs with the potential for leadership enhancement through customized arrangement, two executive programs with the label of "leadership," and one executive program that specifically addresses agility-relevant leadership development for the VUCA era. The next section presents the findings' contribution to the larger context of public sector professionals' leadership development discussions for the VUCA era.

Three Executive Programs with Potential for Leadership Enhancement through Customized Arrangement

The first group consists of schools that emphasize their tailored approach by offering customized programs: (a) Tsinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management, which houses the Cadre Education Center; (b) the University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley)'s Richard and Rhoda Goldman School of Public Policy, which conducts the Berkeley Global and Executive Program; and (c) Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), within which The Picker Center for Executive Education resides (Table 1).

Regarding the target participants, there are largely two patterns: one is to cater to the nation's public sector that seeks professional development services for the sector's senior executives (Tsinghua University's Cadre Education Center), and the other is to cater to both domestic

Table 1.
Profile of the Three Executive Programs

University name	Tsinghua University, Beijing, China	University of California at Berkeley UC Berkeley), California, US	Columbia University, New York, US
School name	School of Public Policy and Management	Richard and Rhoda Goldman School of Public Policy	School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA)
Center in charge or program name	Cadre Education Center of Tsinghua SPPM	Berkeley Global and Executive Program	The Picker Center for Executive Education
Target participants	Party and government leaders, business executives, and heads of social organizations (of China.)	Senior and mid-career government officials and public policy practitioners from the United States and nations around the world.	Senior managers from around the world
Instructors	Faculty of the University, plus knowledge from Chinese public administration	University's top faculty and practitioners	Distinguished University faculty both in New York City and at partner institutions around the world
Features explained	A large number of high-level public administration courses	Designed to support the target students who aspire to increase their impact as thought leaders and raise the bar on effective public management for our modern world	Courses are available on issues that range from financial management in emerging markets, to leadership and strategic planning, to using "big data" in city management and sustainability studies

Source: Processed by the author

and international markets to offer capacity development programs to senior-level personnel looking for add-on training opportunities (UC Berkeley's Goldman School and Columbia University's SIPA).

With respect to the instructors for the program, all three schools stress their advantage of having a full-fledged, globally renowned university base from which they can tap the best possible instructor for the course ordered. In terms of the offered programs, Tsinghua's Cadre Education Center and Columbia University's SIPA state that they have a wide variety of course lists to choose from, while UC Berkeley's Goldman School seems to tailor upon order.

The common default arrangement of this group is their stance to serve self-identified leaders and/or those regarded as leaders by respective organizations to make them able to perform the job better. If asked, the schools in this group will probably create a course on leadership development. However, from the way they publicize, it does not seem probable for the schools to go out of their ways by stretching to create something totally new, such as agile leadership-focused training, which does not sit in the range of the standard leadership development menu.

Two Executive Programs with the Label of "Leadership"

The second group consists of schools that offer "leadership" named courses for people in leadership positions, and they are (a) Harvard University's Kennedy School that conducts Executive Education Program, and (b) National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), which conducts senior fellowship in public service programmes (SFPSP) (Table 2).

There was an interesting contrast between the target participants. Harvard's Kennedy School offers skill-specific short courses of several days for busy professionals who sign up knowing what they need, while the National University of Singapore's LKYSPP runs a month-long cohort-based program where all participants go through a rigorous capacity development curriculum

Table 2.
Profile of the Two Executive Programs

University name	Harvard University	National University of Singapore
School name	Harvard Kennedy School	Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP)
Center in charge or program name	Executive Education Program	Senior Fellowship in Public Service Programme (SFPSP)
Target participants	Senior-level leaders looking to sharpen their skillset, expand their leadership capabilities, and develop a global network of peers	Senior-level leaders in public, private, and non-profit sectors.
Instructors	Harvard faculty	LKYSPP faculty and practitioners
Characteristics of the program explained	40+ transformative on-campus and online programs to select from	A rigorous curriculum that focuses on developing leadership and governance competencies of participants, equipping them with the tools to take on challenges at a global level, to deal with a world full of unknowns.
Leadership programs explained	* Leadership for the 21 Century, with a focus on navigating authority, conflict, and change. * Senior Executive Fellows, whose curriculum provides insights into real-time leadership challenges to address them effectively. * Emerging Leaders, will cover interactive simulation to train to make evidence-based decisions amid ambiguity. * Leadership in Crisis, will challenge the participants craft and execute time sensitive responses to crisis.	* Participants will develop visionary leadership that empower them to inspire change within the organization. * Will be exposed to pragmatic real-world strategies to lead and manage change.

Source: Processed by the author

based on four pillars, of which leadership is one along with globalization, national governance, and technology and innovation.

Although there is a noticeable difference between the two programs, there is still a common thread that runs between them: the emphasis on training capability to respond to real-world and real-time leadership challenges. It cannot be confirmed if the founding history of LKYSPP had any impact on such a common thread, but going back to the time of LKYSPP's establishment in 2004, the Kennedy School's role was not insignificant.

The LKYSPP was established based on the decision of the Government of Singapore to create an institution of higher learning dedicated to the study and teaching of good governance. The National University of Singapore's pre-existing public policy program inherited by LKYSPP included a partnership with Kennedy School, and because of that relationship, KYSPP did not have to start from scratch, according to Dr. Kishore Mahbubani, the founding dean of the school.

Nevertheless, LKYSPP consciously asked "what it means to be a global and Asian policy school' (Fritzen, 2013, p. 72) and set up its own vision to make the school a global reference point in public policy with relevance to Asian societies (Yiannouka, 2013a, 2013b). Today, the two schools are connected at a different level as representative schools located in the respective corner of the world as members of the Global Public Policy Network (GPPN), a partnership among eight globally renowned schools of public policy.

One Executive Program that Specifically Addresses the Agility Relevant Leadership Development for VUCA Era

Out of the 100 top ranked universities' public policy and administration programs of The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024, there is one program that elaborated its tailored curriculum on VUCA

minded agility focused leadership development in a series titled "Emergent leadership series." It is offered by the Executive Course of the Australia National University's Crawford School of Public Policy.

The series is envisaged to build the competence and confidence of participants to lead and manage in a VUCA world environment (Crawford School of Public Policy, 2024). The series is further explained to equip the participants with current and future capabilities and expertise to better understand complexity and uncertainty and develop programs and processes that will support adaptation within the organization and the society that they are in. The series consisted of three component courses, each containing five sessions of one hour to one and half hour each (Table 3).

Throughout the course descriptions, it is clear that the courses target change makers who are positioned to develop something new in their organizations, be it a strategy, plan, and/or project. Therefore, the courses are meant to prepare the participants to step out of their box and make them able to chart a new path in a way they have never done by becoming an agile leader.

What this series imagined is assumed to

Table 3.
Component Courses of the Emergent Leadership Series

Course title	Adaptive Thinking for Complex Policy Environment	Foresighting Skills to Design and Implement Adaptive Practices	Strategic Thinking and Planning in a Complex and Uncertain World
Summary	Frameworks and processes to understand and enable adaptive change in complex and uncertain policy environments.	How to use foresight and systems thinking to develop adaptive capacity	How to develop strategy in a complex and uncertain landscape
Learning outcome	*Understand how to lead and manage in a complex and volatile environment * Understand how to lead and support cultural change * Apply skills and techniques that will assist adaptive policy and strategy development * Apply the principles of complex adaptive systems to better understand complex environments * Understand how people work together using the frameworks and principles of complex adaptive systems * Understand the worldview of complex adaptive systems	* Will have new ways of perceiving and thinking about complex and uncertain policy environments * The capability to develop the content to lead and manage for adaptation to a changing business environment * The capability to develop and share new narratives that impact on cultural change, policy and strategy development * The skills and techniques of foresight work that will assist to inform policy and strategy development and address a range of other issues * The capacity to challenge belief systems about the dynamics of the business landscape and the implications this may have on the direction of the organization and its consequential performance	* Understand the nature of change and how that influences the framing of policy and strategy development * Understand the distinctions between strategic thinking and strategic planning * The capability to identify the differences ambiguity and uncertainty and how to respond accordingly to develop strategy * The capability to identify uncertainty, understand it and include the implications of it throughout the strategic plan * The capability to better understand people during strategy and policy development and how to better manage relationships to achieve intended business outcomes
Who should attend	*Managers who are required to develop strategy and policy in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous operating environment * Project leaders who are responsible to complex problems, yet do not believe nor feel that they are gaining a sense of satisfaction through their efforts.	*Any sector that needs to understand the nature of its business environment and develop an organized response with the capacity to identify emerging trends and be able to respond to them * Policy development and implementation business units	* Any sector that needs to understand the nature of its business environment and develop an organized response with the capacity to identify emerging trends and be able to respond to them.

Source: Processed by the author

be the closest available version of what Bice and Coates (2021) proposed using the Global Capabilities Framework. However, this series does not fall under the graduate curriculum assumed by Bice and Coates. First, this series is drawn from the portfolio of executive programs out of the top 100 ranked universities' public policy and administration" in The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024. Thus, it is different from degree programs, such as towards a master's or PhD. In addition, this series is taught by a single instructor who is not part of the so-called permanent faculty but is brought in as a course presenter. From this perspective, this series does not fall under the domain of a full-fledged-degree program curriculum. Nonetheless, this series, the executive program that focuses on nurturing VUCA-minded agility for leadership development, is convincing since its content is well aligned with and reflects what the literature stated as agility as an important driver in public policy and administration for urgent and unexpected responses (Table 4).

The courses offered by this special series of executive programs seem to be outliers in the current context of leadership development in public policy and administration schools. However, given that the contents match the researchers' thinking as important for the VUCA era public policy and administration, the contents concerned by the series have the potential to become indicative prototypes for similar programs in the future.

What the World's Public Policy and Administration Program's Portfolio Suggests

Beyond the categorized illustration of the world's public policy and administration programs, the systematic analysis of the portfolio of executive programs, as presented in the previous section, contributes to the broader literature on public sector professionals' leadership development discussions for the VUCA era. First, the portfolio analysis revealed that the public sector professionals who are concerned with leadership capability are those who are in or are aiming for an executive position and that their needs are addressed in the executive programs rather than in the master's program meant for either entry level of junior professionals.

Second, the driver was the self-awareness of the person or the organization to want to improve leadership qualities, which prompted the person or the organization to seek professional development services through an executive program that addresses leadership development. These revelations extend our current knowledge on public sector professionals' leadership development discussions by indicating which subset of professional development programs and which career levels to focus on for further investigation.

Table 4.
Converging Points between the Study's Literature and "Emergent Leadership Series" at Australia National University's Crawford School of Public Policy

What author said	Addressed by which course
Morton (2023) said agility is the ability to be adaptable to the changing situations	* Adaptive Thinking for Complex Policy Environment
Moon (2020) pointed out on the agile-adaptive actions to deal effectively with the pandemic.	
Janssen and Van der Voort (2020) observed that agility and adaptability could go hand in hand but conflicted at times due to their differences in nature: agility for seeking quick responses and adaptability for maintaining fit with the changes.	
Ludviga and Kalvina (2024) found that the employees performed with higher work engagement if supported by leaders who sensed change, made timely decisions, and acted in an agile way.	* Foresighting Skills to Design and Implement Adaptive Practices * Strategic Thinking and Planning in a Complex and Uncertain World

Source: Processed by the author

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify what kind of leadership-related capability development is available through public policy and administration programs for public servants to navigate in the VUCA era with a focus on agility. It comes with decision-making abilities, typically not required for entry positions but critically required for managerial and/or leadership positions.

Given the nature associated with leadership development, this study focused on executive programs. It became clear that the subject of leadership development, particularly nurturing agile leadership, is not a standard item in the menu offered by public policy and administration schools. Presumably, one can ask a course to be tailored to or go straight to a particular program that specifically deals with a particular skill that one is looking for. Although still a non-standard offer, the study identified that there is one public policy and administration school that offers a VUCA-minded agile leadership-focused executive program. However, it is taught by a single external instructor as a special series and does not seem to fall within the range of a full-fledged curriculum. Thus, the study concludes that leadership development with a focus on agility to tackle the evolving global policy environment is still at an infancy/early stage of adoption by the world's public policy and administration schools.

However, this study made a step forward by identifying where the programs are already running, down to the point of which university and which public policy and administration programs. The practical implications of the study reside in its referential value for those governments and/or their professionals in identifying where services are provided.

While exhaustive efforts have been made to research public policy and administration programs to include in the portfolio, the study has limitations from the perspective of sampling. The study relied on data compiled by The Times Higher Education World University Overall Rankings 2024 (Times Higher Education, 2024) and referenced the top 100 schools that offer relevant programs. However, there could be other strong referential cases outside the sample set that were not tapped for the study.

Leadership is a theme that has been traditionally addressed under the management discipline, and this study provides insights that further research can extend the focus to graduate programs that are housed within management disciplines. This pursuit would make it a worthwhile research agenda to advance the knowledge presented in this study.

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