

GENERAL ISSUES CONCERNING NEEDS ANALYSIS IN LOCAL PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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Needs assessment in local public institutions was not very present so far in a systematic manner in Romanian specialized literature on administrative reform. Current study uses interviews with candidates for a public administration master program to investigate civil servants motivation of pursuing graduate-level studies and their perception on current needs of the work in local public institutions. Motivation for pursuing graduate studies is located mainly on the need to update and diversify their professional knowledge, and not as much on promotion-related reasons. The perceived needs are related to management of public institutions, structure of information system, legislation and European integration, human resource management and public relations.

Framework:

Public administration kept a low profile within reform efforts until recent years. Issues related to efficiency and effectiveness in public institutions were visibly missing both in official policy documents and in electoral platforms of various political parties¹ until in the second part of the 1990s. Visible decisions were made only after the European Commission Country Monitoring Reports critiqued Romania's low administrative capacity². Interestingly enough, public administrative professional literature in Romanian language was concerned only to a little extent³ to design and conduct in a systematic manner such analyses, especially for the case of local government or de-concentrated institutions. One of the risks resulted

¹ <http://www.electoral2000.ro/platforme.php>

² European Commission, Regular Reports from the Commission on Romania's Progress Towards Accession, 1998-2004.

³ Dan Sandor, Călin Hîntea, "Profesionalizarea funcționarilor publici", *Revista Transilvană de Științe Administrative*, Nr. 1(2)/1999, pp. 88-93; Călin Emilian Hîntea, "Probleme strategice ale reformei sistemului administrativ românesc", *Revista Transilvană de Științe Administrative*, Nr. 1(2)/1999, pp.141-145; Ion Popescu Slăniceanu, "Pregătirea și perfecționarea profesională a funcționarilor publici", *Revista Transilvană de Științe Administrative*, 1(4)/2000, pp. 18-26; Sorin Dan Sandor, Călin Ghioltan, "Universitarii ca resursă pentru dezvoltarea unei capacități autohtone de consultantă în administrația publică", *Revista Transilvană de Științe Administrative*, 1(6)/2001, pp.158-163.

from this situation is that the training of local level civil servants is realized according to criteria which do not reflect local needs, leading thus to waste of already scarce resources.

Current study provides the preliminary results of a two-years pilot study exploring the motivation of continuing studies at master level and other perceived needs (broadly defined) in their institutions by civil servants in local government and de-concentrated institutions from counties in north-western part of Transylvania. Motivation of continuing studies was included as part of the need to preparation and training of the human resource in public institutions. These results could provide some guiding points in developing more extended studies in that regard.

Working hypotheses:

- a) The motivation of continuing studies at master level is determined by the wish to secure the work position for the top decision-makers⁴
- b) The motivation of continuing studies at master level is determined by the wish to promote by the rank and-file civil servants.
- c) Needs perceived at the civil servants level regarded the lack of funds and high level of fluctuation in legislation which render difficulties on current work.

Methods:

The research method chosen to tackle the problem was the interview applied on the candidates for the Executive Master program in Public Administration offered by the Department of Public Administration⁵. In September 2004 a sample of the civil servants was interviewed (as the selection for the top decision-makers was done at the National Institute of Administration), and in September 2005 all candidates (decision-makers and civil servants) were interviewed. The interview was chosen as research method because it allowed the investigator to look with more detail to the perception of the interviewees about the motivation and needs. Two questions were asked to look into the “needs”: one about the subjects of study for which they were interested, and the other asked about the changes that would be considered useful for the daily work.

The answers were recorded in writing using keywords. Due to multiple answers the total number of answers is higher than the number of interviewees. Keywords frequencies were counted and grouped into components/categories.

In 2004 the interviews were done with a random sample 45 out of the 141 applicants from the “rank-and-file” civil servants and in the end answers from 39 candidates were included in the analysis. In 2005 all 175 candidates, both top decision-makers and “rank-and-file” civil servants, were interviewed.

Results and analysis:

The three major topics followed were:

1. Declared motivation for application to the master program;
2. Subjects of interest for the study during the program;
3. Changes that would be useful for the daily work.

Only the first topic is presented in the current paper, as it tries to describe the specifics of each cohort and to identify changes between them.

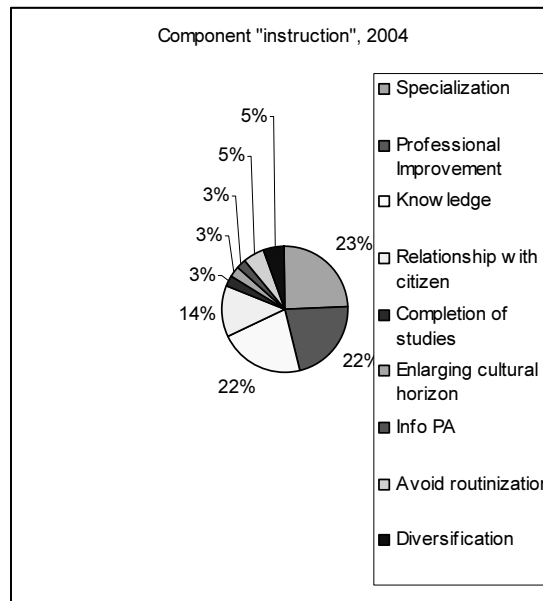
⁴ The Law of the Civil Public Service issued in 2003 requires a master level degree in public administration or a related field in order to occupy a management position. Incumbent top decision makers who wanted to keep their position had to obtain a master- level degree within three years.

⁵ This is a 1 year program offered by the DPA for civil servants; in 2003 and 2004 it was offered in cooperation with the National Institute of Administration and in 2005 only by the Babes-Bolyai University.

1. Motivation of application to the master program

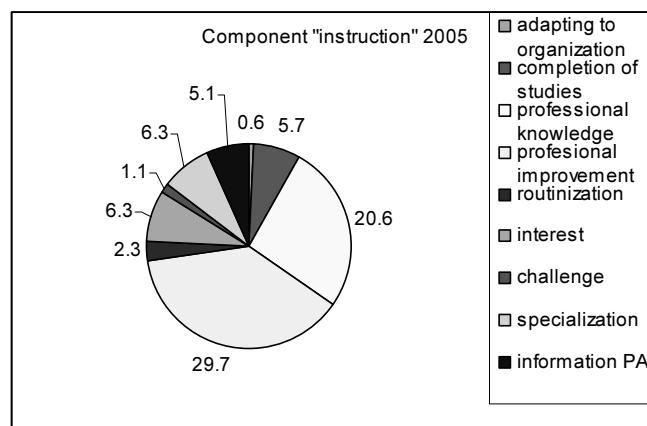
The answers to the question related to the motivation of application to the master program can be grouped in the following categories: instruction, career, and personal.

a) Component "Instruction":



This category included the following items: specialization, professional improvement, knowledge, avoiding routine, completion of studies, diversification, enriching cultural horizon, more information about public administration. In 2004 there were 37 items included under this category, distributed as above.

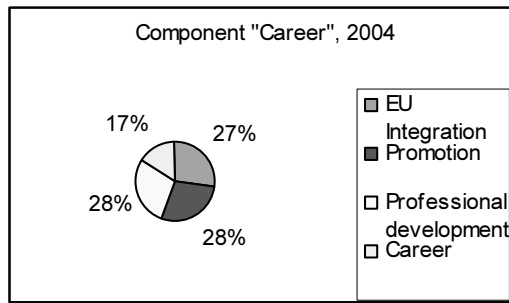
It suffered few changes in 2005, with new items such as "new interest", "challenge", and "adapting to organization" as follows:



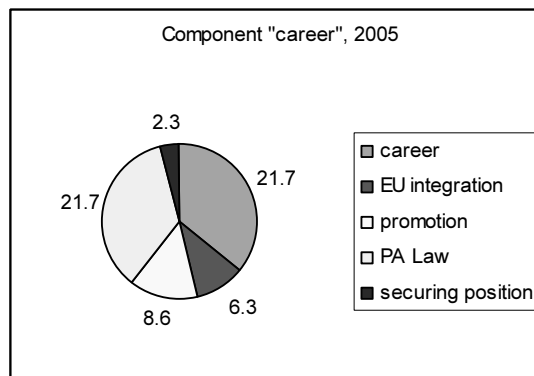
Overall, the same items are predominant: specialization, professional improvement, and knowledge. The major item absent in 2005 is "the relationship with the citizen" which in 2004 was declared by the interviewees as a significant component of the motivation for which they needed a master degree.

b) The component "Career"

The second category of items included elements such as: promotion, career, professional development, European Integration. In 2004 they were distributed as follows:



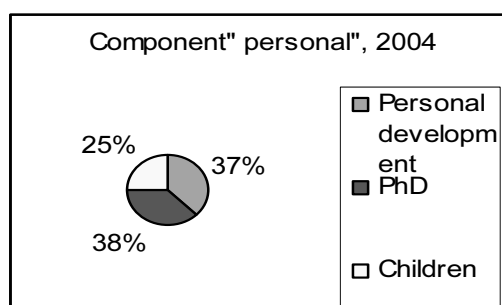
Again, in 2005 the differences were not too big in terms of the components; however, there were changes in terms of percentages:



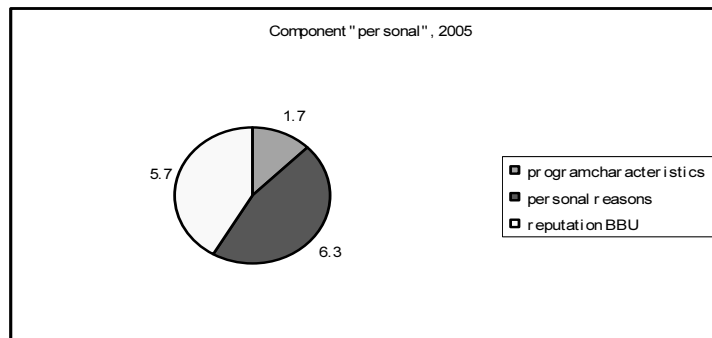
The item "promotion" strongly decreased from 28% to 8.6%, "European integration decreased spectacularly from 27% to 6.3%, and "career" increased from 17% to 21%. The item generically named "professional development" which in 2004 occupied 28% now is replaced with an open admission that "PA Law " requires a further degree (21.7%) and another generic term named "professional consolidation"(2.3%).

c) Personal

Under the category named "personal" the following items were included: personal development, model for children, (mentioned twice by women), and PhD. 8 such items were mentioned in 2004.



In 2005 the cluster was restructured, as new types of personal motivations appeared, such as "being convinced by a spouse", "children were old enough so that I could take the responsibility for a master degree", "encouraged by a child" etc. Among the motivations included here are also characteristics of the program (availability near the residence, classes scheduled at the end of the week, allowing thus for work) and, totally new, "reputation of the Babes-Bolyai University". The latter was declared as a very important factor in choosing for this program, as opposed to other programs offered by other universities.



There are interesting differences when looking at the structure of answers between the two years. Thus, for 2004 the category named "instruction" included more items than "career" (37 items versus 18), which does not confirm initial hypothesis that rank-and-file civil servants are only interested in promotion. Instruction through the master program can be, however, seen as a means to secure current position, faced with possible personnel cuts. However, the simple weight of the number of the items in a category can not be considered as a crucial criterion in making such a decision. It can be argued that the high number of items in the "instruction" category can also indicate:

- A socially desirable answer, especially considering the widespread suspicion today in public institutions towards employees who manifest wishes for promotion;
- Instruction can be seen as an indirect way of securing workplace, and thus an indirect way of securing career, and
- Can reflect an existent need for training and education for personnel in public institutions, acutely needed at the level of rank-and-file civil servants.

The explanation from point c) is best supported by the available data for 2004, as the most frequent items are those reflecting professional preparation: specialization (9 times), professional improvement (8 times) and knowledge (8 times). In addition, many interviewees declared that they did not participate in other professional training courses since graduation of university⁶, and that they acutely feel that need in the daily work. One of them declared "so far only the bosses participated to training sessions, and these courses are needed at lower levels in organizations as well".

One more argument favoring this explanation can be brought by the fact that most of the candidates were supporting themselves the tuition fees, or for the best case scenario their institution would support them in the second semester, due to unavailability of funds for this purpose in the budget. This argument can be used also for point b), as candidates could view this investment in time and money as useful for the future, and a graduate diploma could be taken as a selection criterion for future personnel cuts.

An interesting aspect of the answers included in this category was given by the positive phrasing of the answers, focused on learning new knowledge, both general and specialized. However, practical skills were not at all mentioned as reasons for continuing studies. One possible explanation could be given by the general understanding about the difference between the "theory" loosely associated with scholarly education and "practice" which "happens in real life". University is still seen as an "ivory tower", totally separated from the community. One can also interpret that candidates expectations towards the education process is one related to uni-directional communication, with a low level of feedback from students. This piece of information is important for faculty members in structuring the class materials and interaction. One additional argument for this position is given by

⁶ Given the average age of the candidates, they had graduated from university between 1989-1991.

the difficulties that the interviewees had to answer the question “ how do you see your contribution to the educational process?”. Most of them were puzzled over the idea that they also have things to bring in class. The only answer that came after rephrasing the question, and even then in few situations, was that practical experience could be used in class discussions.

Avoiding routinization was another item with an interesting evolution between the two cohorts, as it got more often mentioned by the 2005 cohort.

One can thus preliminary conclude that there is interest and willingness for effort directed towards the improvement of professional preparation.

However, the answers brought by the 2005 cohort bring new interesting elements for the differences in the types of answers. Due to the different size of the interviewed groups we can not compare them directly. However, breaking down main items of the “instruction” category by the position of the candidate, there are some interesting results:

Distribution frequencies of item “ professional improvement” by position

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Civil servant | 24 |
| Decision maker | 22 |
| other | 2 |

Distribution frequencies of item “professional knowledge” by position:

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Civil servant | 17 |
| Decision maker | 14 |
| other | 2 |

The difference between civil servants and decision-makers are no longer as clear cut as they seemed from the previous cohort, and the wish for instruction seems rather marginal when considered only from the frequencies points of view. The comparison between cohorts is limited, indeed, and another limit is that the comparability of the meaning of the terms used could not be cross-checked. This is one aspect to be taken into account for future cohorts.

The category “career” reflects a small range of answer, the most frequent items being “promotion”, “career” and “professional development” for the 2004 cohort and “ career”, “PA Law” and “promotion” for the 2005 cohort. One can consider that the relatively small number of candidates who openly admitted that the reason for which they apply for master is to insure their future promotion is given by social desirability, as the contrary would attract negative images from co-workers and supervisors. Additional questions aiming in that direction were answered in a defensive manner.

Again, there are differences between the two cohorts, which need further investigation. Thus:

Distribution of frequencies for the item “career” by position:

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Civil servant | 17 |
| Decision maker | 12 |
| other | 8 |

Distribution of frequencies for the item “promotion” by position:

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Civil servant | 11 |
| Decision maker | 3 |

Distribution of frequencies for the item “PA Law ” (i.e. Law requirement to obtain a graduate diploma in order to maintain job) by position:

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Civil servant | 10 |
| Decision maker | 28 |

Again, the striving towards developing a career and for promotion as well as plain constraint by the law for the top managers bring additional arguments to support the initial work hypotheses. The two types of aims come out with more nuances than they were initially envisaged, as promotion and career can be insured indirectly through instruction, by investing time and money into a graduate degree. Peer pressure and colleagues examples also act as motivating factors, as resulted from data collected in 2005.

The category titled “personal” although small for both cohorts, brings surprises, like the wish to provide a role model for children, to further pursue a PhD out of personal desire, as it would not bring any advantage in the current job. Being a role model for children, or being supported by the children in the decision to pursue a graduate degree were provided as motivation only by women, in both cohorts. This can indicate a diversification in the roles and relationships in families. On one hand, current models of success are not related to academic performance by persons at middle ages, but the example of a mother can be crucial for a teenager. On the other hand, a child who is student and encourages and supports his/her mother to pursue a graduate degree also contributes to the increase in self-esteem at parent level. Other items such as “reputation of UBB” or “characteristics of the program” tend to sketch new conditions to be taken into account on the higher education market, by candidates in search of a program suited to their needs.

Conclusions

Current study presents a preliminary interpretation of a two-years pilot study on the needs existent at the level of public administration institutions, with focus on the human resource education and training.

The preliminary results confirm the working hypothesis according to which decision makers motivation to pursue a graduate degree is mainly given by the Law's constraint, and also the second hypothesis according to which the motivation of the civil servants to pursue a graduate degree stems from the wish for promotion. That is however nuanced by the finding that for civil servants, instruction materialized through efforts put into obtaining a master degree is considered a means to secure their job when faced with potential personnel cuts, thus indirectly ensuring their career.

The focus on instruction and on the need for improving the preparation of public institutions personnel (almost 2/3 of the items in the category titled “instruction”) underlines the need to improve the training programs for civil servants

This project has some limits which impede upon the generalizability of its results, however, these results represent a first step for future research.

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