
Public Administration and Management Research: 'Thermostat' or 'Thermometer'?

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the status of social sciences research reveals that multiple variables currently influence the scientific stance of knowledge production endeavours, both in higher education institutions and in government circles. This raises a critical question as to whether research conducted in applied social science disciplines such as Public Administration and Management (PAM) can be considered as a thermostat (i.e. 'heats the temperature' by influencing the policy agenda proactively through evidence-based input) or thermometer (i.e. implying that disciplinary research is characterised by merely 'reading' the current agenda and responding reactively to existing policies and strategies implemented by the government of the day). The purpose of this article was to address these fundamental questions by considering multiple issues. The contribution of the article is mainly centered in three (3) aspects, namely to critically reflect on the status of social sciences in general and PAM research in particular; to propose suggestions for improving the readiness of PAM academia to conduct policy-relevant research; and to make recommendations for enhancing engagement between academia and practitioners. The approach was informed by an interpretivist, anti-positivistic research paradigm, utilising a literature review and a desktop survey as research instruments. The results revealed that the potential contribution of social science research in general and PAM research in particular are hampered by rather negative perceptions regarding the empirical quality, scientific robustness and limited applied nature of research results. Main contributions made are suggestions to improve engagement between academia and practice, thus enhancing the potential contribution of PAM research for public policy enhancement.

Key phrases

Academics; disciplinary relevance; PAM; research and social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

What are the roles, responsibilities and expectations of academia with regard to society? Do academics live up to their social responsibilities in a developing country such as South

Africa? Should academics become involved in policy-decisions and the manner in which society is governed? Attempts to answer fundamental questions like these promptly reveal the "wicked" nature of the interaction between academia and the world of practice. It could be argued that the societal role of scholarly life is by far the fuzziest of the triple responsibilities of academics, namely teaching, research and community outreach.

As part of an applied social science, one may expect that scholars in PAM have already clarified the role they should play in society in general and in government in particular. The truth, however, is that this role is far from clear. This is evidenced by the fact that academics struggle to reach consensus on questions such as:

- To what extent should the curriculum of PAM reflect the policy directives of government?
- Should knowledge production (i.e. research) efforts mainly serve the needs and interests of government or should it rather focus on 'neutral' theory construction to enhance the corpus of knowledge of the field of study?
- How should PAM scholars serve the state without becoming its servant?

An analysis of the status of social sciences research in general and PAM research in particular, reveals that multiple variables currently influence the scientific stance of such research, both in the academic fraternity and in government circles. This raises a serious question: Can PAM research be considered as a *thermostat* or *thermometer*? In this sense, the author argues that a thermostat means that PAM 'heats the temperature' of policy debate and service-delivery discourse by influencing the policy agenda proactively through evidence-based input. A thermometer in turn implies that PAM is characterised by merely 'reading' the current agenda and responding reactively to existing policies and strategies implemented by the government of the day. In other words, will PAM's curriculum continue to be reactive in nature? This would mean reviewing and including the latest policy, strategy and programmes of government into the curriculum. Or on the other hand, can scholars - and is it expected of them to - become more pro-active? This would mean leading and facilitating a research agenda to suggest innovative, cutting-edge responses to societal challenges. How do scholars thus transcend the 'what is'-focus (i.e. *thermometer*) towards a 'what should be'-focus (i.e. *thermostat*)?

The purpose of this article was to address these questions by considering multiple issues. These would be the role that social sciences in general and PAM research in particular should play in shaping and informing the agenda of government, thereby exploring the value that PAM researchers could add in support of good governance initiatives. Public

Administration and Management can be regarded as an interdisciplinary study domain which borrow theory, principles, approaches, research traditions, and bodies of knowledge from various adjacent or reference disciplines in the broader social sciences. As such, PAM research traditions and praxis are virtually inseparable or indistinguishable from broader social sciences (Van der Waldt 2013, 2014a, 2014b). The value of the article is thus threefold:

- a critical reflection on the status of social sciences in general and PAM research in particular;
- practical suggestions to improve the readiness of PAM academia (i.e. lecturers and students) to conduct policy-relevant research; and
- recommendations to improve engagement between academia and practice.

The approach was informed by an interpretivist, anti-positivistic research paradigm, utilising literature and desktop surveys as main instruments for data collection.

2. CONTEXTUALISING THE STATUS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES: THE CHANGING NATURE OF SCHOLARSHIP

A cursory assessment of general research literature and the current discourse on research blogs and scientific commentaries reveal two (2) key dimensions for the status of social sciences in general, namely (a) social sciences experience an existential crisis, and (b) there are fundamental shifts in the nature of scholarship. The existential crisis of the social sciences can be analysed from two (2) vantage points; the first being the critique from within the scientific community, and the second the way in which society in general perceives the nature and 'usefulness' of social sciences. From a scientific point of view, logic-positivists argue that one of the cornerstone principles of science is replication (Godfrey & Hill 1995:520). This leads to the idea that experiments must be repeated to find out whether the results will be consistent and thus valid and reliable (i.e. scientific). Replication is typically not feasible in the social sciences, thus often negating its scientific position. Social science research furthermore has a rather 'loose' status. This has led to the marginalisation of these sciences - irrespective of the real value that postmodern, interpretivist and qualitative perspectives add to human understanding of social phenomena. Such marginalisation also influences the legitimacy of qualifications in social sciences, the credibility of scholars' input to dialogue in society and the 'agenda-setting' contributions that these sciences could have made to political discourse (Fuchs 2014; Rogers 2013). This raises questions such as: Is a Bachelor in social sciences still worth it?

A Bloomberg Report, released on 28 May 2019, revealed that “exploding student debt and increased competition have made earning a bachelor degree a less likely path to financial security” (Bloomberg Report 2019). The report indicated further that only 67% of students believe that a degree in social sciences was worth the time and money. Reports like these imply a query: Does a degree in social sciences prepare students adequately for the world of work? Some commentaries such as Thiel (2018) maintain that the so-called “education bubble” has resulted in more people than ever having degrees but lacking in problem-solving skills, emotional awareness and common sense. Such lack of skills prevents employees from succeeding in their careers. This situation is exacerbated by negative feedback from social sciences students on the quality of their qualifications and the extent to which it prepares them for the labour market. Comments on social media expound the problem by sending out a particular message to society. An analysis of online comments conducted by Fuchs (2014), Bruns (2013), Rogers (2013) and Kennedy, Moss and Birchall (2015) accentuate adverse comments in this regard such as:

- “the material and syllabi are outdated;
- grades are an illusion - cheating is rampant;
- lecturers are merely reading word for word from generic, ‘cookie-cutter’ slides or text books;
- universities are preparing us for jobs that either don’t exist or won’t exist very soon; and
- a degree is merely a receipt - it is proof of conforming to societal norms”.

Public Administration and Management academics are thus marginalised even if they do have the intention to make a positive contribution to society. From the perspective of society, scholars such as Arnould and Thompson (2005) and Davies, Silcock, Chakrabarti and Mason (2015) argue that we are increasingly experiencing the influx of a culture of consumerism and pragmatism also in academia. Consumerism, the consumption of goods and services at a higher rate, demands value-for-money to get results equal to or more than the value of money paid for a product (e.g. degree) (Davies *et al.* 2015). Pragmatism emphasises workable solutions to practical problems. Pragmatic academics, in other words, tend to build connections with practitioners and policy-makers in an effort to make meaningful contributions to the world of practice, and consumers (Arnould & Thompson 2005). Therefore, pragmatic academics tend to emphasise ‘usability’ of their research rather than building the corpus of knowledge of their disciplines.

Both consumers and pragmatists will typically ask: What can I do with my degree? In the process, the need for reflective universities in society is jeopardised. Consumerism and the commodification of knowledge are embodied further by the focus on productivity, quantification, measurement, and value for money. Top university ranking instruments, such as the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Ranking, and other standards and indicators for research assessments have a strong quantitative focus. This implies the research bottom-line: number of scientific articles published, number of postgraduate students supervised, number of patents registered, and the number of commissioned research reports produced.

These mentioned factors lead to shifts in the academic landscape. This is also evident in South Africa where accreditation bodies such as the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and research funding institutions such as the National Research Foundation (NRF), curtail academic freedom by over-emphasising outputs (i.e. 'publish or perish'), outcomes and vocational skills. Ball (2003:215) refers to this tendency as "the terrors of academic performativity".

Consumerism and pragmatism typically suppress critical thinking and stifle attempts to challenge political narratives. It also fosters a shift away from knowledge construction (theory focus) to knowledge production (practice focus). This shift significantly influences the current types and modes of universities. In South Africa, universities are categorised as traditional and comprehensive, compared to the universities of technology, each with different foci and content. This foci and content are, however, changing rapidly due to the emergence of a so-called "second generation" of university, i.e. University 2.0. This second generation denotes a superior or more advanced version of an original concept. Naturally, this implies that the current 'version' of universities is inadequate for, or uncondusive to existing realities (Kerr 2001). University 2.0 generally is characterised by consumerism where students are considered as 'clients', and commodification of knowledge ensues. This is coupled with pragmatism providing open-learning platforms, improved learner interaction, and the facilitation of practical, knowledge-based learning. The intension is to create so-called 'collective intelligence' (Segaran 2007). This intention is in line with the emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution that will seriously challenge more traditional or conventional modes of tuition and curricula of qualifications. Also, when entering the labour market (e.g. government sector), university students are often told that their on-campus training has no concrete use in the 'real world'. This idea creates a gap between what students 'study' on campus and what they 'do' at work. It may be argued that such incongruence can be regarded as an academic-real world gap. This implies an increasing demand for work-

integrated learning (WIL), a form of higher education meaning that students go to 'academia' to learn 'theory' and into the 'real world' to learn 'practice'.

Coupled with the notions of University 2.0 is the generational shift that universities experience. The ageing lecturer corps of universities are typically from the so-called Baby Boomer generation (born between 1944-1964), Generation X (born between 1965-1979) and Generation Y (born between 1980-1994). In this regard, students typically are Millennials (born between 1980-2000) and Generation Z (born between 1995-2015) (Beaudry, Mouton & Prozesky 2018:2). These generational gaps impact teaching methodology. Younger people usually enter the academia with different learning expectations (e.g. the use of social media in teaching, online learning material, and self-directed assessment) than the more conventional teaching methodologies applied by lecturers (Delner, Schweikert & Nedelko 2017:48).

An aspect deserving special attention is the role and influence of social media in tuition. Scholars such as Hoffman (2016:2) argue that social media is "one of the most disruptive forces in society today, and academia is not immune to its impact". The author argues that students presently have instant access to more news, stories and information, including scientific facts, from more sources and in more varied formats than ever before. Students constantly compare themselves with others, especially celebrities, which thus leads to so-called "template living" (Chan & Prendergast 2008:9). For universities to remain relevant, lecturers have to adapt to new realities brought about by the Information Age. Open online courses, open access journals, online news, blogs and other emerging forms of teaching technology are altering what it means to be a lecturer and a scholar. Social media often has more impact on public opinion than an academic report has (Chan & Prendergast 2008:7; Nyhagen & Baschung 2013:412). Adding to this changing landscape is the rise of pseudo-scientific and predatory journals, which further undermine the potential contributions of the social sciences. The results of articles published in pseudo-scientific journals are usually highly questionable and generally contribute little as far as empirically-verifiable research is concerned. Predatory journals usually do not make use of robust peer review processes, but are mainly concerned about rapid publication for the maximising of page fees.

A further aspect that should be considered is the rapidly changing nature of the higher education landscape. The restructuring of the South African higher education system ranges widely from new political and legislative direction, the creation of new or rationalised institutional arrangements, and mergers. In this respect, scholars such as Bolden, Gosling and O'Brien (2014) and Nyhagen and Baschung (2013) reason that new organisational structures and resultant changes in the culture of higher education institutions, significantly

influence the nature of academic work. It may ultimately alter the research agenda, the content of academic programmes, as well as the readiness and willingness of academics to adjust to new circumstances.

The potential attraction of social sciences lies in its potential relevance to the process of social transformation, whether conceived of as radical political change, or individual self-realisation or liberation (Beaudry *et al.* 2018:iv). Scholars such as Geschwind and Broström (2015) and Kerr (2001) maintain that social scientists should be engaged in conducting surveys, offering economic advice, and conducting other activities, which clearly were understood as part of the larger project of social reconstruction. Such an approach implies adequate funding and research support. In South Africa, however, NRF funding for the social sciences has declined significantly since 2004 (Mouton 2011). Government typically promotes 'safe' research with quick-fix results and is unwilling to pay for the risk of novel (social) ideas. In this regard, Van der Waldt (2013:72) and Teelken (2012:271) argue that tertiary institutions that are resource strained seem to advance a business model that promote cost-benefit and quantitative performance models. Running a university as a pure business often leads to questions such as what value certain disciplines can add to the 'business' of the university (Kerr 2001; Marginson & Considine 2000). From a cost-benefit point of view, for example, university management considers the number of enrolments in a study area to determine that area's financial viability. This 'value-adding' dimension often revolves around the matter of disciplinary relevance (Van der Waldt 2013).

It seems that at present, there is a profound crisis of purpose in the social sciences and related disciplines. It further seems that there is no longer a clear idea of the rationale for the research work that is done, over and above its usefulness to help pursue individual careers (Ekman, Lindgren & Packendorff 2018:318; Hoffman 2016). In an era of strict political correctness and delimited human rights, social scientists are often simply afraid to engage sensitive social issues and topics of political nature. The public outcry to a recent article published by social scientists at the University of Stellenbosch dealing with the cognitive abilities of a certain segment of society illustrates this point. The author would like to argue, though, that social scientists typically do feel a responsibility to participate in practical and realistic research to seek solutions for poverty, social inequality, rapid urbanisation, service delivery capacity, land reform, and the like. The significant emphasis current PAM master's and doctoral research places on issues related to service-delivery and public policy improvement is indicative of this responsibility.

3. THE READINESS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT ACADEMIA TO CONDUCT POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

Public Administration and Management, as applied social science, aims to promote the general well-being of society by focusing on the successful implementation of public policy by government institutions and the adherence to good governance principles and approaches. The focus is on the readiness of academics in PAM, namely their capacity, competency, knowledge, experience, and support that allows them to conduct policy-relevant research (i.e. being 'thermostats'. This preparedness is, however, influenced by various macro (external) and micro (internal or institutional) factors. One may argue that PAM academics find themselves in the eye of a storm, a force-field with driving as well as constraining pressures. These pressures significantly impact the ability to improve the proactive nature of research. To assess the state of readiness of PAM researchers, it is necessary to consider the force field in which scientific inquiry occurs. This context is highly fluid and dynamic and is characterised by often strongly opposing forces such as practical, vocational training versus more academic underpinnings, and applied or contract research versus grounded theory-based research.

As is the case with other social scientists in South Africa, PAM scholars find themselves in the midst of both intellectual and disciplinary reorientation. On an intellectual level, scholars have to interpret and respond to the decolonialisation and the Africanisation debate, the #FeesMustFall campaign, and the rapidly changing tertiary landscape in general. Regarding the state of the discipline, PAM scholars have to keep abreast of the latest developments in their field of specialisation, provide quality tuition to both under- and postgraduate students, and conduct research to build the corpus of knowledge. A study by Breuer and Roth (2003) showed that scholars from the applied social sciences generally find it difficult to grasp, apply and teach basic epistemological assumptions, reflexive research methodology, and discipline-specific research conventions and traditions.

Van der Walddt (2012:92) further maintains that curriculum efforts in PAM increasingly become dominated by debates about the relevance of academic programmes' content for society in general and government in particular. This immediately raises additional questions such as the extent to which the curriculum of PAM should reflect the values, intentions and interventions of the state. Vil-Nkomo (1998:132) in this respect claims that "a major responsibility is placed on scholars of public management and administration to advance the public sector and the country through relevant pedagogical approaches and innovative research". Van Jaarsveldt and Wessels (2011:379) dispute this claim and reason that

universities should seek to “create cultivated individuals rather than to train for specific professions”. In a similar vein, scholars such as Clarke, Knights and Jarvis (2012) and Berglund (2008) argue that the typical academic ‘just wants to be an academic’, meaning that they would like to pursue their personal research interest that may or may not be aligned with the research interests of the particular university or the state in general. There may thus be inherent tensions between personal research interests, the advancement of scientific knowledge, the business model of the university, and the research agenda of the state. Gleeson and Knights (2006:277) refer to these tensions as “academic dualism” and Geschwind and Broström (2015:60) warn that the stresses in the “teaching-research nexus” could lead to misguided disciplinary research endeavors.

Further studies by Cameron and McLaverty (2007) and Wessels (2008) on the status of postgraduate research in PAM, indicate that academics are mostly ill-prepared to supervise postgraduate research. The author maintains that this state of affairs could mainly be attributed to limited expertise in various research traditions and paradigms, theoretical underpinning and cognisance of a basic philosophy of science. The result is that, generally, postgraduate students seem unprepared to conduct real-world, far-reaching impact research by following established conventions and scientific traditions. The reactive nature of postgraduate studies and limited ‘hard’ empirical research further hamper the potential status of the discipline and its contribution to the world of practice. In this regard, one may concur with the suggestion of Raadschelders (2011:916) that research in PAM should be advanced by embedding research methodology in the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the field. In other words, current and prospective PAM scholars should be adequately versed and proficient in applying fundamental philosophical and meta-theoretical dimensions to enrich research endeavors.

Academic discourse on research blogs such as ResearchGate.net and Academia.net, further reveals the types of frustration that scholars experience when conducting research. Also, in their publication, “The Next Generation of Scientists in Africa”, Beaudry *et al.* (2018) identify the following typical challenges and frustrations that scientists encounter during research:

- lack of funding opportunities and barriers to secure funding;
- ill preparation for the world of science and research;
- lack of mentoring and institutional support;
- lack of upward career mobility for scientists;

- limited research collaboration - studies indicate that in fields such as humanities and social sciences, scholars tend to work individually and collaborate less;
- low citation impact; and
- workload and lack of research focus.

These factors, which surely also hold true for PAM academics in South Africa, further inhibit the readiness of scholars to conduct policy-relevant research.

4. ACADEMIA-PRACTICE ENGAGEMENT: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

This is the third part of this article, namely recommendations to improve the proactive nature of research and sharing results and findings with decision-makers. In other words, how should we engage government officials and politicians and how can we share our research findings with decision-makers and, in the process, become 'thermostats' for government policy-making?

To answer this question one should acknowledge especially three (3) aspects:

- Firstly, the nature and scope of practice engagement, commonly referred to as "community outreach" as well as the social responsibilities of academics at universities, are generally ill-defined and vague in nature. Typical questions that emerge are: To what extent is it expected of us to engage decision-makers; in other words, what expected weight should we attach to this matter in our performance agreements? How will our performance or "output" be assessed in this regard? How will it contribute to our academic profile and prospects for career advancement? Putting it plainly, is there incentives to devote a considerable amount of our time in engaging decision-makers in government?
- Secondly, universities are generally regarded as independent centers of teaching in the joint pursuit of knowledge. Clearly, universities' primary function does not entail engagement with or sharing evidence and imparting expertise to decision-makers (this reservation is probably more true in the social sciences). It may be argued that academics can and should offer in-depth knowledge, expertise and research that can help inform, design, improve, test and analyse government policy.
- Thirdly, the nature of engagement and the scope of sharing research findings are not clear. On the one extreme, academics can, for example, be contracted as consultants and get remuneration for their research expertise and findings (i.e. contract research). At the other extreme, they can offer expertise and results free of

charge (e.g. community service). The middle ground is probably to conduct one's 'own' original research and then consider the results to be of interest to a particular government department, agency or municipality. In such a case, findings could be disseminated through 'normal' avenues such as scholarly articles, conference papers and workshop presentations.

There seems to be a lack of clear answers to these three mentioned aspects. Nevertheless, the author reasons that PAM academics can (and should) contribute in several ways to improve government policy. Scholars can offer expertise (advice-based on knowledge of a field) and evidence (facts and information that support a policy proposal). Academics typically spend their entire careers in one or a few specialist areas, which provide them truly in-depth understanding and useful knowledge. They can also offer expertise in new research methodologies for *ex-ante* and *ex-post* policy analyses.

Engagement is usually only successful as a two-way process. In other words, policy-makers and general government decision-makers should appreciate the value that academics could add and thus pursue this contact actively. The reality is that policy officials generally have weak connections to academia. Or, existing connections are rather *ad hoc* and limited to only one or two personal ties. A desktop survey conducted by the author regarding engagement between Academia and practice revealed that policy officials in general experience various barriers that impede their interaction with academia. Scholars such as Porter (2015), Muscio and Vallanti (2014) and Nutley, Walter and Davies (2007), pinpoint the following barriers in this regard:

- lack of time and other constraints on officials' capacity to build academic networks;
- difficulties in locating relevant experts or applicable completed research when needed;
- limited skills and capacity to maintain connections with academia and retain knowledge - due to high staff turnover and weak institutional memory; and
- scant incentive to seek out academic evidence and expertise due to the lack of openness and transparency in Government - academics need transparency to see where they can contribute to existing deficiencies.

On the side of the academia, prolific scholars often are poor communicators who lack the skills or inclination to play the role of advisor to government officials and political decision-makers. In this regard O'Brien (2011:1) argues that academic research can only benefit society if academics use "incisive and engaging language in concise, well-designed briefings

that can be shared with officials and political decision-makers". Furthermore, academics are not trained or given proper incentives to act as advisors in this sense. Often academics do not view it as their role or place to advocate certain issues. Furthermore, they do not believe that it provides personal benefits to invest in such endeavors. Ill advice may even be career-limiting, for example, being chastised and exposed in social media for 'politically incorrect' statements. As a result, academics generally focus inward towards their research community and remain largely disconnected and heuristically objective from important public and political discourse on governance matters. Adding to this seeming apathy and the growing threat of irrelevance of the academic fraternity, is a growing antagonism towards the nature of academic input as well as the perceived poor quality of research output (articles, conference papers, postgraduate research, etc.).

The question remains: What can be done to improve academia-practice interaction? As move towards operationalisation, the following practical suggestions are proposed:

- Create knowledge-sharing platforms for PAM research: It is important to make existing policy-related research more accessible to government decision-makers. It is thus recommended that the Association of Southern African Schools and Departments of Public Administration and Management (ASSADPAM) explore the possibility of establishing a PAM Blog with scholarly articles, Questions and Answers (Q&As), and policy input. Knowledge-sharing platforms can also be established by utilising existing scholarly collaboration networks (SCNs) such as Figshare, ResearchGate, Peerus, Academia.edu, and Mendeley.
- Compile and maintain a PAM Expert Profile: Such a profile will make it easier for academics and officials to engage by helping decision-makers find relevant academic experts and academic work faster. An Expert Profile will also allow policy officials to build stronger relationships with academics and enable government departments and agencies to forge and strengthen relationships with universities and research funders.
- Establish expert think tanks and advisory committees: These should be ad-hoc or formal forums of academics and other experts who advise officials and policy-makers. Think tanks may offer advice on specific policy topics such as housing, strategic planning, programme design, social impact assessments, crime prevention, and skills development. An advisory committee could also conduct reviews on existing policy.

- Secondments: Opportunities should be created for academics, inclusive of doctoral students, to be placed on a part-time basis in managerial 'shadowing' positions in government departments. This will not only ensure that scientific knowledge be imparted to the world of practice, but will also provide the opportunity for academic to experience first-hand the challenges that confront public officials in the execution of their responsibilities. This could lead to more real-life, scientifically-focused and relevant research to address particular challenges experienced in certain departments. Studies conducted by Ekman *et al.* (2018:299) in Swedish universities, for example, illustrated that higher education institutions can benefit significantly if academics become effective managers. Prospects for academics to gain managerial exposure and particular competence will thus not only enhance the management of academic institutions, but will also ensure that academics better comprehend governance settings and adjust their research foci accordingly.
- Contract, or commissioned research: Academics may become members of research teams to conduct contract research on behalf of a government institution. Contract, or commissioned research usually create opportunities for engagement and expose academics to policy priorities Government seeks to address through new or existing research.
- Personal networks: Beyond institutional networks, civil servants rely on their personal networks. Senior civil servants identify 'previous connections' as one of the principal channels for finding academics. Personal networks give policy officials fast access to academics they trust to provide useful expertise, which is extremely valuable given capacity constraints. If officials rely too much on them and are not encouraged to broaden their connections, it can lead to dominance by the 'usual suspects'.

5. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH AS 'THERMOSTAT': *QUO VADIS?*

In 1998, Jane Lubchenco called for a "scientists' social contract" in which scholars are obligated to provide a service to society, provide value for public funding, government grants or general tuition that we receive, and give account of what the financing is used for (Lubchenco 1998:495). It is perhaps time in South Africa for a professional body such as ASSADPAM to establish such a social contract between PAM scholars, government, and society. The author holds that the content of such a social contract should outline the moral and societal duty of an academic, namely to advance science, improve general well-being of society and share knowledge. An essential part of this role requires academics to participate

in public debate, responsibly influence opinion, and help decision-makers navigate the complexities of governance.

6. CONCLUSION

A critical reflection on the status of social sciences in general and PAM research in particular, has revealed the rapidly changing nature of scholarship and the extensive force-field that academics are subject to. In this regard, the article has made practical suggestions to improve the readiness of PAM academia (for both lecturers and students) to conduct policy-relevant research and facilitate engagement between academia and the practice. Naturally, the engagement process will not always be harmonious. Research findings may reveal 'inconvenient truths' that do not suit the agenda of decision-makers, who would rather choose to ignore such results. Academics of PAM should not create knowledge obscura, "trapped in ivory towers" and only accessible to enlightened peers. The knowledge they create and manage should have a positive impact on South African society in general, and the goodness of governance in particular.

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