

Joining forces to tackle issues

HKU's new public administration course bridges the gap between private and public sectors in facing challenges, says **George Chen**



Doubts about the government's ability to manage public affairs has helped trigger growing demand for professional education in public administration. Photo: Nora Tam

Hong Kong has been one of the world's leading financial centres for decades, on a par with New York and London. The city is full of financial professionals, and an MBA is one of the most popular academic programmes for those wishing to join, or gain promotion in the industry.

In recent years Hong Kong has seen rising political challenges in making governance more efficient and effective. Today's social problems include a widening income gap, rising property prices, and a growing desire among the young for more freedom as well as a higher degree of democracy.

Solving these problems involves getting to the root of the

causes, which falls within the academic field of public administration. The University of Hong Kong (HKU) has long been well-known for its master of public administration (MPA) programme, and is often dubbed the birthplace of senior civil servants in both the colonial and post-1997 eras.

Public administration (PA) scholar Professor Danny Lam Wai-fung, who is also associate dean in the faculty of social sciences at HKU, says that public administration studies are more sorely needed than ever before.

Taking this into account, HKU has launched a new four-year programme, the doctor of public administration (DPA), to help practitioners enhance their knowledge to find solutions, he says. "We have seen a growing

demand for professional education in public administration in Hong Kong and the region," Lam says. "This demand has been partly triggered by the rapid changes in public governance that seem to cause doubt over the government's ability to manage public affairs."

Lam says those operating in the public sector, including policy advocates and public managers, feel the need to brush up on their knowledge and skills to understand and cope with increasingly complex problems. On the other hand, those from the business, NGO and social sectors see the importance and relevance of public policy to their work, and are interested to learn more about governance.

He says that in mainland

no professional doctorate programme in governance in Hong Kong or the region to satisfy this need.

Conspicuously absent were programmes combining academic rigour and a focus on practice to enhance the scholarly expertise of executives keen to extend and build on their professional experience by bridging the gap between theory and practice, he says.

"Our programme is designed to provide theoretically-grounded professional education to leaders in different sectors who strive to gain knowledge of governance and develop the intellectual ability to apply such knowledge in their work," Lam explains.

The DPA is positioned as an elite programme, so the student intake is small and admission selective. "We wanted to ensure that the student body is a good mix of experience, backgrounds, and aspirations," Lam says. "The diversity and quality of the first batch of students is amazing. Apart from government officials, we have senior executives from statutory bodies, NGOs, the social and business sectors, and the media. Students from varied backgrounds bring very different perspectives; the diversity generates magical chemistry in class interaction and discussion."

Effective public problem-solving hinges on collective action in different arenas

DANNY LAM WAI FUNG

Lam adds that unlike conventional PA programmes, which mostly focus on the operation of government, the programme adopts a governance perspective, emphasising the importance of collaborative efforts to straddle the divide between the state, markets, and civil society, and collective action in multiple jurisdictional levels and scales, as well as civic engagement in policymaking and the administration of public affairs.

"A major principle underlying curriculum design is that ever more complex public problems can no longer be dealt with by government alone," Lam says. "Effective public problem-solving hinges on collective action in different arenas."

"Our courses are designed to combine the academic literature with opportunities for students to apply theories and concepts from that literature. Through real case studies, debates and interactive class discussion, students can apply what they have learned," he adds.

Students must write a dissertation equivalent to a PhD thesis in depth, rigour, and academic standards. The US National Science Foundation, for instance, considers a DPA and a PhD to be equivalent in terms of academic credentials.

Lam says the department has

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THE NUMBER OF YEARS OF STUDY FOR A DOCTOR OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION DEGREE

developed a network of scholars and public administration practitioners to contribute to the programme. It includes former senior managers in the public and nonprofit sectors such as Professor Peter Lai, a former secretary for security in the Hong Kong government, Professor Alan Lai, Hong Kong's former ombudsman, and senior academics from major public administration schools overseas.

The Chinese Academy of Governance (CAG), China's top government training institute, is partnering with the department to co-offer some courses. Lam says: "The CAG contribution can enrich the contents and scope of our DPA, while our experience of designing and running the DPA can be a good reference for the CAG in their effort to launch their own programme."



Photo: HKU