

Repositioning Public Administration Education for Twenty-First-Century Governance: A Competency-Based Framework for Curriculum Reform in Nigeria

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Abstract

The changing character of twenty-first-century governance has exposed growing misalignment between the competencies required of public administrators and the educational models that prepare them. Digital government, artificial intelligence, climate change, fiscal pressures, and rising citizen expectations demand public servants with analytical, technological, ethical, and collaborative capabilities. Yet Public Administration education in many developing countries, including Nigeria, remains largely content-driven and lecture-centred. Although competency-based education, governance capacity, and curriculum reform have each attracted increasing scholarly attention, these strands of literature remain insufficiently integrated, limiting their practical value for curriculum transformation. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a competency-oriented framework for repositioning Public Administration education in Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative theory-building conceptual approach, it synthesises contemporary scholarship on governance, competency-based education, experiential learning, and curriculum innovation. The analysis is principally informed by Experiential Learning Theory and the competency-based education paradigm, while drawing complementary insights from governance capacity and public value perspectives. The study identifies six core competency domains essential for contemporary public service and integrates them into the proposed Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF), which links curriculum relevance, experiential learning, competency development, institutional partnerships, authentic assessment, and continuous professional development into a coherent educational model. The paper argues that effective curriculum reform requires a systemic realignment of teaching, learning, assessment, and professional engagement with contemporary governance demands. The PACDF provides a theoretically grounded framework to guide curriculum reform, support governance capacity development, and serve as a basis for future empirical research in Nigeria and comparable developing-country contexts.

Keywords

Public Administration education;
competency-based education;
governance capacity;
curriculum reform;
experiential learning;
higher education.

1. Introduction

Governance has changed shape over the past three decades. Governments now formulate and implement policy inside environments marked by technological disruption, fiscal uncertainty, climate risk, recurring public health emergencies, and citizens who expect more transparency and responsiveness than earlier generations did (OECD, 2023; United Nations, 2015). These pressures have pushed the job of the public administrator well past bureaucratic management, into collaborative leadership, evidence-

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informed policymaking, digital governance, and institutional resilience (Bovaird & Löffler, 2016; Osborne, 2018). Governance quality now depends

Public Administration education sits at a strategic point in this picture, because it supplies the grounding on which administrative capacity is built. Historically, programmes in the field were organised around administrative law, public finance, personnel management, and bureaucratic procedure, following the classical traditions associated with Wilson and Weber. Those foundations still matter, but on their own they no longer prepare graduates for the multidimensional problems governments now face (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Peters, 2021). Administrators today are expected to combine analytical reasoning, ethical judgement, technological fluency, and adaptive leadership in ways the classical curriculum was never designed to teach.

This shift has drawn renewed international attention to the relevance of Public Administration education. The OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank have each argued that higher education needs to move past transmitting disciplinary content and towards building practical competence, lifelong learning, and digital fluency for labour markets that are themselves changing quickly (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2024). Within Public Administration specifically, this has fed growing interest in competency-based education, experiential learning, and work-integrated learning as ways of narrowing the gap between what students' study and what practice requires of them (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Gervais, 2016; Kolb, 1984; Raelin, 2008). Internships, policy laboratories, simulations, and community engagement are increasingly treated as essential rather than supplementary, on the reasoning that professional judgement is not something a lecture alone can build (Schön, 1983; Wenger, 1998). Even so, adoption of these approaches has been uneven across developing countries, and Nigeria illustrates the unevenness well.

Nigeria is pursuing ambitious governance reform while still contending with institutional weakness, youth unemployment, insecurity, and rising demand for efficient public service delivery. Universities and polytechnics carry real responsibility for producing graduates who can strengthen governance capacity rather than add to the pool of credentialed but underprepared job seekers. Yet many Public Administration programmes remain dominated by lecture-based instruction and examination-oriented assessment,

not only on institutional reform but on the quality of the professional education that produces the people running those institutions.

with limited structured experiential learning. The result is a persistent mismatch between what graduates can do and what governance requires of them a mismatch documented in recent assessments of technical and vocational graduates in Lagos State, where employers and graduates alike report substantial dissatisfaction with how far competency claims on paper translate into competence in practice (Ogunbote et al., 2026).

Despite the expanding literature on curriculum reform, competency-based education, governance capacity, and higher education innovation, important conceptual gaps remain. Studies tend to treat these themes separately. Work on competency-based education often stays close to pedagogical process without asking much about governance outcomes; work on governance capacity rarely asks how professional competence is actually produced; and work on curriculum reform tends to focus on updating content rather than on integrating curriculum design, experiential learning, institutional partnership, authentic assessment, and lifelong professional development into one coherent system. No widely shared conceptual framework yet ties these dimensions together for Public Administration education in the Nigerian context.

This paper addresses that gap by proposing the Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF) as an integrated model for competency-oriented curriculum reform. The framework treats Public Administration education as a continuous process in which curriculum relevance, experiential learning, competency development, institutional collaboration, authentic assessment, and continuous professional learning reinforce one another rather than operating as separate boxes to be ticked. Rather than arguing for incremental adjustment, the paper argues for a more deliberate reorientation of the field around the competencies twenty-first-century governance actually requires.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it draws together current debates on governance, competency-based education, experiential learning, and curriculum reform into one analytical account. Second, it develops the PACDF as a theoretically grounded model that can guide curriculum reform in Public Administration programmes. Third, it shows how competency-oriented reform of this kind can strengthen governance capacity and support

sustainable national development in Nigeria and comparable settings.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the conceptual methodology. Section 3 reviews the literature and theoretical foundations underpinning competency-oriented Public Administration education, including the regulatory architecture within which Nigerian curricula are actually built. Section 4 presents the PACDF. Section 5 discusses its theoretical and practical implications. Section 6 draws out implications for policy and practice, and Section 7 concludes with priorities for reform and directions for future empirical research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Public Administration Education in Transition: From Bureaucratic Training to Competency Development

Public Administration education has evolved alongside changing conceptions of the state, governance, and public service. Its early intellectual foundations owe a great deal to Wilson's (1887) politics-administration dichotomy and to Weber's theory of bureaucracy, both of which treated public administration mainly as a mechanism for achieving efficiency, predictability, legality, and hierarchical control (Peters, 2021). Programmes built on this foundation centred on administrative law, budgeting, personnel management, public finance, organisational theory, and bureaucratic procedure, with the aim of producing technically competent civil servants able to implement policy within reasonably stable institutional settings.

That classical model gave modern governments their administrative architecture, but it assumed a governance environment that was comparatively predictable and institutionally bounded. Contemporary governments operate in something quite different: rapid technological change, growing policy complexity, cross-sector collaboration, deeper global interconnection, and citizens who expect more. These conditions have made it harder to sustain the assumption that administrative competence can be built through mastery of bureaucratic procedure alone (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Osborne, 2018).

New Public Management (NPM), which took hold through the 1980s and 1990s, was the first serious attempt to redefine what public administrators needed to know, borrowing from private-sector management to emphasise efficiency, performance measurement, and

results-based management (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). This sharpened managerial awareness but, critics argued, at the expense of democratic values and collaborative governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Scholarship since has moved attention from government towards governance more broadly. Concepts such as New Public Governance, collaborative governance, and public value management start from the recognition that most public problems do not sit within the authority of a single institution and require cooperation across government, civil society, and private actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bovaird & Löffler, 2016; Osborne, 2010); within these arrangements the administrator looks less like a bureaucratic controller and more like a facilitator and institutional entrepreneur. Table 1 summarises this progression and its implications for curriculum.

Digital transformation has accelerated these changes further. Governments increasingly rely on digital platforms, big-data analytics, artificial intelligence, and integrated information systems for decision-making and service delivery (Mergel, Edelmann, & Haug, 2019; OECD, 2023), and the rise of generative AI tools specifically has forced public institutions — and the universities preparing people to work in them — to confront questions about the reliability and appropriate scope of automated decision support that did not exist a decade ago (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Public Administration education can no longer confine itself to traditional administrative subjects; it has to build digital literacy, data interpretation, and ethical reasoning alongside them.

Nigeria's experience of these shifts brings both opportunity and difficulty. Universities and polytechnics have widened their Public Administration curricula to include governance, public policy, and public financial management, but implementation has been uneven, and many programmes still lean heavily on lecture-centred teaching. Industrial attachment schemes such as SIWES offer some exposure to practice, but placements are often weakly connected to learning outcomes. The result, a familiar complaint among employers, is graduates who know the theory but have had comparatively little structured contact with contemporary governance practice. Governance theory, in short, has moved towards collaborative, digital, and adaptive forms considerably faster than educational practice has caught up — a lag that underlies much of the continuing concern about graduate preparedness, and one the next two subsections build towards addressing.

Table 1. Evolution of Public Administration Education and Implications for Curriculum Reform

Period	Dominant Governance Paradigm	Primary Educational Focus	Competencies Emphasised	Limitations for Contemporary Governance
Late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century	Classical Public Administration	Administrative law, bureaucracy, hierarchy	Administrative efficiency, procedural compliance, legal authority	Limited adaptability, weak collaboration, minimal innovation
1980s–1990s	New Public Management	Strategic management, performance, efficiency	Managerial competence, accountability, results orientation	Overemphasis on efficiency, limited citizen participation
2000s–2015	New Public Governance	Collaboration, networks, stakeholder engagement	Partnership building, negotiation, communication	Digital competencies remained underdeveloped
2015–Present	Digital and Adaptive Governance	Innovation, digital transformation, evidence-informed policymaking	Digital literacy, systems thinking, ethical leadership, collaborative problem-solving, policy analytics	Requires continuous curriculum renewal and competency-based educational approaches

Source: Developed by the authors from Wilson (1887); Hood (1991); Osborne (2010, 2018); Denhardt and Denhardt (2015); Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017); OECD (2023); Peters (2021).

2.2 Competency-Based Education and the Regulatory Architecture of Nigerian Higher Education

Before the paper can argue for a competency-oriented curriculum, it is worth being precise about what "competency" means in this literature and what room Nigerian regulators leave for the kind of reform the paper proposes a question the earlier discussion of governance change leaves open.

Competency-based education (CBE) is often traced to vocational and professional training movements of the late twentieth century, and it has since spread well beyond its original home in technical and medical education. Boyatzis (2008) defines competencies as underlying characteristics knowledge, skill, motive, trait, or self-image causally related to superior performance in a role, treating competence as something demonstrated in performance rather than merely certified by a transcript. Mulder (2014) distinguishes competence as an input concept (capabilities a person brings into a situation) from competence as an output concept (what can be observed once someone performs), and argues professional education tends to assess inputs attendance,

coursework completion while claiming to certify outputs. Frank et al. (2010), writing from medical education, describe how competency-based frameworks reorganise curricula around defined outcomes and milestones rather than time spent in a classroom, an approach medicine adopted well before Public Administration education began to borrow from it.

It would be misleading, though, to present CBE as an uncontested consensus. Hyland (1994) offers an early and still relevant critique, arguing that competence-based approaches can reduce professional judgement to a checklist of narrowly specified, atomised behaviours, stripping out the reflective and contextual reasoning that makes professional practice professional in the first place. This matters for the argument developed later in this paper: a competency framework that lists discrete skills without attending to how they are integrated and exercised under uncertainty would reproduce the very narrowness Hyland warned against. The PACDF, presented in Section 4, is designed partly as a response treating competencies as mutually reinforcing rather than as an inventory of separable behaviours, and building reflective practice into the framework rather than leaving it optional.

In the Nigerian context, whatever curriculum model a Public Administration programme adopts operates within a regulatory architecture that is itself moving, tentatively, in a competency-oriented direction. For universities, the National Universities Commission replaced the older Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards, in place since 1989, with the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) in December 2022, specifying that only 70 per cent of programme content is centrally mandated and leaving 30 per cent to institutional discretion (NUC, 2022). That discretionary 30 per cent is precisely the space within which a Public Administration department could embed the experiential learning, authentic assessment, and institutional partnership the PACDF calls for, without renegotiating national accreditation standards from scratch. A review of the reform against its predecessor found the new document places noticeably more emphasis on professional specialisation from the first year of study (Idoko, 2023), broadly compatible with though not sufficient on its own to guarantee a more competency-oriented curriculum.

For polytechnics, the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) issues detailed curriculum and course specifications for each National Diploma and Higher National Diploma programme, including Public Administration, that already reserve 70 to 80 per cent of contact hours for professional courses building practice-level skill, require a supervised industrial attachment (SIWES), and mandate that theory and practice be integrated within each course rather than taught separately (NBTE, 2024). The regulatory floor, in other words, already leans towards the practice-integrated model this paper argues for. The persistent complaint from employers and graduates is not that regulation forbids experiential learning, but that implementation on the ground supervision quality, alignment between placement and learning outcomes, assessment of what was learned falls well short of what the curriculum documents describe (Ogunbote et al., 2026).

This regulatory detail sharpens where the real obstacle lies. The problem this paper is chiefly concerned with is less that Nigerian regulation prohibits competency-based reform and more that institutions have not yet used the discretion they already have. NUC's 30 per cent, or NBTE's practical course allocation in a sufficiently deliberate way. That is the specific gap the PACDF, developed in Section 4, is intended to close.

2.3 Experiential Learning as the Missing Link Between Theory and Practice

The gap between theory and practice remains one of the most persistent criticisms levelled at Public Administration education. Graduates often show a sound grasp of theory, policy, and governance principles, yet employers regularly report that they fall short on practical problem-solving, stakeholder engagement, and decision-making once actually inside an institution (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004). Closing that gap requires more than tweaking curriculum content; it requires pedagogy capable of turning theoretical understanding into professional competence.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), developed principally by Kolb (1984), remains the most influential framework for understanding how professional competence develops. ELT treats learning as a continuous cycle in which knowledge is generated through the transformation of experience rather than absorbed passively from instruction, identifying four connected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation – and arguing that effective learning happens when a person cycles through all four rather than stopping at any one stage. Professional fields that take this seriously – medicine, engineering, nursing, law – build clinical placement, supervised practice, and problem-based learning into the core of the curriculum rather than treating it as optional, putting students in front of situations where theoretical knowledge has to be interpreted and applied under real uncertainty (Harden, 2002; Schön, 1983). Public Administration shares those characteristics, but structured practical learning remains comparatively underdeveloped in many institutions, particularly in developing-country settings.

Two further ideas sharpen the case. Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner suggests professionals build expertise through reflection both in and after action; administrators rarely face problems with a ready-made procedural answer, and reflection is what turns raw activity into learning rather than mere repetition. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice adds that competence develops through sustained participation in a professional community, where newcomers pick up the knowledge and norms of the field through interaction with experienced practitioners – learning as a social process, an

individual cognitive one. Applied to Public Administration, this points to the value of sustained partnership between institutions and government agencies that let students watch administrative practice happen and begin forming a professional identity before they graduate. Work-based learning (Raelin, 2008) extends this further, treating the integration of academic study with workplace practice as deliberate curriculum design rather than an internship bolted onto the end of a programme students engaging real organisational problems while reflecting on that engagement in structured academic settings alongside it.

Implementation within Nigerian Public Administration programmes remains inconsistent despite fairly wide recognition that experiential learning matters. SIWES placements provide real opportunities for workplace exposure, but their value is often undercut by weak supervision, poor alignment with learning outcomes, and inconsistent assessment; in practice, placements often function as an administrative box to tick rather than a designed educational experience, a pattern consistent with what employers' report about technical graduates more broadly (Ogunbote et al., 2026). It is worth being honest, too, about the limits of the experiential case itself: without structured reflection and competent supervision, workplace exposure can just as easily

reinforce bad habits as build critical thinking (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985), and unequal access to good placements can widen gaps in outcomes among students from different backgrounds. Both concerns argue for embedding experiential learning within a coherent curriculum architecture rather than delivering it as a loosely connected, peripheral activity.

Taken together, Experiential Learning Theory, reflective practice, communities of practice, and work-based learning converge on a single proposition: professional competence develops through the systematic interaction of knowledge, experience, reflection, and application. For Public Administration education, the implication is that curriculum reform should redesign how the educational process works, so that students engage repeatedly with authentic governance problems across the whole of their programme rather than only at its end. This is the conceptual bridge to the paper's central argument: if competency development depends on integrating curriculum, experiential learning, assessment, institutional partnership, and continuous professional growth, these elements should be understood as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single system — the theoretical foundation for the framework developed in the sections that follow.

Table 2. Experiential Learning Approaches and Their Contribution to Competency Development in Public Administration

Experiential Learning Strategy	Theoretical Foundation	Competencies Developed	Curriculum Implications
Policy simulations	Kolb (1984); Schön (1983)	Decision-making, policy analysis, ethical judgement	Integrate simulation exercises into core governance courses
Internships and SIWES	Raelin (2008)	Workplace adaptability, organisational awareness, professional communication	Align placement activities with programme learning outcomes and reflective assessment
Case-based learning	Biggs & Tang (2011)	Critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving	Reduce exclusive reliance on lecture-based instruction
Service-learning and community engagement	Wenger (1998); UNESCO (2022)	Citizen engagement, collaborative leadership, social responsibility	Establish sustained partnerships with communities and public institutions
Governance laboratories and consultancy projects	OECD (2024)	Evidence-based policymaking, teamwork, stakeholder engagement	Embed real public sector projects within the curriculum
Reflective journals and portfolios	Schön (1983); Boud et al. (1985)	Reflective practice, lifelong learning, professional identity	Adopt authentic assessment alongside traditional examinations

Source: Developed by the authors from Kolb (1984); Schön (1983); Wenger (1998); Raelin (2008); Biggs and Tang (2011); OECD (2024); UNESCO (2022).

2.4 Governance Capacity as an Educational Outcome: Towards an Integrated Conceptual Framework

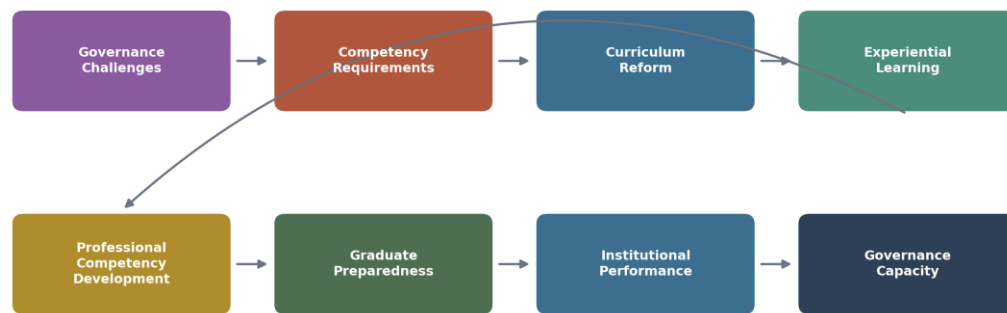
Governance capacity has traditionally been examined through institutional, political, and administrative lenses, with the dominant literature attributing effective governance to bureaucratic quality, institutional design, political leadership, and administrative reform (Fukuyama, 2013; Peters, 2021). This body of work is not wrong so much as incomplete: it tends to treat the competence of public officials as a given input rather than asking where that competence actually comes from, and the educational foundations of governance capacity have accordingly received comparatively little scholarly attention.

Governance capacity, broadly, refers to the ability of public institutions to formulate policy, mobilise resources, coordinate stakeholders, and maintain public trust within norms of accountability and democratic legitimacy (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2024). It is common to discuss these capabilities as organisational attributes, but institutions themselves do not formulate policy or exercise judgement the people inside them do, and their knowledge, skill, and leadership capacity have been shaped by education and professional experience long before they take up their posts. Sector-specific research reinforces the point from a different angle: work on health governance has traced how the competence of the individual agents managing principal-agent relationships within a health system shape whether health system strengthening efforts succeed or stall, regardless of how well-designed the formal institutional rules appear on paper (Brinkerhoff & Bossert, 2014). This suggests governance capacity is best understood not merely as an institutional resource but as the cumulative product of sustained investment in human capital — a point Human Capital Theory formalises: Becker (1993) argues that education raises productivity by building knowledge, technical capability, and adaptive capacity, so that educational institutions function as strategic contributors to state capacity because they prepare the workforce governance ultimately depends on. Contemporary governance problems reinforce this relationship. Climate adaptation, digital transformation, and public health emergencies all require officials able to integrate knowledge across disciplines and adapt institutional responses as circumstances shift (OECD, 2024; United Nations, 2015) capabilities unlikely to

emerge from fragmented educational experience or narrowly disciplinary curricula. The relationship runs in both directions, too: effective governance depends on competent administrators, but educational institutions themselves depend on supportive governance systems for policy direction, funding, and quality assurance. Curriculum reform in Public Administration should therefore be understood as part of a wider governance ecosystem rather than an isolated academic exercise.

Existing literature has touched on parts of this relationship, but in fragments. Work on governance capacity examines institutional effectiveness and political leadership without examining the educational processes through which professional competence is cultivated; work on higher education reform focuses on employability and pedagogical innovation with little attention to governance outcomes. This paper proposes closing that gap by treating governance capacity as the cumulative product of interconnected educational processes: curriculum relevance establishes the knowledge base; experiential learning lets students apply it in authentic settings; authentic assessment provides evidence of competency attainment; institutional partnerships expose students to real governance environments; and continuous professional development keeps competencies evolving across a career. This speaks to a broader international call for higher education systems that build graduates capable of addressing complex societal problems, not merely satisfying immediate labour-market requirements (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2024), and it positions Public Administration education as bearing directly on governance quality rather than sitting apart from it.

This leads to the paper's central proposition. If governance capacity depends fundamentally on the competencies of public administrators, and those competencies are developed through integrated educational processes, then curriculum reform must be understood as a strategic mechanism for strengthening governance rather than a housekeeping exercise. That proposition is the conceptual basis for the Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF) presented next, which integrates curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and professional engagement into a single competency development architecture.

Figure 1. Conceptual Pathway Linking Public Administration Education to Governance Capacity

Source: Developed by the authors (2026).

Table 3. Educational Processes and Their Contribution to Governance Capacity

Educational Process	Immediate Educational Outcome	Institutional Outcome	Governance Outcome
Curriculum relevance	Contemporary knowledge and conceptual understanding	Improved graduate quality	Better policy formulation
Experiential learning	Practical skills and professional judgement	Workplace readiness	More effective programme implementation
Authentic assessment	Verified competency attainment	Improved professional standards	Enhanced accountability and service delivery
Institutional partnerships	Exposure to real governance environments	Stronger Higher Education–government collaboration	Increased policy innovation
Continuous professional development	Lifelong learning and adaptability	Organisational learning	Greater institutional resilience

Source: Developed by the authors based on the literature reviewed.

3. The Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF): An Integrated Model for Curriculum Reform

3.1 Conceptual Rationale

The review above points to a fairly specific problem. Governance has moved towards increasingly collaborative, digital, and adaptive forms, but curriculum reform has generally moved in a fragmented way a curriculum review here, an experiential learning initiative there without explaining how the pieces should fit together to build governance capacity, and shorter still, in the Nigerian case, of engagement with the specific regulatory space (NUC's CCMAS, NBTE's ND/HND specifications) within which reform would actually have to happen.

The Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF) responds to

that gap. It does not replace existing theories of competency-based education or experiential learning; it integrates their central insights into a governance-oriented model explaining how Public Administration programmes can systematically build the competencies effective public service now requires. The framework rests on a central proposition:

Governance capacity is strengthened when Public Administration education deliberately integrates curriculum relevance, experiential learning, competency development, authentic assessment, institutional partnerships, and lifelong professional learning into a coherent educational system.

Unlike curriculum models that treat teaching, assessment, internships, and professional engagement as largely separate activities, the PACDF treats them as mutually reinforcing parts

of one continuous competency development cycle running from curriculum design through professional practice and beyond graduation. It accordingly positions professional competence, rather than curriculum content on its own, as the principal outcome of Public Administration education content still matters, but its value is only realised once translated into professional capability through authentic learning experience and sustained engagement with governance problems as they actually arise.

3.2 Components of the PACDF

The PACDF has six mutually reinforcing dimensions, shown in Figure 2.

Curriculum relevance. The framework's intellectual foundation. Public Administration curricula need to keep evolving with governance itself rather than being revised in occasional, incremental bursts, bringing digital governance, artificial intelligence in public administration, climate governance, policy analytics, and public value creation into the curriculum alongside traditional administrative subjects using, where institutional context allows, the discretionary space that NUC's CCMAS and NBTE's professional-course allocations already provide, rather than waiting for the next national curriculum review. This also calls for genuine interdisciplinarity: governance problems rarely respect disciplinary lines, and graduates need to draw on economics, law, information systems, and data analytics together, not as separate boxes on a transcript.

Experiential and practice-oriented learning. Where curriculum gets put into practice. Competencies develop most reliably when theoretical learning is reinforced through policy simulations, internships, governance laboratories, and consultancy projects, giving students the chance to apply conceptual knowledge and reflect critically on what they have done. Crucially, this should not be confined to a single industrial attachment period near the end of the programme; authentic practice needs to be built in progressively, so students engage increasingly complex governance situations as they advance rather than encountering real practice for the first time just before graduation.

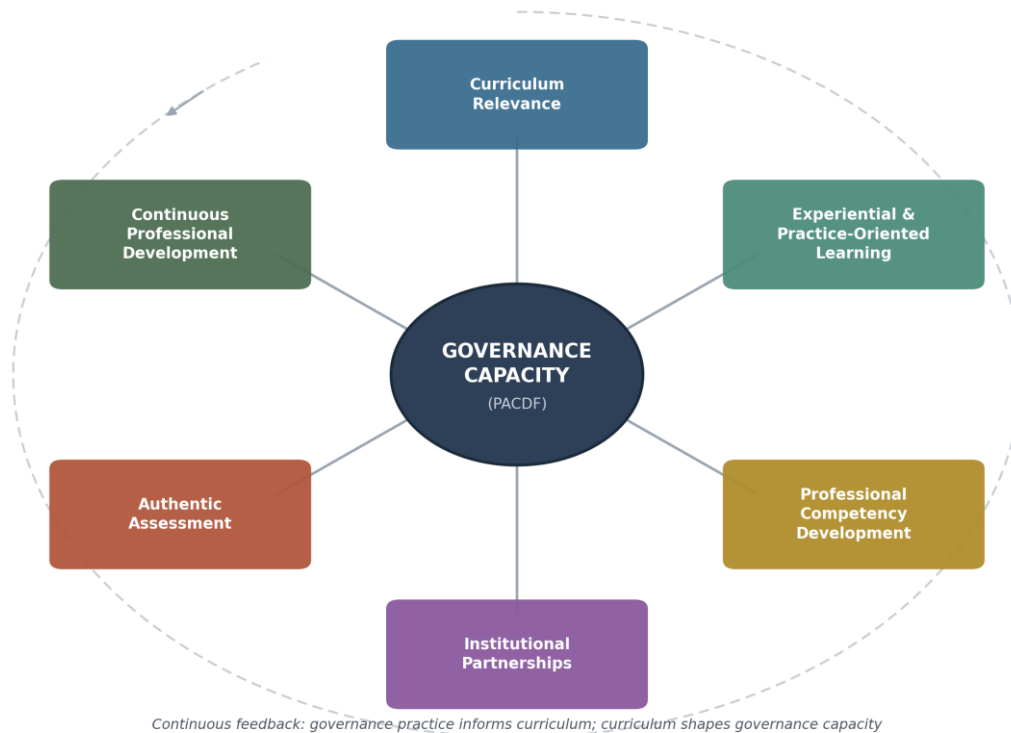
Professional competency development. The centre of the framework, since it is the outcome the other dimensions exist to support. Six

competency domains are identified: (1) governance and public policy analysis; (2) ethical leadership and accountability; (3) digital governance and data literacy; (4) research and evidence-informed decision-making; (5) collaborative leadership and stakeholder engagement; and (6) communication, negotiation, and adaptive problem-solving. These are mutually reinforcing rather than six discrete skills to be checked off separately precisely the concern Hyland (1994) raised about atomised competency lists. Effective public administration draws on analytical, ethical, interpersonal, and technological capability at the same time, in the same decision, not one at a time.

Institutional partnerships. Professional education depends on sustained interaction between higher education institutions and the organisations responsible for public governance partnerships that go beyond placing interns, to include practitioner-led teaching, collaborative research, policy laboratories, and joint innovation projects. Through relationships of this kind, curriculum stays responsive to changing governance realities, and public institutions gain access to current research and emerging talent in return.

Authentic assessment. Assessment shapes how students learn far more than curriculum designers sometimes admit; where it is dominated by memorisation and written examination, students learn to prioritise recall over capability, whatever the syllabus claims to teach. The PACDF calls instead for assessment asking students to demonstrate practical application of knowledge, policy briefs, consultancy reports, stakeholder negotiation exercises, governance simulations, and reflective portfolios providing richer evidence of what a graduate can actually do.

Continuous professional development. Competency development does not end at graduation. Public Administration operates in an environment of continuous technological and institutional change, so graduates need real opportunities for lifelong learning through executive education, professional certification, and practitioner workshops mechanisms that let governance capacity keep evolving alongside the challenges it is meant to address, rather than freezing at whatever level a graduate reached the day they left campus.

Figure 2. The Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF)

Source: Developed by the authors (2026).

Table 4. Components of the Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF)

Framework Dimension	Primary Function	Expected Educational Outcome	Governance Contribution
Curriculum relevance	Align educational content with governance realities	Contemporary conceptual understanding	Improved policy analysis and strategic thinking
Experiential learning	Integrate theory with practice	Practical judgement and workplace readiness	Stronger implementation capacity
Professional competency development	Cultivate integrated professional capabilities	Competent and adaptable graduates	Enhanced governance effectiveness
Institutional partnerships	Connect education with public sector practice	Authentic professional learning	Increased policy innovation and institutional collaboration
Authentic assessment	Measure demonstrated competence	Improved graduate quality	Greater accountability and professional standards
Continuous professional development	Sustain competency throughout careers	Lifelong learning and adaptability	Institutional resilience and continuous governance improvement

Source: Developed by the authors.

3.3 Operational Logic of the Framework

The PACDF is best understood as a dynamic system rather than a fixed sequence of steps. Curriculum relevance supplies the intellectual foundation from which learning outcomes are

defined; experiential learning gives students the chance to translate conceptual understanding into professional capability; authentic assessment evaluates how far those competencies have actually been achieved and feeds that information back into curriculum refinement; institutional

partnerships keep educational experience grounded in contemporary governance practice; and continuous professional development carries learning beyond formal education into professional life. The framework builds in continuous feedback loops deliberately: developments within public institutions should inform curriculum revision, and graduates entering public service should bring new experience back into future programme improvement, closing a loop that keeps education responsive to evolving governance challenges rather than dependent on infrequent, top-down cycles.

Where conventional curriculum models are organised primarily around knowledge transmission, the PACDF makes competency development the organising principle of Public Administration education itself. Curriculum reform, in this reading, becomes an integrated process through which educational institutions contribute directly to governance capacity and institutional effectiveness, rather than a periodic academic housekeeping exercise conducted mostly for accreditation purposes.

3.4 Theoretical Propositions

To support future empirical validation, PACDF gives rise to five propositions:

Proposition 1: Public Administration programmes that systematically integrate competency-based curriculum design with experiential learning will produce graduates exhibiting higher levels of professional competence than programmes relying predominantly on traditional instructional approaches.

Proposition 2: Strong institutional partnerships between higher education institutions and public sector organisations positively influence graduate preparedness for professional public service.

Proposition 3: Authentic assessment strategies provide more valid indicators of professional competence than assessment systems based primarily on written examinations.

Proposition 4: Continuous professional development strengthens the relationship between graduate competence and long-term governance capacity.

Proposition 5: Governance capacity is positively associated with the cumulative quality of competency-oriented Public Administration education.

4. Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative, theory-building conceptual research design to examine how Public Administration education can be repositioned around the competency demands of contemporary governance. It does not generate primary empirical data; instead, it synthesises existing theoretical and policy scholarship into an integrated framework linking curriculum reform with governance capacity. Conceptual research of this kind suits situations where the task is to clarify relationships among existing ideas, surface gaps in current knowledge, and propose new models capable of guiding future empirical work (Jaakkola, 2020). Unlike a narrative review, whose job is primarily to summarise, theory-building conceptual research extends what is already known by integrating separate strands of literature into a coherent explanatory account, following the concept-centric logic Webster and Watson (2002) set out for building a review around ideas rather than proceeding study by study.

Literature underpinning the analysis was drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and policy reports, with particular weight given to material published between 2015 and 2026 to capture current developments in digital governance, competency-based education, artificial intelligence, and higher education reform, while retaining foundational earlier works that continue to underpin scholarship on experiential learning, competency development, and governance theory. The review drew on databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SpringerLink, Sage Journals, and ScienceDirect, supplemented by policy documents from the OECD, UNESCO, the World Bank, the African Union, and Nigerian regulatory bodies, principally the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), whose curriculum benchmarks govern what universities and polytechnics in Nigeria are actually permitted to teach. Search terms combined Public Administration education, governance capacity, competency-based education, experiential learning, curriculum reform, digital governance, and graduate employability.

The retrieved literature was thematically coded around governance transformation, curriculum design, competency development, experiential learning, institutional partnership, authentic assessment, and continuous professional learning, then compared across disciplinary lines to identify convergence, divergence, and conceptual

omission. Development of the PACDF proceeded iteratively: the review first identified the emphasised across the literature, then synthesised the associated educational mechanisms into a single conceptual structure and finally organised the relationships among these elements into an integrated framework explaining how competency-oriented reform can strengthen graduate preparedness and governance capacity.

Conceptual research of this kind does not aim at statistical generalisation, but it can offer theoretical generalisability by providing explanatory models capable of informing future empirical inquiry (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020). The PACDF should accordingly be read as a heuristic framework intended to guide curriculum reform and provide a starting point for empirical validation, rather than as a tested causal model.

5. Discussion

5.1 Reframing Public Administration Education as a Governance Capacity Project

The central argument of this paper is that Public Administration education should not be understood merely as an academic enterprise concerned with transmitting disciplinary knowledge; it should be recognised as a strategic mechanism through which governance capacity is cultivated. Where existing literature has largely examined governance capacity through institutional, political, or managerial lenses (Fukuyama, 2013; Peters, 2021), this paper argues the competencies underpinning effective governance originate, to a significant degree, within the higher education systems responsible for preparing future public servants. If governance capacity is partly an educational outcome, then curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and institutional partnerships become central variables in explaining differences in public sector performance rather than background conditions taken for granted, and reforms aimed purely at administrative structures may have limited staying power without corresponding investment in professional education.

5.2 Advancing Competency-Based Education and Bridging the Theory–Practice Divide

Competency-based education has gained real traction across professional disciplines, but its application within Public Administration remains uneven, and as Hyland's (1994) critique suggests uneven application is not the only risk: existing frameworks often specify what graduates should do without explaining how those competencies

governance competencies most consistently are developed, and some risk reducing professional judgement to a checklist. The PACDF answers both concerns by integrating curriculum, experiential learning, assessment, and partnership within a single architecture and by framing the six competency domains as interdependent rather than separately certified treating competency development as dynamic and iterative, professional capability emerging from continuous interaction between theoretical learning and authentic governance practice, rather than as a fixed, checkable outcome.

This directly addresses one of the most persistent criticisms of Public Administration education: the gap between academic preparation and professional practice. Traditional programmes lean heavily on lecture-centred instruction, leaving graduates with limited chances to apply concepts in realistic settings; internships provide some exposure but are often peripheral to curriculum design rather than central to it. The PACDF makes experiential learning a core organising principle rather than an afterthought and pushes towards a more systemic conception of reform generally treating curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and partnership as interconnected dimensions of one system rather than independent elements, giving institutions a practical way to coordinate renewal across several dimensions at once instead of pursuing isolated reforms that never quite add up to a coherent whole.

5.3 Contribution to Theory

The paper makes four related contributions. First, it extends governance capacity scholarship by identifying higher education as a foundational mechanism through which governance capability is produced, consistent with sector-specific findings on how agent competence shapes system performance more broadly (Brinkerhoff & Bossert, 2014). Second, it shows how competency development can be operationalised within Public Administration through integrated curriculum architecture, taking seriously Hyland's (1994) warning against reducing competence to a checklist. Third, it extends experiential learning theory by embedding it within an institutional model of curriculum reform rather than treating it as only an instructional strategy. Finally, it proposes a governance-oriented model integrating curriculum, experiential learning, assessment, partnership, and professional development into a coherent account of professional preparation

grounded, for the Nigerian case specifically, in the provide, rather than treated as a purely academic proposal detached from what institutions are permitted to do.

5.4 Limitations of the Framework

The PACDF offers an integrated conceptual model, but several limitations deserve acknowledgment.

First, the framework is conceptual rather than empirical. Its relationships are derived from synthesising existing scholarships rather than from direct observation of curriculum implementation, so future empirical research is needed to test the framework across different institutional contexts and establish the relative weight of its individual components.

Second, the framework has been developed primarily with the Nigerian higher education system in mind. Many of its principles travel reasonably well, but institutional arrangements, accreditation systems, governance structures, and educational priorities differ across countries, and comparative studies involving Public Administration programmes elsewhere in Africa

actual regulatory space NUC and NBTE curricula and in other developing countries would strengthen understanding of how far the framework generalises.

Third, the framework concentrates on curriculum architecture rather than institutional political economy. Successful implementation depends on leadership commitment, adequate funding, digital infrastructure, faculty development, a supportive regulatory environment, and sustained collaboration with public institutions. These contextual factors sit outside the immediate scope of this paper but deserve systematic investigation in their own right including, specifically, empirical work on how consistently institutions are actually using the discretionary curriculum space NUC's CCMAS and NBTE's professional-course allocations already make available to them, since the framework's practical value depends substantially on that discretion being used well rather than left unused.

None of this diminishes the framework's value; it simply marks out where the next round of empirical and theoretical work needs to go.

Table 5. Comparison of the PACDF with Existing Approaches to Public Administration Education

Dimension	Conventional Curriculum Model	Competency-Based Curriculum	Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF)
Primary emphasis	Knowledge transmission	Competency attainment	Governance capacity through integrated competency development
Curriculum design	Subject-centred	Outcome-centred	Systems-oriented and governance-responsive
Teaching approach	Lectures and tutorials	Active learning	Experiential, collaborative, reflective, and interdisciplinary learning
Assessment	Knowledge recall	Demonstration of competence	Authentic assessment linked to governance practice
Industry engagement	Limited or periodic	Internship-focused	Continuous institutional partnership and co-production
Graduate outcome	Academic qualification	Professional competence	Competent public servant capable of strengthening governance capacity

Source: Developed by the authors.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The PACDF has practical implications for higher education institutions, regulatory agencies, public sector organisations, and policymakers concerned with governance capacity. Rather than treating curriculum reform as an isolated academic exercise, the framework positions Public Administration education as a strategic investment in institutional effectiveness and national development, which means implementing competency-oriented reform requires coordinated action across several levels of the governance and higher education ecosystem at once, not a single decision taken by any one actor.

6.1 Implications for Universities, Polytechnics, and Regulators

The analysis suggests Public Administration programmes should move beyond incremental curriculum revision towards more comprehensive redesign, integrating competency development across all levels of study rather than confining practical learning to industrial attachment or final-year projects. For universities, this means complementing theoretical rigour with applied policy analysis and simulation exercises, built where possible into the discretionary 30 per cent of curriculum content NUC's CCMAS leaves to institutional judgement rather than waiting for the next nationwide curriculum cycle. For polytechnics, whose mandate already emphasises applied education, it means strengthening work-integrated learning through governance laboratories and long-term institutional partnerships, making fuller use of the practical-course allocation NBTE's specifications already provide for.

Regulatory agencies have a complementary role. Competency-oriented education cannot be achieved just by expanding course content; it requires accreditation standards that evaluate how programmes build professional capability through teaching, assessment, and experiential learning, not only whether the right course titles appear on a curriculum map. Accreditation processes should examine authentic assessment practice and how effectively institutional partnerships are functioning, including closer scrutiny of how well SIWES and equivalent placements are supervised and assessed, since this is where the gap between regulatory intent and classroom reality currently appears widest (Ogunbote et al., 2026).

6.2 Implications for Public Sector Organisations and Faculty

The framework points to the importance of stronger collaboration between higher education institutions and public sector organisations. Ministries, departments, agencies, and local governments should be treated not only as employers of graduates but as co-producers of professional education, contributing to curriculum development, mentoring, and collaborative research; public organisations stand to gain in turn through access to current research and continuous professional development opportunities.

Curriculum reform ultimately runs through academic staff, and lecturers now expected to teach digital governance, policy analytics, and AI in public administration alongside sustaining active research need sustained investment in their own development, professional attachment within public organisations, digital skills training, and a genuine shift towards learner-centred pedagogies, as a continuous institutional priority rather than an occasional workshop.

6.3 Implications for National Development

The broader significance of the PACDF goes beyond educational reform on its own. Public Administration education shapes the quality of the professional workforce responsible for policy formulation and service delivery, so strengthening it contributes, indirectly but substantively, to better governance outcomes a link that matters particularly in a labour market where structural unemployment and underemployment already limit the returns young Nigerians see on formal education, and where reforms that visibly connect study to employable capability carry correspondingly higher stakes (International Labour Organization, 2024). Curriculum reform alone cannot resolve broader governance challenges, but it represents a genuine long-term investment in institutional capacity, one government interested in improving public sector performance should treat as a complementary part of governance reform rather than a separate track.

Table 6. Policy Priorities for Strengthening Public Administration Education in Nigeria

Stakeholder	Strategic Priority	Expected Outcome
Universities	Integrate competency-based curriculum and experiential learning across programmes, using CCMAS's discretionary curriculum space	Graduates with stronger analytical and professional capabilities
Polytechnics	Expand work-integrated learning, governance laboratories, and policy consultancy projects within NBTE's professional-course allocation	Improved workplace readiness and applied problem-solving skills
Regulatory agencies	Adopt competency-oriented accreditation standards and periodic curriculum review	Greater curriculum relevance and educational quality
Public sector organisations	Strengthen partnerships with higher education institutions through internships, mentoring, and collaborative research	Improved alignment between education and governance practice
Academic staff	Invest in professional development, digital capability, and learner-centred pedagogies	Enhanced teaching quality and curriculum innovation
Government	Support sustained investment in educational infrastructure, digital technologies, and governance-oriented research	Stronger governance capacity and institutional effectiveness

Source: Developed by the authors

7. Conclusion

Public Administration education occupies a strategic position in building capable, accountable, and innovative public institutions. As governance becomes more shaped by digital transformation, complex policy challenges, collaborative decision-making, and higher citizen expectations, the traditional model of Public Administration education is proving less and less sufficient for preparing graduates to work effectively in contemporary public sector environments. The central argument of this paper has been that strengthening governance capacity requires a corresponding change in how future public administrators are actually educated.

Drawing on competency-based education, experiential learning, and governance scholarship, the paper has argued that curriculum reform needs to move beyond periodic content revision towards an integrated educational architecture that

deliberately aligns curriculum design, experiential learning, authentic assessment, institutional partnerships, and continuous professional development. That argument was developed through a critical synthesis of contemporary literature grounded, where the Nigerian case is concerned, in the actual regulatory architecture of NUC's CCMAS and NBTE's ND/HND curriculum specifications rather than in general principle alone and it culminates in the proposed Public Administration Competency Development Framework (PACDF), which treats competency development as the organising principle of Public Administration education.

The paper's main contribution is to reposition governance capacity as an educational outcome as well as an institutional one. Existing scholarship has largely examined governance capacity through organisational and political lenses; this paper extends that literature by showing the

competencies underpinning effective governance are shaped, in important respects, by how Public Administration education is designed and delivered. The PACDF offers a theoretically grounded account of how competency-oriented reform can contribute to graduate preparedness and improved governance outcomes, and it has practical value too: it gives universities, polytechnics, regulators, and public sector organisations a coherent model for aligning educational practice with the realities of twenty-first-century governance, treating curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and professional engagement as parts of one continuous system rather than separate activities pursued in isolation.

The study has real limitations, and it is worth being direct about them. As a conceptual article, the PACDF has not been empirically validated and should be read as a theory-informed framework rather than a tested explanatory model. Future research should test its applicability across different institutional settings, examine the relationships among its constituent dimensions, and assess its influence on graduate competence, organisational performance, and governance outcomes including, specifically, whether institutions that make active use of the discretionary curriculum space already available under NUC and NBTE regulation show measurably different graduate outcomes from those that do not. Comparative studies involving universities and polytechnics elsewhere in Africa would also be valuable in establishing how far the framework's logic travels beyond the Nigerian case.

Ultimately, the future effectiveness of public administration will depend not only on institutional reform but on the quality of the educational systems preparing the people entrusted with governing public institutions. Repositioning Public Administration education is, in that light, more than an academic undertaking: it is a strategic investment in governance capacity, democratic resilience, and sustainable national development. By putting competency development at the centre of curriculum design, higher education institutions can contribute meaningfully to building a public service capable

of meeting the genuinely complex demands of twenty-first-century governance.

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