





Exploring Current Themes, Future Trends, and Challenges in Scandinavian Public Management


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Introduction

At the end of 2024, the *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration* (SJPA) invited scholars to contribute to a dynamic and forward-thinking discussion on the contemporary issues facing Scandinavian public organizations (Brorström, Kallio, Karlsson, & Nyland, 2023). Inspired by our era of rapid change and complexity (Klijn, Koppenjan, Spekkink & Warsen, 2025; OECD, 2022; Geuijen et al, 2017), we saw that public organizations are navigating a myriad of challenges while simultaneously trying to innovate strategies to shape their futures (Torfing & Ansell, 2017). The public sector faces and must address a multitude of significant challenges, including global political instability, the escalating risk of pandemics, global migration, social and environmental (un)sustainability, and fiscal declines (Funck & Karlsson, 2023; Tekin Bilbil, Firtin & Karlsson, 2024).

In our opinion, the Scandinavian context offers a unique perspective given its long tradition of inclusion, political stability, and (progressive) use of managerial techniques (see e.g., Leitner and Wroblewski 2006; Elgström and Delputte 2016; Greve, Martela, Rothstein and Saari, 2020; Marjanen, Strang & Hilson 2021; Lapsley, 2017; Karlsson & Olsson, 2018; Helgesen, 2014; *Nordic Cooperation*, 2023). The call for papers targeted issues of such grand challenges and invited contributions of conceptual or empirical character that specifically deal with coping strategies and (progressive) managerial tactics under times of uncertainty and economic and fiscal turmoil, to explore the multifaceted landscape of public management in this region.

In the call for papers, we encouraged scholars from different traditions and disciplines to submit papers to this special issue, and we especially welcomed heterogeneity in theoretical approaches and perspectives. Some examples of questions and issues of interest were:

- Managerial: As NPM ideas wane, post-NPM and trust-based approaches seek to restore values and resilience. Can they endure in uncertain times?
- Accounting and fiscal: Under fiscal strain, public bodies must sustain quality and equity. How are they adapting, and with what societal effects?
- Organizational: Facing global pressures, can public organizations innovate for sustainability, inclusion, and equality?

In addition to empirical studies employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methodologies, conceptual papers and interdisciplinary approaches were also welcomed to address these themes. The call for contributions was extended to authors to elicit insights that could inform policy and practice. This objective renders the call pertinent not only to academia but also to policymakers, administrators, and practitioners.

A workshop related to the special issue took place in conjunction with the Nordic Academy of Management (NFF) conference, which took place from August 15 to 17, 2024, at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik. The NFF standing track for The Public Sector Management (PSM) provided a great platform for this special issue (NFF, 2025) and proved to be an important platform for constructive dialogue around potential contributions and topics relevant to this special issue. Participation in the workshop did not guarantee publication in the special issue, nor did it exclude non-participants from submitting contributions to the special issue at a later stage. However, we are delighted to notice that most of the papers included in this special issue were originally presented in an earlier form at the workshop in Reykjavik. We were also pleased to see so many early-career scholars take part in our special issue. After all, we called for emerging trends and future directions in Scandinavian public management research, and the newer generation of scholars is particularly well positioned to offer such forward-looking perspectives.

In this special issue, we are happy to include five articles that represent different theoretical approaches, perspectives, traditions, and disciplines. This makes this special issue a compilation and indeed a representation of the plurality of perspectives that characterize research on public management and governance. As a result, we can present a special issue that compiles different empirical as well as theoretical viewpoints. The themes of trust, accountability, and collaboration are prominent in the selected articles. These themes are studied from the multiple perspectives, including budgeting, reforms, change management, crisis management, and design decisions within public sector organizations.

First, *Lykke Mose* discusses whether efforts to strengthen trust in the public sector will improve welfare outcomes in primary and lower-secondary schools in her article: *Positive Impacts of Trust-Based Leadership and Governance on School Outcomes. A Literature-Based Impact Study*. Mose (2025) sees that trust has gained increasing prominence in Scandinavian public administration as an alternative to traditional governance approaches. Her article examines the potential impact of trust reforms, focusing on primary and lower-secondary schools. It explores how trust-based leadership, understood as interactional trust, and trust-based governance, seen as structural trust, influence welfare outcomes such as student achievement and motivation. The study applies a systematic review of empirical research to assess whether evidence supports the assumption that trust reforms improve welfare outcomes. The findings suggest that trust-based practices can enhance educational outcomes when leadership and governance are implemented together and guided by a clear mission. Measuring trust in reform processes may also provide new forms of accountability by assessing whether organizations succeed in fostering trust. The review reveals knowledge gaps regarding the practical implementation of trust reforms and calls for further research and methodological development to strengthen the evidence base for trust-oriented approaches in public governance.

In the second article, *Anna Villaume Silberstein, Gunilla Eklöv Alander, and Mikael Holmgren Caicedo* study collaboration within the framework of pooled budgets. In the article: *Between Solidarity and Anomie: A Study of a Collaboration with a Pooled Budget*, Villaume Silberstein et al. (2025) highlight that collaboration is often promoted in the public sector to address complex societal problems, yet such efforts are often undervalued because performance is typically assessed at the level of individual organizations. The article explores how

management accounting both enables and constrains collaboration, focusing on a pooled budget arrangement established by public organizations to fund rehabilitation measures for the long-term unemployed. Building on Durkheim's concepts of solidarity and anomie, the study analyzes 29 interviews with actors engaged in this coordination association. The findings indicate that pooled budgeting initially fosters solidarity by promoting shared responsibility and stability, but regulatory and political pressures also introduce anomic tendencies that undermine cooperation. To sustain collaboration, counteractions must be taken to reinforce solidarity and secure relative autonomy from external funding bodies. The study concludes that management accounting in collaborative settings requires support both externally and internally. To be genuinely collaborative, management accounting must originate from within the partnership, enabling collective planning, resource allocation, and monitoring.

Next, *Paulina Ekendahl, Izabella Bäckström, and Andreas Norrman* study public administration change processes in their article: *Context Adaptation in Public Administration Change Processes: A Case Within the Swedish Transport Administration*. Ekendahl et al. (2025) stress that adapting organizational change to specific contexts is widely recognized as essential, yet research has often neglected how actors within organizations perceive and enact such adaptations. The study by Ekendahl et al. (2025) addresses this gap by examining how managers and employees at different organizational levels perceive the context of change and adapt change processes within the Swedish Transport Administration's traffic management division, characterized by 24/7 shift work. Using an abductive qualitative approach, informed by 21 semi-structured interviews, the study applies a contingency perspective to explore how contextual factors shape adaptation. The findings reveal that both managers and employees engage in continuous context adaptation, though their capacity to act varies across hierarchical levels. Key contingency variables include operational demands of round-the-clock work, the need to sustain service delivery during change, limited staff resources, and challenges of communication and involvement. The study contributes theoretically to the public administration literature by demonstrating that context adaptation is not limited to designated change agents but occurs throughout the organization, influenced by both adaptable and non-adaptable factors. Managerial implications highlight the importance of aligning change strategies with available resources, recognizing the enabling role of higher-level actors, balancing operational continuity with personnel involvement, and acknowledging the active role of employees in shaping contextual adaptation.

Fourth, *Andreas Bergh and Joakim Wernberg* investigate how quasi-markets differ from traditional markets in their article: *Stress Testing a Quasi-Market: Unintended Consequences of the Swedish School Voucher System*, demonstrating how design decisions have resulted in unintended consequences that are detrimental to service quality and contrary to policy goals. The authors raise the issue that quasi-markets have become a common, yet contested, arrangement for delivering public services. While often discussed as if their consequences mirror those of traditional markets, Bergh and Wernberg (2025) show that quasi-markets differ in fundamental ways, combining elements of market competition with public financing and political control. The article develops an analytical framework for comparing traditional markets with voucher-based quasi-markets, distinguishing between static factors, such as price-cost relations, supply-demand matching, and competition—and dynamic factors, including structural change and rent-seeking. Using a thought experiment where all education providers act as profit-maximizers, the study stress-tests the Swedish school voucher system. The analysis highlights unintended outcomes such as grade inflation, cream-skimming, market concentration, and distorted incentives for innovation. The findings suggest that profit motives are not inherently detrimental, but their effects depend heavily on how the quasi-market is structured. The paper concludes that restricting profits is unlikely to resolve systemic issues and may even hinder positive dynamics. Instead, effective reform requires regulatory approaches that align incentives with policy goals, balance innovation with quality control, and provide sufficient oversight to ensure compliance.

Finally, *Kristiina Janhonen, Marjaana Viita-aho, Henna Paananen, Laura Kihlström, Soila Karreinen, and Liina-Kaisa Tynkynen* analyze the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic as seen by the national-level decision-makers in their article: *Contested, Impractical,*

and Easily Forgotten? Analysing National-Level Decision-Makers' Interpretations of Lessons Learned From the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Qualitative Follow-up Study. Janhonen et al. (2025) highlight that while existing scholarship has primarily emphasized the acute phase of the pandemic, this temporal focus risks neglecting how evolving political, institutional, and societal conditions shape the meanings and uses of lessons learned during protracted crises. The study draws on pragmatist theory to conceptualize lessons learned as dynamic, contested, and contextually embedded rather than static outcomes. Empirically, it is based on a longitudinal qualitative design using two rounds of semi-structured interviews with national-level decision makers: first during the acute stage of the pandemic in 2021 (n=21), and later in the post-acute stage of 2022–2023 following high vaccination coverage (n=16). The findings reveal that the framing of lessons shifted between the two stages, with early reflections emphasizing urgent crisis management and later interpretations focusing on systemic preparedness and interdependencies across health and societal systems. These evolving framings influenced whether and how lessons were acted upon, sometimes enabling institutional learning but often constraining reform. The article contributes theoretically by integrating pragmatist insights into crisis research and empirically by demonstrating how lessons learned are reinterpreted across time in national crisis governance. It underscores the need for models of crisis preparedness that account for the evolving, contested nature of lessons learned during extended crises.

The five articles in this special issue collectively advance our understanding of contemporary challenges in public administration, particularly in the areas of governance reform, organizational change, collaboration, marketization, and crisis learning. Although they address different empirical contexts – schools, rehabilitation services, transport administration, education markets, and pandemic governance – they converge on several critical themes: the tension between stability and flexibility, the importance of institutional design, and how public sector actors interpret and adapt reforms in practice. Theoretically, the contributions draw on a range of perspectives, including trust-based governance and leadership, Durkheimian notions of solidarity and anomie, contingency theory, market theory, and pragmatism. This diversity reflects the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary public administration research yet also underscores a shared concern with the relationship between structures, incentives, and actor-level perceptions. Despite these shared concerns, the articles differ in their empirical focus and analytical emphases. Mose (2025) positions trust reforms as a potential corrective to control-heavy governance, while Villaume Silberstein et al. (2025) demonstrate how management accounting can both stabilize and destabilize collaboration. Ekendahl et al. (2025) highlight the everyday practices of managers and employees who adapt to organizational change under contextual constraints. Bergh and Wernberg (2025) expose the design flaws of quasi-markets, showing how regulatory choices condition unintended outcomes in the Swedish school voucher system. Finally, Janhonen et al. (2025) explore the temporal dynamics of crisis learning, showing how lessons are framed and reframed as political and institutional conditions evolve.

Together, these studies highlight both the possibilities and limits of reform initiatives across diverse settings in the Scandinavian context. They collectively show that reforms are never implemented in institutional vacuums; outcomes depend on how actors perceive, interpret, and adapt to contextual conditions, which has been an ongoing debate in the literature (e.g., Lindberg et al., 2015). Governance designs need to balance competing logics – trust and control, solidarity and anomie, continuity and change, market dynamics and public values, immediate crisis response and long-term preparedness. As the opening of this special issue highlighted, contemporary public administration faces multiple and interlinked challenges – political, fiscal, social, and environmental. The contributions gathered here show that public sector reforms are among the main ways through which such challenges are interpreted and addressed. Rather than offering ready-made solutions, the reforms examined in these articles illustrate how public organizations continuously adapt to uncertainty, balancing competing demands and values in practice. Together, these studies highlight both the possibilities and limits of reform initiatives across diverse settings in the Scandinavian context. The contributions in this special issue thus direct attention toward a reflexive model of public administration that acknowledges the interdependence between structure and agency, values and performance, and learning and control. In sum, the articles in this special issue collectively call for a more nuanced, context-

sensitive, and actor-oriented understanding of how public administration reforms respond to contemporary challenges, while opening pathways for new theoretical and empirical explorations.

In sum, the articles in this special issue collectively call for a more nuanced, context-sensitive, and actor-oriented understanding of public administration reforms, while opening pathways for new theoretical and empirical explorations. Drawing on these insights, we suggest several avenues for further research. Scholars could, for instance, continue to explore how trust-based governance models can or should be institutionalized without reproducing the control mechanisms they intend to replace. Future research could also explore the long-term dynamics of quasi-markets and their interaction with public values or examine how organizational resilience and learning evolve across crises of different magnitudes and durations. Comparative research across the Nordic countries could expand our current understanding of how institutional and cultural traditions shape and reshape the balances between flexibility and accountability. We also urge future researchers to draw on a wide range of theories and methods to illuminate these complexities and to continue bridging the gap between conceptual innovation and practical reform.

This special issue represents an initial step in a continuing effort to deepen scholarly engagement with the evolving challenges of public administration. We hope that the articles contained in this special issue will stimulate interest in additional studies on the conditions for public governance and management, with a continued focus on Scandinavia.

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