

Understanding context in the strategic management of public organisations

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Project description:

Models of strategic management have enhanced applicability to many contemporary public services organizations. A range of 'schools of thought in strategic management', originally developed for the commercial sector, have now traversed into the public sector and are applied to understand the organisational behaviour of organisations active in the provision of public services. More recently, certain approaches to strategic management have originated within the public sector – most notably the 'Public Value' approach. Strategic management is thus a source discipline for public management, a body of knowledge that may be employed for bettering our understanding of public organisations.

However, the distinctiveness of public sector contexts has to be taken into account to properly situate strategic management in public services settings, and acritical importation is of little or no relevance. The simple dichotomy between 'public' and 'private' sector, while significant, carries only limited explanatory power. Public organisations operate in remarkably diverse 'contexts' across the world. Shaped by the still nowadays very visible frontiers of the 'old' nation states or by less visible borders drawn by history, geography, demography, affluence, culture, language, and religion, diverse 'contexts' host and provide the frame in which public organizations act. The cultural, societal, politico-institutional and administrative 'context' in which public services organizations operate is a remarkably significant feature.

One way of modelling such influences is by considering that context affects 'the strategic space' of a public services organization. Such strategic space is constituted by the autonomy that a public services organization enjoys (a precondition for strategy to form) as well as the political–societal expectations towards a public service organization (what is expected of a public service organization strategy, as a key legitimating dimension), and relatedly the obligations and accountability bases under which the public services organization operates (what public managers as 'strategists' are accountable for, to whom and how).

The proposed PhD project will investigate the forming of strategy in public services organisations and will probe into the ways in which contextual influences shape the strategic space of public services organisations, thus contributing to both the field of public management literature and the discipline of strategic management. Emphasis may be given to the cultural, political or the administrative context, or any combination thereof. Key research questions may include: How does context affect the strategic space of public services organisations? What models of strategic management can be employed to explain the organisational behaviour of public services organisations, and under what contextual conditions? And how can 'context' be framed and interpreted, theoretically?

Pluralism in research methods is welcome, notably where combined in an integrated way (mixed methods), and variety in the institutional settings from which 'cases' of strategic management for investigation are drawn would add to the strength of the proposal.

Readings:

Ferlie, Ewan and Edoardo Ongaro (2015) *Strategic Management of Public Services Organisations: Concepts, Schools and Contemporary Issues*. London: Routledge

Mintzberg, H., B. Ahlstrand and J. Lampel (2009) *Strategy Safari*, 2nd edition, Harlow: FT Prentice Hall.

Pollitt, Christopher (ed.) *Context in Public Policy and Management: The Missing Link?* Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Elgar.

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