

# FUTURES IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

The Emerging Relational Approach  
to Public Services

**Edited by** Rob Wilson,  
Hannah Hesselgreaves, Max French,  
Melissa Hawkins, David Jamieson,  
Martin King and Jonathan Kimmitt

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON  
INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC SECTOR  
MANAGEMENT

**VOLUME 8**

# FUTURES IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

What a fascinating read to anyone in and between the practice and policy of public services, especially in the contexts of health, care and welfare! This thought-provoking edited collection increases much-needed understanding on how relational approach can foster a public management paradigm shift to better address the complex societal challenges of our societies. Importantly, the relational approach provides insights into the complex, dynamic and interconnected systems of practice and policy of public services.

—*Paula Rossi*, Senior Researcher,  
School of Management, University of Vaasa

We are at an inflection point in the future of public services and public service reform. The Emerging Relational Approach to Public Services is required reading for anyone interested in how we may learn from the failures of the New Public Management era to shape a period characterised by innovative relational approaches to designing and delivering public services. Wilson and colleagues' work is at the bleeding edge of such thinking.

—*Michael J. Roy*, Professor of Social Innovation  
and Sustainable Organisations/Associate Dean (Research and Innovation),  
Stirling Management School, University of Stirling, UK

This book presents new international evidence on the relational approach to public services. It offers a refreshing analysis of what it takes to create an alternative basis for public management, both in theory and in practice.

—*Taco Brandsen*, Chair of Public Administration,  
Radboud University

There is a growing consensus that radical change is needed in the purpose, form and function of public policy and governance. The authors suggest that New Public Governance perspectives have generated unintended consequences which have 'solidified NPM in practice, rather than supplanting it'. It brings together international evidence and new perspectives on relational approaches to public management. This book plants the relational 'standard' in both the theoretical and practice field.

—*Peter Murphy*, Director of the Public Policy and  
Management Research Group, Centre for Economics, Policy and  
Public Management, Nottingham Trent University

The time for relational public services is now. This rich and ambitious book provides essential conceptual and practical guidance for public managers, practitioners, and academics to co-create public services in an interconnected world.

—*Dr Koen Bartels, Associate Professor,  
University of Birmingham*

This book is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand how to improve public services in a context of complexity and a growing demand for more relational approaches.

—*Dr Rick Muir, Director of  
the Police Foundation*

This book makes a refreshing and compelling case for the need to move beyond New Public Management and fully embrace a relational approach to public management. It highlights the limitations and shortfall of existing ways of working and proposes an alternative approach, one that privileges relationships above all else, and as key to achieving better, effective and meaningful social outcomes. The book serves as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and academics to engage in a serious collaborative effort to redefine public service delivery underpinned and grounded in relational principles. It will take us all to make this happen and I for one am grateful for the academic expertise so carefully represented here.

—*Kristy Docherty, Director of Public Services and  
Sector Engagement Lead, Co-Director of the Scottish Prevention Hub,  
Edinburgh Futures Institute*

*Futures in Public Management* is a must-read for anyone grappling with the limitations of transactional governance and searching for more effective, human-centred alternatives. It makes a compelling case for relational approaches as a fundamentally different way of thinking about public services, policy, and outcomes. This book brings together critical insights and practical examples that challenge conventional wisdom and offer a way forward for those of us working to reshape public management in service of real, meaningful change. Essential reading for policymakers, practitioners, and anyone invested in the future of public services.

—*Dr Luke Craven, Chief Executive Officer,  
Partnerships for Local Action and  
Community Empowerment (PLACE)*

*Futures in Public Management: The Emerging Relational Approach to Public Services* critically re-evaluates the role of public management in an era where public services are increasingly challenged by complex, interdependent issues. The authors engage in a timely and essential debate on the limitations of the New Public Management paradigm, advocating for a more relational approach that

fosters transformative and effective public service delivery. Drawing on international empirical evidence, the editorial team have integrated contemporary public management theories, including Human Learning Systems and Complexity Theory of Outcome Creation, to offer fresh insights into navigating modern governance challenges. This book is a crucial resource for public management scholars, policymakers and practitioners seeking to advance service innovation, embrace complexity and enhance the impact of public services on citizens' lives.

—*Dr Katri-Liis Lepik*, Associate Professor,  
Tallinn University

# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC SECTOR MANAGEMENT

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC  
SECTOR MANAGEMENT VOLUME 8

**FUTURES IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT:  
THE EMERGING RELATIONAL  
APPROACH TO PUBLIC SERVICES**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To those who help us to be part of healthy, positive and supportive relationships.*

*We thank you*

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*Rob Wilson, Hannah Hesselgreaves, Max French,  
Melissa Hawkins, David Jamieson, Martin King and  
Jonathan Kimmitt*

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# FOREWORD

Writing this foreword is a delight for me because after spending 20 years trying to work ever more relationally in public services as a consultant and local authority director, the people who bring you this collection of insights have been instrumental in helping me understand what relationality is and critically how to learn and iterate more effectively.

In recent years as Director of Public Service Reform at Gateshead Council and the lead for Changing Futures Northumbria, I've been leading the development of the 'Liberated Method'. It's a relational approach to supporting people who are struggling and to supporting public sector leaders/workers that are lost in or hiding from the understanding of complexity and emergence needed to be effective. This work has seen lives turned around from crisis after many years bouncing around the public service ecosystem at huge cost whilst things got worse. It's also seen demand reduce into critical services who can then be liberated to work more preventatively and proactively. Like many other relational approaches that innovators are doggedly developing, this stuff works.

For many years, I couldn't put my finger on why it worked and why public services weren't grabbing this work with both hands. So, I sought help from the good people across the river at my local university who I'd noticed were asking similar questions.

Through this enquiry, I came to know and befriend some of the authors of this book. Rob Wilson and Hannah Hesselgreaves have both, in their contrasting and complementary ways, helped me experience epiphany after epiphany without ever themselves professing to know any of the answers. I was quite prepared to be outthought and overawed by academics blessed with big brains and time to think but I was game to try to keep up and hang on, but I've instead learnt that there is a mutuality, indeed a relationality between practice and academia that can be beautiful. I think this book brings that to life.

Rob's focus on human and system interaction and Hannah's focus on learning as a leadership focus have transformed my thinking, my work and its prospects. They've learnt with me rather than instructed me, and in doing so, we've come to understand more about relationality in public service (and what it is up against).

There are two epiphanies that I think this book foregrounds, the first being the simple and profound truth that if you're not learning alongside somebody then you're not working relationally with them and the second is that a focus upon learning is more productive than a focus upon productivity.

That second one blows my mind. Think of all those transformation programs that are efficiency driven, focusing hard on structure and flow and often illusory

predictability. For anything requiring context and nuance, which is to say anything that matters to anyone, this axiom is a public service reform game changer.

As is this book, which offers breadth and depth in the exploration of relational public service that speaks to both its innate and necessary complexity and its unifying coda, which is that transactions should be subordinate to or contextualized by relationships. This book is important and comes at an important time because the opposite is far more observable in public services, i.e. any relationality is often within the confines of the transaction or standardized process – relationality has been essentially relegated to being largely an issue of style or tone (customer charters are visible examples of this).

There is a growing cautious optimism, in the United Kingdom certainly and as this book shows far beyond, that the game could be up for this line of thinking. Austerity and a focus on efficiency and standardization has created a pattern of growing consumption and failure demand which is unignorable and has been exacerbated by disinvestment in community services and social care. Public services in their current form are running out of road. This book is important as it offers hope of a better alternative through credible practice and evidence.

My sense from this book and my experiences with several of its editors and authors is that the hope goes beyond the method and into the community of practice. Relational practice is weirdly rife, weird because it's intuitive and observable in so many places but remains largely the preserve of the project or prototype. The solidity of the work, the profundity of the learning and the generosity of the sharing make this book a valuable resource for the mission to move from transactional to relationally oriented services.

The editors of this book have understood the importance of the alliance needed to move the dial and have skillfully reflected that in this broad view of relational practice. Their contribution to building this community through such means as the Human Learning Systems collaborative and their Relational Public Service conferences places them well to bring all of these terrific examples together.

My delight in writing this foreword stems from my growing confidence and understanding that anyone can locate and develop their practice in the pages of this book. A caseworker with a sample of one can meaningfully explore their experience of relationality and its role in their successes and frustrations as validly as me, any of the authors and anyone else. The entry requirement is to be human and curious.

This book shows well that relational public service is more effective and that the road to normalising it is paved with complexity and emergence. Yet it also shows that relational working is as old as time and anyone can do it. I'm often asked where to start, and this book only goes to confirm the answer to this: start anywhere and go everywhere.

*Mark Smith,*  
Independent Public Service Consultant and  
Visiting Professor at PERU in Manchester Metropolitan University

# PREFACE

Public services are something that ought to extend far beyond mere administrative efficiency or routine service delivery. Yet this is something that has become overlooked in the rush to modernize, rationalize, streamline and channel shift service provision into predictable and straightforward linear delivery. At the heart of an effective public service lies one fundamental element: the possibility of relationships. Whether it's the interaction between citizens and their local governments, between organizations and their employees, between service providers and the communities they serve or between citizens and communities, the ability to build and maintain positive, trust-based relationships is crucial to progress and meaningful change.

This book seeks to explore the emerging international landscape of relational public service through a range of contexts from Colorado in the United States, the Lombardy region of Italy, to the cities of Manchester and Birmingham in the United Kingdom to British Columbia, Canada. It examines how public service agencies can shift from traditional, transactional models to more relational approaches – where understanding, empathy and collaboration drive decision-making, policy implementation and day-to-day operations. By recognizing the inherent value of relationships in public service, we open the door to more inclusive, responsive and sustainable systems that reflect the needs, voices and aspirations of all stakeholders.

Throughout this book, we explore key concepts and strategies that redefine how public servants and organizations can learn to foster deep, lasting interconnections between service providers and the public. Our chapter authors demonstrate through their work the successes and challenges of relational approaches in various public service sectors, from healthcare, welfare, and education to social services. They also highlight the challenges of sustaining and scaling relationality and the opportunities that this brings in rethinking how we can innovate the ecology and platforms we currently have. These examples serve as a testament and a provocation to cultivate a future of relationship-centred service delivery.

The journey through this book is not just about theory; it's about practical insights that can inspire public servants, policymakers, citizens and even academics to rethink how we engage with one another, with empathy, respect and a shared commitment to our common good.

As we move towards a future where collaboration, inclusion and trust are paramount, the principles outlined here offer inspiration for how public services can evolve to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

We invite you to explore these ideas with an open mind, a spirit of inquiry and a willingness to engage in the kind of relationships that can shape a more equitable, compassionate and responsive public service for all.

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# INTRODUCTION: FUTURES IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: IS THERE AN EMERGING RELATIONAL APPROACH TO PUBLIC SERVICES?

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## ABSTRACT

*This introductory section aims to set the scene for this edited collection by situating the discussion of relational public management within a historical context alongside current discussions in policy and practice. The following assortment of chapters draws from the burgeoning academic and practice literature and draws on the experiences and insights provided by the contributing authors to provide a unique range of perspectives surrounding the emergence of relational thinking in public services. These are loosely collated into three areas: action learning approaches to public service development in practice, new approaches to understanding outcomes and the measures and forms of outcome measurement and academically framed debates that provide potential organizing frameworks as lens for thinking about relationality in public service.*

**Keywords:** Public administration; public management; international public management; relational public services; relational public management; new public management; transactionality; action research; public service innovation; public service reform

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Futures in Public Management

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## INTRODUCTION

Public management is facing a crisis both in terms of its legitimacy and its effectiveness. Social innovations that centre on relationships as both the sought outcome for social cohesion and the means of tackling societies big challenges are giving public management direction about how to change. Public services, funded and designed to achieve valued social outcomes ranging from educational attainment to public health to environmental sustainability, now require movement in delivery, management, policy, and scholarship to sustain the public outcomes that innovations in those services are creating (Bartels et al., 2024; Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024). Creating outcomes that matter to the public is becoming an increasingly complex task in an ever more trying climate. An underlying inertia resulting from the ongoing application of an orthodoxy of a rationalistic and transactional stance to public service reform which proliferated in the New Public Management (NPM) era risks an opportunity to be reformative across all the levers of social change. The gift of desperation felt by some social reformers has started to signal what can be changed *in spite* of necessary and responsive innovations in policy, commissioning, inspection, accountability, leadership and measurement. However, these reforms also demonstrate how public management can be evolved across the public sector and also how relationality can be absorbed into the leadership and management practices of public service. In this book, we bring together new evidence and perspectives from the worlds of relational public practice, data science and academia, with the aim of landing the case for a significant reappraisal of public management and public policy.

NPM offers a case study of how effective it is to develop a confluence of internally consistent public service practice, outcome measurement practices and academic debate in establishing a stronghold for social policy. NPM placed an emphasis on management, markets and measurements being applied to public service management and social interventions on the basis that they should be commissioned, contracted, managed and evaluated. It was believed that adoption of NPM would move public services away from a bureaucratic compliance model with poorly aligned incentives between stakeholders to one which aligned the divergent interests of policymakers, public managers, public servants and citizens thereby releasing the latent energy of innovation and entrepreneurship in the system towards shared goals at a stroke. NPM would use measurement to release information to enable market forces by managing performance, enabling citizen choice, improving competition between providers and driving out inefficiency in service offers. The language of government at all levels – international, national and local – is littered with ‘programmes’ aimed at the ‘modernisation’, ‘transformation’ or ‘improvement’ of services with limited effect on the services and lives of citizens or the social impact themes they purport to change, including reducing inequalities (for example health, pay, gender), economic growth and better institutional accountability.

Governments, philanthropic and non-profit organizations around the world have been increasingly adopting a transactional approach in the design of policy

and the management of public services, the implications of which have been subjected to increasing scrutiny within public administration (Boyne & Law, 2005; Heinrich, 2002; Lowe, 2013; Lowe et al., 2020; Lowe & Wilson, 2017; Wimbush, 2011). Yet wherever such a transactional approach has been applied, be it within performance management, budgeting, commissioning or outcomes, its achievements have fallen short of expectation and need more importantly.

There is a growing consensus that radical change is needed in the purpose, form and function of public administration and governance. This rationalist approach (French et al., 2023) has manifestly failed to deliver on the promises made. Unsurprisingly, after over 40 years of these reforms being in place, there is a significant body of critique from academia and practice perspectives on issues created by marketization and performance management (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Lowe, 2013; Lowe & Wilson, 2017; Pell et al. 2016, 2020; Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002), including problems of measurement and attribution (Bovaird, 2014; Jamieson et al., 2020; Lowe, 2013; Perrin, 2006; Wilson et al., 2011; Wimbush, 2011). Attempts to declare NPM deceased have been made before notably New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006) which attempts to bridge activities into a more collaborative stakeholder space; Public Value which sought to ascribe a wider set of values to organizations interventions and investment (Moore, 1995) and Digital Era Governance (Dunleavy et al., 2006) which emphasizes the use of information to simultaneously create horizontal agility, reduce bureaucratic load (including costs) and afford improvements in control of outsourced elements. These appear to have generated unintended consequences in that they have solidified NPM in practice rather than supplanting it (French et al. 2022, 2023). The persistence of NPM is indeed remarkable and the pervasiveness of its accounting methods have shaped the environment to be self-referential conditioning what can be set out both as policy objectives and their achievement in its own image (Lapsley & Miller, 2024). Such is the power of this conditioning that coherent alternative narrative to neoliberalism which seizes the imagination and binds together the lived experiences of practitioners, citizens and communities and the needs of those working in policy and politics have yet to meaningfully sustain (Clarke & Newman, 2024).

However, we have seen the emergence more recently of programmatic experiments in Public Service Innovation/Social Innovation. At the state level, the emergence of the relational approach to public management has been in development for approximately a decade. The spread of narratives surrounding relational practices are emergent in academia particularly in the United Kingdom and North America (Lamph et al., 2023) in what has been described as a relational 'turn' in public administration (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020) and sustainability science (West et al., 2020). This corresponds with a re-energized narrative of relational public service reform in the UK 'think tank' discourse drawing on innovations in practice to offer a range of future directions for government with many common recommendations of investing in local assets and community and citizen empowerment (Wilson et al., 2024). The initial framing of this discourse emanated from the UK-based policy think tank of the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) in collaboration with Geoff Mulgan, which included the

publication of two reports exploring the ‘relational state’ (Cooke & Muir, 2012; Muir & Parker, 2014). These reports and syntheses generated significant debate at that time about the direction of the state particularly in the strategy and investments required to make the state more ‘relational’. The recommendations emphasized the need to work with communities to improve the relevance and impact of proposed programmes and build capacities of local assets. Since these initial explorations, significant policy trajectories have been proffered, demanding government and public service to be local and community-based rather than distant and centralized (Lent & Studdert, 2019), staffed in the main by generalists rather than specialists (Needham & Mangan, 2014), co-productive and co-creative with stakeholders instead of paternalistic and bureaucratic approaches (Bartels, 2020; Baines et al., 2024), capable of harnessing systems thinking and complexity rather than attempting to simplify matters (Hobbs, 2019; Lowe et al., 2022) and built around human rather than structural and transactional relationships (Cottam, 2018; Heimburg & Ness, 2021).

At the public management level, the relational public service design in the form of participatory design processes, relational leadership, and relational commissioning and contracting, has been necessarily bound not to policy directives from legislative or political work but to the work of public service innovation in practice. It indicates a refreshing shift towards policymaking and public management decisions being inherent in the service work enacted with the public and therefore is innately relational. Relational public service is intrinsically self-governable and accountable by its capacity and capability to be iterative and dynamic (French et al., 2023; Teece et al., 1997). Relational practice demonstrates how public servants adopt stewardship capability (creating permissive environments to stay on purpose and promote informed responsiveness within and across boundaries), coordinative capability (integrating and mobilizing resources for effective systemic responses) and adaptive capability (centring learning as the strategic core of management practice). These capabilities, enacted in public service, offer strong indications about what is required of policymakers, commissioners, regulators, evaluators and other players in the constellation of public sector functioning and, more notably, reform.

In this book, we provide new international evidence for reappraising public management in policy and practice by bringing together perspectives on relational approaches to public management. Building on current research, policy and practice in a range of applied settings and places, we present an alternative basis for enacting public management: that the objectives for and outcomes sought by institutions working with the public in contexts of health, care and welfare are inherently relational phenomena – they are always complex and cross-boundary, always co-produced by the individuals who experience them through interaction with those who are delivering them in relationship with those providing help and support. This is not enough, however, and for this geographically, professionally and disciplinary disparate body of work to come together, we seek to address the following questions for a burgeoning area of relational public service management:

- How do we now understand the potential trajectories, risks and opportunities in taking relational approaches?
- How can we address the new governance and management requirements of organizations and practice of relational public services?
- What requirements does relational management and public service reform have of new roles and responsibilities for stakeholders?
- What development and capacity building resources, including leadership, organizations and infrastructures, do we need to create to support relational management approaches?
- What is the new agenda for education, research and practice in the coming years?

We do this by considering the building the evidence for relationality across three domains, the intersections of which offer opportunities for an alternative public management paradigm: action learning approaches to public service development in practice; new approaches to understanding outcomes and the measures and forms of outcomes measurement; and three scholarly debates that provide organizing frameworks for viewing relationality in public service.

Action learning provides a framing for Section 1 (the first four chapters). Nease et al. outline learning from a community health initiative in Colorado and highlight the collective identity-forming quality of community-based participatory learning programmes of research whilst also highlighting the effort and labour necessary to establish and sustain relational work. This meaningful work is inherently problematic and unsustainable without those capabilities to build public management practice into the solutions McCabe & McCabe experience in Chapter 2. The McCabe's drive this home impactfully with a reflective account of how important relational working is in building place-based practice and identities, but how precarious these effortful outcomes become when investment is scarce. Sheer charisma, determination, altruism and passion are exemplary yet still unsustainable without corresponding methodological, political and policy shifts. In Chapter 3, Ormston and Macauley use social identity theory to map the ways in which Human Learning Systems (HLS) (an explicitly relational approach to public management) has helped foster a shared, common sense of identity and purpose in the context of a multi-agency leadership training programme. In Chapters 4 and 5, Middlekoop and Horseenlenberg and James et al. apply intentionally designed methods of professional dialogue to strengthening agency among public servants in the Netherlands and leadership development initiatives in Greater Manchester, respectively. All three of these chapters illustrate how highly specified initiatives for the design of work and development of public service capability can enable public service reform efforts and the experiences of those enacting them building capacity and confidence in those working in the sector.

The second section of this book is dedicated to new approaches to data, information, and measurement (Cornford et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2024). Public services are funded and designed to achieve valued outcomes from educational

attainment to public health to environmental sustainability. Outcome measurement has a history spanning more than 200 years, but only in comparatively recent history did these high-level goals – as aspirations, indicators of progress or performance targets – influence the operational delivery of public services. Alongside the NPM reforms, a raft of outcome-oriented performance systems, contracting relationships and investment vehicles have sought better outcomes through a transactional and rationalistic approach of disaggregation, incentivization and commodification. The hypothesized benefits of these reforms find little support in the empirical record, with real risks of perverse incentives, bureaucracy and diminished capabilities in public sector organizations. So, what role should high-level goals like outcomes play in a relational service context?

It is increasingly understood that performance targets always create perverse incentives in public services. Using outcomes as targets amplifies this problem because they lie beyond the ability of any individual agent to bring about independently or predictably. Those subject to performance management regimes, therefore, face a significant incentive to take shortcuts – by skewing, withholding and distorting data to make services accountable without corrupting the measurement and attribution processes on which they rely.

Relational alternatives to outcomes and outcome creation have been described by [French et al. \(2023\)](#), who consider the causes of social outcomes complex in their factorial variety and connectedness (compositional complexity), how variously those factors are experienced and manifest in lives (experiential complexity), the changing of these over time (dynamic complexity) and the deep and broad work involved across resources to tailor solutions to real world problems (governance complexity). This infinite variation renders rationalist approaches to understanding social outcomes inadequate at best and destructive at worst: undermining innovation by misusing data to set targets, incentivising the gaming of data to attempt demonstrable ‘meeting’ of targets and the skewing and tunnelling of real world understanding that results.

Key to a relational approach to public management are issues of the production, interpretation and consumption of data for the purposes of service design, management and governance. Since how we measure outcomes and use those data directly influences important decisions about what’s on offer to the public, [French et al. \(2023\)](#) propose a Complexity Theory of Outcome Creation (CTOC), outlining the dynamic capabilities as enabling features of complex public service environments. Emergent outcomes are thus co-created products of relationships as complex systems. Considering outcomes in these ways, as an alternative to the product of a service, is a long-standing endeavour from a sociological perspective and has made its way into complexity sciences and population health circles as ‘Complex Adaptive Systems’. However, empiricism lags in determining how measures and processes of measuring authentically reflect the messy nature of reality.

From the practice world, shining examples such as Buurtzorg ([Monsen & De Blok, 2013](#)), Outcomes Star ([Mackeith, 2014, 2024](#)) and Poverty Stoplight ([Burt & Sanabria, 2019](#)) have begun to show that tools built on a range of alternative relational perspectives are both possible and effective in addressing the question

of what would a relational approach might look and feel like for managers, practitioners and citizens which seeks to engage with the diversity of people and places as opposed to the current framing of one size fits all or what works. Taking these ideas beyond the service contexts and seeking to address issues at the systemic, institutional and leadership levels are also crucial and work is emerging in these areas such as the HLS movement (French et al., 2023; Lowe et al., 2021) or from the local collaboration perspective ‘bespoke by default’ standpoint exemplified in the example of the ‘Liberated Method’ approach (Smith et al., 2025).

There is a perspective, still in its infancy, that considers a relational approach to the use of data and information with and by stakeholders as a key to more co-productive interpretative measurement processes such as learning. Questions also remain about the design or public service information and data systems, ownership of platforms and the implications this has for collaboration in policy and practice. This section’s chapters address the emergence of new approaches to the production and interpretation of data and how these can be captured through alternative approaches to leadership, learning, performance management or evaluation. In Chapter 6, MacKeith shows how the outcomes produced by the efforts of action learning discussed in the first section can be harnessed with Outcomes Star, a holistic tool which seeks to reflect the complexity, humanity and emergence of what’s meaningful in one’s whole life as an interconnected system. Outcomes Star has built a strong reputation as an instrument for relational working in public service and the chapter tells the fascinating history of how this came to fruition.

But what of the swathes of traditionally captured, transactional and administrative data captured over decades by statutory bodies to ‘demonstrate outcomes’? Montaletti, in Chapter 7, offers an innovative method for seeking hidden relational patterns in these data, using statistical-qualitative methodologies in labour market activation programmes in Italy. The resultant network diagrams show evolutions in relationships and act as graphical artefacts for use in discussions to co-produce new insights about employment programmes. Similarly, Charlton reports on a deep and longitudinal analysis of transactional citizen interactions with services in Chapter 8. These citizens have multiple and complex needs so their engagement with public services is extensive, prolonged, and detailed. However, the representation of these life stories has the potential to illustrate individuals’ relationships with services over time, the service failure demand inherent in transactional approaches to complexity and the surprising sources of help.

The linked contributions from Martin followed by Martin and Jacucci adopt a cybernetics perspective in Chapters 9 and 10 to initially conceptualize relationality and then applying a conversation analytical modelling approach to outline the specification of a future information systems environment. They employ Krippendorff’s (2009) systems determination, arguing that social systems require participation in them to be understood: they are not understood from outside its bounds because the conversations in them constitutively determine the nature of them, and our understanding of them. These ideas of participation and engagement in ‘communicative action’ (Habermas, 1984) go some way to explaining the

requirement for relational public service as described in the work in the early chapters to be action-oriented.

These alternative practices of relational work conceived as action learning, and the ways in which data and measurement are understood, signal the diversity required from across sectors to generate public value. For instance, social enterprises hold an increasingly important role in the delivery of public services, particularly in the United Kingdom, and are generally characterized as aiding beneficiaries that have needs which are not being satisfied by a 'market'. Often regarded as a product of the neoliberal ethos of NPM, they are now a consistent feature of public service delivery and service relations.

Key to a relational approach to public services are the role of higher education and research institutions. Traditional roles for academics are in the role of policy expert or evaluator of public management and public services. Relational approaches to public service have increasing demands of a wider range of scholarly schools of thought typically contributory in the social sciences to support social innovation. For example, public management is an applied interdisciplinary area that can scaffold public innovation and draws on a range of perspectives, including sociology, politics, economics, psychology, social policy, public administration, management, information systems and education, and from different practice backgrounds, including from the worlds of design, health and social care, public leadership, social entrepreneurship and the civil service. Furthermore, relationality has contemporary resonance with public administration and opens scholarship out more fully utilize concepts central to policy, management and administrative practice – from co-creation to network governance to citizen participation to collaborative innovation. All recognise and explain how effective public services depend on the quality of relationships amongst the diverse actors involved.

In a wider vanguard of change including the adoption of social innovation approaches such as co-creation, a number of proposed roles to the potential relationships that higher education institutions and academics have to learning (including HLS) are emerging through innovative forms including partnerships with academics and consultants and the provision of services for research (Hesselgreaves et al., 2021). Part of this mix is the concept of engaged scholarship and academic informed practice, which seeks to build boundary spanning activity for an ongoing process of applied research and knowledge production for new models and approaches to change to occur (see for instance Lowe et al., 2021; Bartels, 2020; Smith et al., 2025). Section 3 explores the forms of scholarship that enable and sustain learning in public management and social innovation more broadly, from the fields of social pedagogy, ecosystem development, and design thinking.

Charfe surfaces the lurking issue of power when working relationally as a leader through the lens of social pedagogy in Chapter 11. She appraises HLS through the lens of Social Pedagogy as an approach that allows power to be explored given its central tenet of human freedom and flourishing and adopt HLS to consider how power is a relational element manifest in working reflexively across professional, personal and private selves. Charfe concludes that open and