Leadership in Public Sector Management: Perceptions of International Residents in Lublin, Poland

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Abstract: This study examines leadership practices in public sector management through the lens of international residents in Lublin, Poland, combining theoretical insights from public administration literature with empirical survey data. The research addresses a significant gap in understanding how leadership styles, particularly transformational and transactional approaches, impact service quality and user satisfaction for non-native populations in Eastern Europe. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, beginning with a review of leadership theories to establish a conceptual framework. It then analyses survey responses from 113 international students in Lublin, assessing their experiences with public services across 12 indicators, including transparency, communication, accessibility, and facility quality. Key findings reveal a disparity between institutional objectives and user perceptions. While digital payment systems and physical infrastructure were rated positively (mean scores of 3.60 and 3.35, respectively), language barriers and unclear processes were major pain points (25% rated communication as "very poor"). The results highlight the limitations of rigid bureaucratic systems in accommodating diverse populations and underscore the need for adaptive, emotionally intelligent leadership.

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1. Introduction

Leadership in public sector organisations is a complex and evolving phenomenon, shaped by bureaucratic structures, political dynamics, and societal expectations (Van Wart, 2013). Unlike the private sector, where leadership often focuses on profit-driven outcomes, public sector leadership must strike a balance between efficiency, equity, and accountability (Rainey, 2014). The role of leaders in public institutions, particularly in local governments, remains ambiguous, as they navigate rigid hierarchies while striving to foster innovation and responsiveness (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). This study examines these challenges through the lens of international residents in Lublin, Poland, where public sector leadership plays a crucial role in delivering services to a growing multicultural population.

Leadership in the public organisation sector has been a major point of interest regarding research (Van Wart, 2013). Interest in training leaders first emerged in the 1960s through the 1980s, with an exploration of differences between the public and private sectors, as well as roles in innovation (Rainey, 2014). By the 1990s, interest had shifted to relations between leadership, complexity, and values in public service (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The fundamental concept of leadership in administration remains rooted in the extent to which actors have autonomy for decision-making, albeit with some notable developments over time (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). It was generally accepted, by the late 19th century and up to World War II, that technical decisions were in the hands of administrative officials, whereas political issues were approached separately (Wilson, 1887). Over time, political and administrative matters began to merge into one (Wilson, 1887). Post-war years until the 1980s This period positioned administrative responsibility recognition as an inhibitor of the free latitude of decision-making (Rainey, 2014). There has been some state reform in the 1990s. changes in costs, structural functions, and accountability mechanisms take place for the first time, signposting a move toward

more transformational approaches with greater freedom in decision-making (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The challenge, of course, remains: how to reconcile the interests of users, the common good, and administrative efficiency with democratic ideals without returning to a monolithic approach and, on the contrary, welcoming leadership diversities in style based on context (Van Wart, 2013).

The debate over leadership in public organisations has shifted from trait-based theories to more dynamic models, such as transformational and transactional leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leadership, which emphasises vision, inspiration, and emotional engagement, is often contrasted with transactional approaches that rely on structured rewards and penalties (Northouse, 2018). However, the practical application of these theories in public institutions remains inconsistent, particularly in environments with high bureaucratic constraints (Van Wart, 2013). The New Public Management (NPM) movement aimed to address these inefficiencies by introducing private-sector practices; however, critics argue that its overemphasis on performance metrics can undermine ethical governance and equity (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

Despite extensive theoretical discourse, empirical research on public sector leadership, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, remains limited. This study fills a critical gap by examining how leadership practices influence the experiences of international residents in Lublin, a city with a rising population of foreign students and migrants.

The study's objectives are threefold: (1) to analyse the evolution of leadership theories in public administration, (2) to assess the institutional constraints faced by public sector leaders in Lublin, and (3) to evaluate international residents' perceptions of service quality. This study addresses a significant empirical gap by examining public sector leadership from the perspective of a specific, underserved demographic, international residents in Lublin, a Central and Eastern European urban centre, Poland. It also reveals a critical and often overlooked dichotomy: that technological modernisation can advance independently of, and potentially at the expense of, the human-centric and intercultural leadership competencies essential for serving diverse populations. By bridging theory and practice, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on public sector leadership, offering policymakers actionable insights. The findings show the importance of emotional intelligence, multilingual support, and digital innovation in enhancing service delivery for diverse populations.

2. Materials and methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine leadership practices in public sector organisations and their impact on service delivery for international residents in Lublin, Poland. The methodology combined a comprehensive literature review with empirical data collection through surveys, allowing for both theoretical grounding and practical insights.

The research was conducted in two phases. First, a systematic literature review was performed to analyse the evolution of leadership theories in public administration, focusing on key concepts such as transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994), New Public Management (Hood, 1991), and the distinctions between public and private sector leadership (Rainey, 2014). This theoretical foundation informed the development of the survey instrument and provided context for interpreting the empirical findings.

For the empirical component, a survey was administered to 113 international students at the University of Economics and Innovation in Lublin. Participants were selected through convenience sampling from various academic programs, including Nursing, Management, and Computer Science. The survey utilised a Likert-scale questionnaire with 12 indicators measuring different aspects of public service quality.

The survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean, mode, and standard deviation) to identify patterns in service quality perceptions. This quantitative approach was supplemented with qualitative observations from open-ended feedback provided by some participants. The combination of methods enabled a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by international users of public services in Lublin.

3. Results and discussion

The survey of 113 international students in Lublin yielded significant findings about their experiences with public sector services. Descriptive statistics revealed both strengths and weaknesses in service delivery, as summarised in Table 1. The data shows several important patterns and disparities in service delivery. Most indicators cluster around the midpoint (Mean scores 3.00-3.60), suggesting generally average but unexceptional performance, with significant room for improvement across all measured dimensions. The consistently moderate standard deviations (0.81-1.06) indicate relatively uniform experiences among respondents, although the presence of both high and low extreme ratings in all categories suggests occasional service failures or exceptional cases. The patterns suggest that while Lublin's public sector has made strides in digital infrastructure (payment systems) and physical facilities, substantial gaps remain in human-centred aspects of service delivery. The particularly poor performance in communication and leadership accessibility highlights critical areas for intervention. These findings support the need for leadership development programs that

emphasise multicultural competence, crisis responsiveness, and clear communication strategies to serve international populations better (Lu et al., 2022). The results also suggest that New Public Management reforms may have overemphasised technical solutions at the expense of interpersonal service quality, calling for a more balanced approach to public sector modernisation (Haynes, 2015).

Table 1: Summary of Survey Results (N=113)

Indicator	Mean Score	Mode	SD	Highest Rating (%)	Lowest Rating (%)
Initial Information	3.36	3	0.81	7.92 (Excellent)	8.91 (Very Poor/Extremely Poor)
Process Instructions	3.14	3	0.92	3.74 (Excellent)	15.89 (Very Poor)
Time Efficiency	3.13	3	0.91	5.61 (Excellent)	5.61 (Extremely Poor)
Navigation	3.24	3	0.96	6.73 (Excellent)	6.73 (Extremely Poor)
Transparency	3.42	3	0.97	13.21 (Excellent)	15.09 (Very Poor)
Leadership Access	3.23	3	0.99	8.41 (Excellent)	19.63 (Very Poor)
Payment Methods	3.60	3	1.06	23.76 (Excellent)	13.86 (Very Poor/Extremely Poor)
Information Access	3.33	3	1.04	14.15 (Excellent)	4.72 (Extremely Poor)
Employee Behavior	3.23	3	0.95	7.55 (Excellent)	19.81 (Very Poor/Extremely Poor)
Communication	3.00	3	0.99	5.77 (Excellent)	30.77 (Very Poor/Extremely Poor)
Facilities	3.35	3	1.04	16.50 (Excellent)	19.42 (Very Poor/Extremely Poor)
Overall Management	3.19	3	0.98	10.58 (Excellent)	17.31 (Very Poor/Extremely Poor)

This shows that the payment systems received the highest satisfaction (Mean=3.60), with 23.76% rating them as excellent, reflecting successful digital transformation in this area (Figure 1).
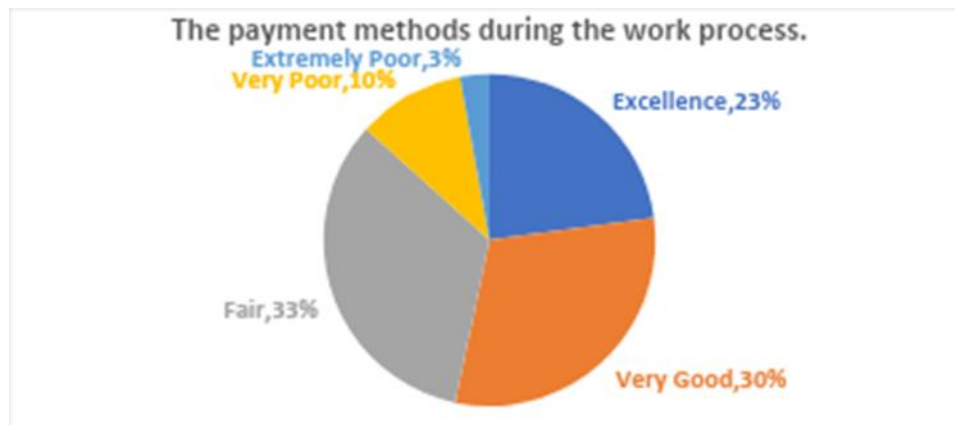

Figure 1: Payment methods during the working process

While electronic payment systems scored well, the poor ratings for human communication (Mean=3.00) suggest an over-reliance on digital solutions without adequate human support. This aligns with critiques of New Public Management's emphasis on efficiency over relational aspects (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The findings support Van Wart's (2013) argument that integrated leadership must balance technological and human dimensions. The severe communication challenges (30.77% negative ratings) expose systemic exclusion of non-Polish speakers. This contradicts the principles of equitable service delivery in public administration (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

The poor accessibility of leaders during emergencies (19.63% very poor ratings) reveals a breakdown in transformational leadership's promised responsiveness (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This is particularly concerning given Lublin's growing international population (Council of Europe, 2020).

The standard deviations (0.81-1.06) across all indicators suggest inconsistent service experiences, supporting Rainey's (2014) observation about variability in public sector performance. Table 2 compares the findings of this study with previous studies. The comparison reveals a paradoxical situation where technological capabilities are improving even as human-centred service aspects decline. This divergence suggests that public sector modernisation may have overemphasised technical solutions at the expense of leadership development and intercultural competence (Goldfinch, 2023). The findings support arguments for more balanced reform approaches that couple digital innovation with strengthened leadership capacity and multicultural service strategies (Santarsiero et al., 2024).

The significant decline in leadership accessibility, combined with the challenges in multicultural transparency, highlights an urgent need for leadership development programs that focus on intercultural communication, crisis responsiveness,

and adaptive management (Scott & Bender, 2025). Meanwhile, the success in digital services provides a model for targeted improvements when adequate resources and focus are applied (Wulf et al., 2017).

Table 2: Comparison with Previous Research

Aspect	Current Study	Previous Findings (Rainey, 2014)	Implications
Process Transparency	3.42	3.51	Slightly worse in multicultural context
Leadership Access	3.23	3.68	Significant accessibility decline
Digital Services	3.60	3.45	Improvement in technical systems

While facilities and digital systems scored relatively well, interpersonal aspects lagged behind. This validates Fernandez et al.'s (2010) warning about the limitations of technical solutions without corresponding leadership development.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that public sector leadership has evolved into a distinct domain; however, scholarly discourse continues to lag behind the robust literature on leadership in other fields. Despite the proliferation of leadership models, many proposed frameworks exhibit only marginal differences, reflecting a broader challenge in public administration theory that moves beyond conceptual debates to actionable insights.

While numerous leadership development initiatives have been launched globally, their impact has often been limited by a failure to account for the organisational realities in which public managers operate. Leadership training programs often overlook contextual factors, such as bureaucratic constraints, political influences, and diverse stakeholder needs, leading to a disconnect between theory and practice. This highlights the urgent need for research that identifies specific variables enabling or hindering leadership capacity within public sector settings. Longitudinal studies are particularly scarce, leaving a critical gap in understanding how leadership behaviours and styles evolve in response to changing societal demands.

Emerging research on emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and human-centred approaches offers promising directions, yet empirical evidence remains underdeveloped. The growing recognition that public sector employees are not merely resources but individuals with emotional and cognitive needs calls for leadership models that prioritise empathy, inclusivity, and mission-driven governance. However, without stronger empirical validation, these frameworks risk remaining theoretical rather than transformative.

This study confirms that public sector leadership is carving out its own identity, yet remains fragmented, with an excessive focus on definitional debates rather than practical applications. Future research must prioritise comparative and longitudinal analyses to capture the dynamic nature of leadership in complex governance systems.

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