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**AN EXPLORATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES INNOVATION  
READINESS WITHIN THE EMIRATE OF SHARJAH**

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**AN EXPLORATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES INNOVATION READINESS WITHIN  
THE EMIRATE OF SHARJAH**

This study sets out the basis of a study, which proposes examining the notion of ‘innovation readiness’ within the context of public services organizations in the *Emirate* of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The study will be undertaken in the form of a fine-grained exploratory case study, the unit of analysis being a unit of the Sharjah public services; namely, Sharjah Municipality. Data will be obtained from a combination of multiple exploratory interviews and a questionnaire survey of key stakeholders involved in managing innovation readiness initiatives within these service units. Analysis of data will via NVivo and IBM SPSS software packages. Findings from are likely to suggest the need for *proactive* consideration of national innovation priorities in the United Arab Emirates noting dual tensions being experienced by public service providers seeking on one hand to deliver on their traditional mandate and on the other hand seeking to deliver on what may appear as a multiplicity of national priorities.

**WORD COUNT: 1993**

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Formed between 1971 and 1972 (Zahlan, 2016), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a relatively young country. As part of its national development strategy, it has enacted a number of vision statements of which the latest, 'Vision 2021' focuses on developing an expanded knowledge-based economy (Al Khouri, 2012). One of the mechanisms identified as being critical to Vision 2021 is for the country to focus on service innovation. For example, part of the country's National Innovation Strategy is an obligation that government departments emphasise innovation at every level of their operations and service delivery (Abou Hana, 2017). While the desire for such innovation is much welcomed and replicated in developed countries such as the United Kingdom (Osborne and Brown, 2011), the reality is that innovation in the public sector is fraught with difficulties. Borins (2001) notes for example a number of challenges of innovation in the public sector including incentives asymmetry.

## 2.0 THE PROBLEM

The public sector serves as a country's administrative institutions. In particular, they offer citizens and residents a range of services on behalf of the government (de Souza Bermejo *et al.*, 2014). Public services add value to the life of citizens.

Knowledge is vital for public services in order to support their delivery in a manner and form which adds value to the daily life of citizens (Rashman *et al.*, 2009). Innovation can act as a tool to improve the quality of public services (Abou Hana, 2017), especially for nations facing rapid social changes such a rapid economic and population growth. In countries such as the UAE which are experiencing rapid economic growth and development, the delivery of public services can face additional challenges from a citizenry which is more aware and expects to be in receipt of services that are aligned to their ever changing needs.

While there is large body of literature on service innovation within both the private and public sector (see for example, Potts and Kastle, 2010; Etlie and Rosenthal, 2011; De Vries *et al.* 2016; Demircioglu and Audretsch, 2017), the main premise of this study is that beyond a small number of studies such as Al-Khouri (2012) and Abou Hana (2017), there is a paucity of such research (in both private and public services innovation) set within the UAE. Most notably, not only is there very limited research on service innovation among public sector organizations in the UAE, but it will appear from a cursory review of available literature, that there is almost no such literature available on not only public sector organizations, but also service innovation within the constituent *emirates* of the UAE. Thus, the main problem with service innovation as this study sees it is that public service organisations within the Emirate of Sharjah may be unprepared to deal with the complex, interconnected and overlapping practices between service innovation and knowledge management practices in the absence of being in possession of specific mechanisms (managerial actions) required to enact service innovation readiness.

There is interest to understand how the public sector can avoid failure and address potential resistance to change in the form of innovation in services. However, literature provides only limited guidance on how to manage the challenging process of innovation in service delivery (Osborne and Brown, 2011). On the other hand, public service innovation faces the challenge of being in a number of instances being defined in very broad terms. This arguably creates difficulties for those seeking to gain a precise appreciation and understanding of its key attributes. Finally, challenges in terms of knowledge management emanate from the suggestion that the public sector has only recently begun to recognize its importance, but there is little empirical evidence to connect the relationship between knowledge management and innovation (Chen *et al.*, 2010). Thus, it is debatable whether there is a clear understanding in the literature, and indeed in practice, of the complex interplay between the various organizational (public sector) factors that relate to knowledge management. The emerging

picture from the literature suggests that the public sector may be unprepared to deal with the complex, interconnected and overlapping practices between service innovation and knowledge management practices.

## **2.0 THE THEORIES**

While knowledge management is influenced by different innovation components, this study opines that there appears to be very little empirical evidence articulating the relationship between them that is set within the UAE in general and the Emirate of Sharjah in particular. In effect the nature of these relationships if they exist has been ignored in previous studies (Chen *et al.*, 2010). At this development stage, the study anticipates drawing on two theories, (i) Institutional Theory (Zucker, 1987) and New Public Management (Hood, 1995; Andrews *et al.*, 2013).

## **3.0 THE PROPOSED RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

As part of this study, a framework for service innovation is to be proposed for public services organizations (localized to the Emirate of Sharjah) that adequately addresses (i) what the nature of service innovation readiness and knowledge is; (ii) what mechanisms are required to enact such service innovation readiness and how these mechanisms can be operationalized, and (iii) what mechanisms are required to operationalize the interplay between the attributes of service innovation and the organizational factors that encompass knowledge management. This generates three research questions.

- *Research question 1:* What is the nature of service innovation readiness and knowledge required by public services organizations in the Emirate of Sharjah to fulfil service delivery mandate?
- *Research Question 2:* What are the mechanisms required to enact such service innovation readiness and how can these mechanisms be operationalized?
- *Research Question 3:* What are the mechanisms needed to operationalize the interplay between the attributes of service innovation and the organizational factors that encompass knowledge management?

## **4.0 THE LITERATURE**

### *4.1 Innovation readiness*

Readiness has been defined in the literature as “...*the cognitive precursor to the behaviours of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort*” (Armenakis *et al.* 1993, p.682). Conversely, military readiness has been defined as “*the ability to provide and integrate capabilities required by combatant commanders to execute their assigned missions*” (United States Department of Defense 2011, p. 20). Based on these two sets of literature, in this study, innovation readiness will be construed as the process of ensuring that all organisational employees (human resources), and support structures and mechanisms are ready for immediate deployment and implementation of innovation. In this regard, innovation readiness implies comprehensive organisational testing, calibration, and proving that all its facets are innovation ready at any given time.

### *4.2 Public services*

A public service can be considered as a facility that is integrated into people’s lives, or a set of facilities that are provided to civilians directly through a civic sector body, which should be recognized as a service-based organization in terms of policy (Radnor and Bateman, 2016). Education, healthcare, social work, economics, commercial care services and municipal development among many others are all intangible elements of public services derived from

processes within the service organizations which are in place to achieve a society's vision and goals (Osborne et al., 2012).

#### *4.3 Public services organizations*

Public services organizations are a group of a country's administrative institutions that offer services on the behalf of the government to supervise and control the society's citizens activities (de Souza Bermejo et al., 2014). Generally, they are dependent on financial allocations from the government for their funding, and controlled by ministers or/and government departmental managers (Ali and Green, 2007). This group of institutions includes sub-sectors of local government units, such as "registration boards, regulatory bodies of different types and statutory authorities" (Campbell et al., 2010, p. 7).

Public organizations are vital to national competitiveness in generating essential settings and infrastructure for private sector efficiency at national, regional and local levels (Hartley et al., 2008). They are open to external situations and challenges and have clear legislatively grounded avenues in which they hold open public meetings on legislative concerns (Ring and Perry, 1985). Consequently, public organizations create formal procedures to control the activities of public officials (Whorton and Worthley, 1981). Moreover, public service organizations operate within a complex stakeholder environment (Radnor and Bateman, 2016). Warwick (1975) argued that the public organizations are usually formed by a higher and controlling body which afford multiple benefits, so the organization would depend on such a body to define its objectives and facilitate its resources. For example, the State Department Officials were observed to have a diversity of higher authorities, monitors and controllers from the external environment; thus it has formal actions for generating decisions (Boyne, 2002). Public organizations are mostly monitored by political powers and systems (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953). This is due to the fact that the public services are diverse, because they function in a multi-faceted policy and political setting, under the formal supervision of politicians, and are subject to high levels of inspection and responsibility (Rashman et al., 2009). The public services aim to generate civic value and to influence citizens, as well as to harmonize challenging stakeholder interests (Moore, 2005). Also, they are usually categorized by specialized groups and communities that extend the organizations' boundaries, so they need to generate specific contexts and forms, networks and partnerships, in order to increase and solidify the collaborations and arrangements (Knight and Pye, 2005). Public service organizations are easily inspired, shaped and affected by external events, so they need to ensure that services are applicable to public needs (Boyne, 2002).

Public services organizations play a key role in leading and supporting local communities and handling complex interrelationships between the national realm, the marketplace and civil society (Benington, 2000). Public services organizations focus on roles and guidelines in order for their individuals to complete the tasks required to deliver services, in parallel with improving the quality within the delivery and responding to residents' and citizens' desires (Box, 1999). The basic roles of the public services organizations are to maintain cost efficiency, productivity and quality in service delivery (Sotirakou and Zeppou, 2004). Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) asserted that individuals within public service organizations need to highlight the empowerment of citizens, the public and residents of all concerned. In doing so, they generate open communication networks to create confidence and relationships in order to formulate shared values and move forward towards a communal sense of public interests. Public service organizations face the challenge of enhancing the commitment of permanent value of efficiency and productivity, although they do retain the core commitment to democratic citizenship and public interests (Ingraham et al., 2000). Therefore, public services organizations introduced different programs to increase productivity and service quality based on specific techniques, such as total quality management (TQM),

benchmarking, and strategic management among others (Holloway et al., 1999). Moreover, these organizations are concerned about achieving high-quality outcomes depending on the defined mission and strategy via procedures; yet they rely on the human capital thoughts and behaviors as a valuable asset to achieve what public wants (Maddock, 2002). Specifically, public services such as health (Fillingham, 2008), federal and central governments (Radnor and Bucci, 2010) and local government (Seddon and Brand, 2008) have responded by applying business process enhancement practices.

### 5.0 THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The proposed study as reported in this development paper articulates the outline of a doctoral study which is currently ongoing. While the research methodology has not been finalized, the authors anticipate adopting a mixed-method study. Figure 1 below is a diagrammatic representation of the anticipated research approach.

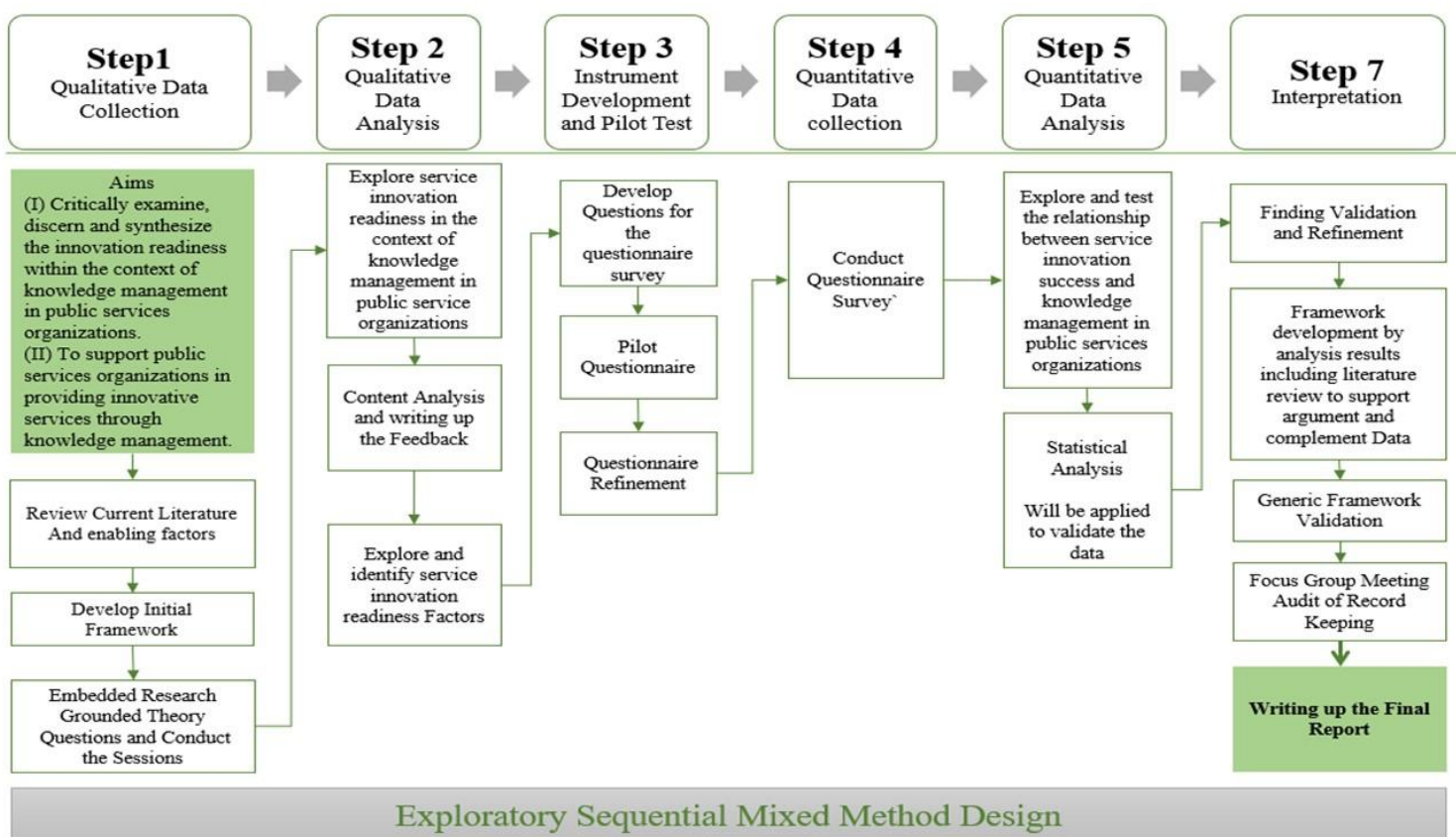


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the anticipated research approach

### 6.0 CONCLUSIONS

This research will have major implications for not only service innovation theory and practice, but also for Public Sector theory. It is expected that the findings may suggest the need for managers to simultaneously consider cross-implications of these two concepts. Particularly interesting will be the possible context of the multiplicity of not only stakeholder interest but also customer interest in public service innovation within the Emirate of Sharjah. The originality of the research will come from its service as an original account of the factors driving public services innovation readiness within the Emirate of Sharjah, an area that to date has not attracted academic attention.

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