

## Why the MPA theoretical frameworks are invaluable for complex problem solving

How helpful is the Master of Public Administration (MPA) programme for those aspiring to be practitioners? During a recent consulting engagement, I was reminded of how valuable theories can be for understanding complex questions. Using the cost/benefit analysis framework taught in the **EC455 Quantitative Approaches and Policy Analysis course**, I was able to quantify the benefits from potentially improved HR management in the Government of Alberta (GOA), Canada. This example shows how analytical skills and theoretical approaches can complement, or be as valuable as expert knowledge.

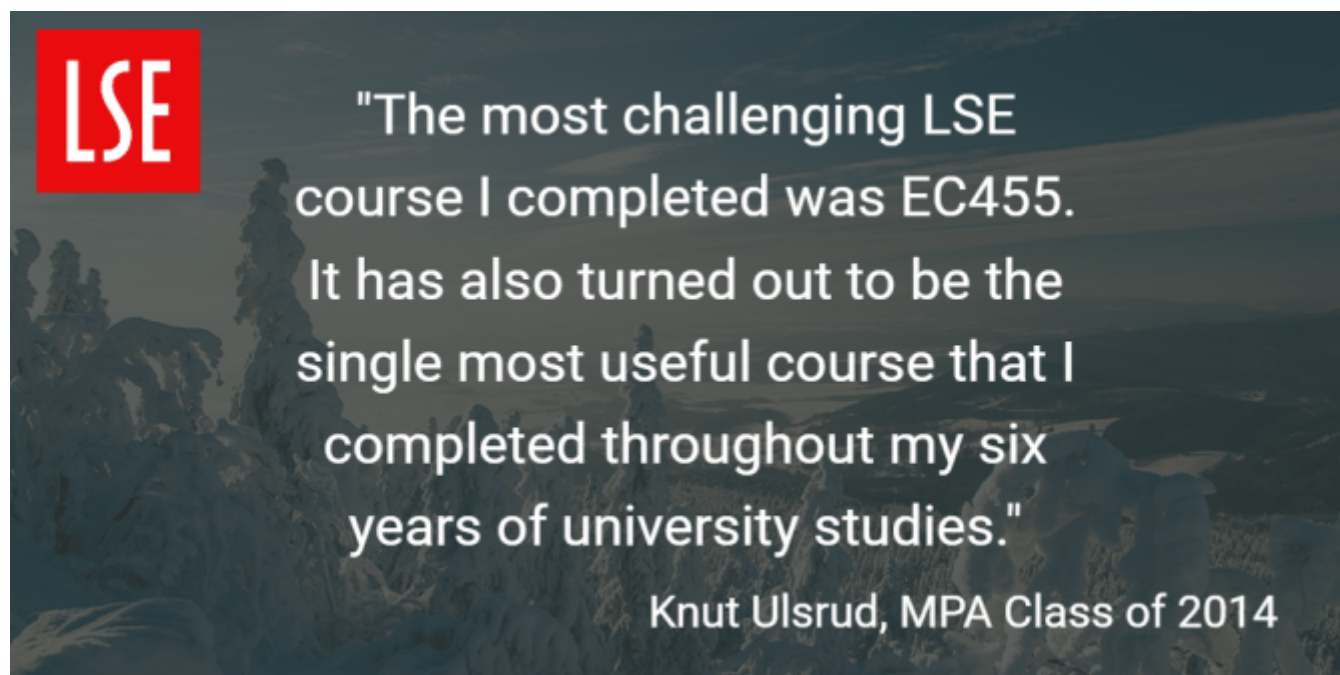
Consider the following question:

Should the GOA implement a new Talent Management Framework, or not?

Firstly, think of what such a framework could potentially improve. In this case, it would be HR outcomes such as recruitment and succession for the government. A natural place to continue could be with the relevant subject matter areas. The framework's success would depend on two relevant aspects:

1. It depends on the functionality of the new IT system that would come with the implementation.
2. It also depends on how the framework would influence HR mechanisms and processes.

Therefore, it makes intuitive sense that someone analyzing the above question would benefit from being an expert in HR and IT systems. However, another option is to think in terms of overall costs and benefits and to identify these in all the relevant framework areas. This allows for more structured problem solving, which is less restricted by the need for expert knowledge.



This is where my MPA becomes relevant. One of the most challenging courses I completed during my two years at LSE was **EC455 Quantitative Approaches and Policy Analysis**. It has also turned out to be the single most useful course that I completed throughout my six years of university studies. On this engagement, I first drew on insights from EC455 during the shortlist presentation, when we had to convince the GOA that we were the most qualified bidder. I focused on **how** we

would apply quantitative cost/benefit methodology, using phrases I had learned from the course such as “revealed and stated preferences” and “future discounting”. While my wording may not have been pivotal for our win (EC455 also teaches the **difference** between correlation and causality), we were in fact later told that the GOA picked us because we had convincingly described our analytical approach to quantifying benefits.

#### Our course of action:

By two weeks later, we had interviewed 38 senior government employees about what types of benefits they anticipated from a new Talent Management Framework. We had also collected available quantitative data. Finally, faced with a trove of qualitative information and key quantitative data, such as compensation costs and the number of GOA employees, I had applied the cost/benefit analysis methodology from EC455 Lecture 5, Lent Term 2013 in order to quantify the tangible and intangible benefits from the proposed framework. The final cost/benefit analysis spreadsheet had more formulas than I would like to count, with over thirty assumptions, thirteen tabs, and two final scenarios. My team presented our results and the logic and rationale behind them to government executives during two ninety-minute sessions. In short, the client was very happy with our work. The best compliment we received was that we “took nothing and created something.”

Would I have approached this question in a similar way if I had not studied EC455? A final relevant concept from the course is the counterfactual, or “what if” scenario. While it is always difficult to imagine or prove hypothetical scenarios, I can very safely say that I would not have been able to complete this engagement without EC455. This stems from knowing the course’s concepts, and the fact that I actually received help from **Dr Greg Fischer** (who teaches the course) during the engagement. After I sent an e-mail with questions relating to the cost/benefit analysis, he responded as quickly as the next day. While knowledge in IT, HR and Public Management helped to inform our analysis it was the MPA’s theory-based analytical tools that won the day.



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