



Popat, S. (2025) ‘Strengthening Public Management through International Collaboration: The Ghana City Managers Community of Practice’, *Education in Practice*.

First published online on 3 November 2025

ISSN 2057-2069

<https://education-in-practice.co.uk/popat-s-2025-ghana/>

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Strengthening Public Management through International Collaboration: The Ghana City Managers Community of Practice

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Abstract

In my article, '[Reflections on Short CPD Training and Long-Term Mentoring Communities of Practice for Public Managers](#)' I argued on the need for a combination of Continuous Professional Development activities (CPD) and Communities of Practice (CoP). This case study examines the development of a transnational CoP focused on public management and governance. A pivotal event in this development was the CPD that took place at the University of Birmingham in March 2025, involving Ghanaian public managers and academics. The initiative, supported by the UK's International Science Partnerships Fund (ISPF), aimed to foster collaborative learning, capacity building, and the co-production of knowledge between Ghanaian and UK institutions. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of CoPs (Wenger, 1998) and collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2007), the visit brought together senior officials from Ghana's local government sector and academic leaders from the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), alongside UK-based scholars and practitioners. The programme included plenary sessions, institutional visits, and strategic dialogues designed to integrate academic theory with practical governance experience. These engagements facilitated mutual learning and the co-design of training materials tailored to the Ghanaian context. The case study analyses the visit's objectives, activities, and outcomes, drawing on qualitative evidence to assess its impact on institutional collaboration, policy development, and professional practice. It also considers the implications for future research and international partnerships in public administration. The findings underscore the value of CoPs as mechanisms for transnational knowledge exchange and highlight the role of universities as conveners of global public sector innovation.

Introduction

The governance challenges facing public institutions in the Global South are increasingly characterised by complexity, interdependence, and the need for adaptive capacity. In response, scholars and practitioners have turned to collaborative models of learning and innovation, such as Communities of Practice (CoPs), to enhance public sector performance (Wenger, 1998; Bianchi et al., 2021). CoPs are defined as groups of individuals who share a concern or passion for a domain of knowledge and engage in collective learning through sustained interaction. In the context of public management, CoPs offer a platform for bridging the gap between academic research and policy implementation, enabling practitioners and scholars to co-produce knowledge that is both theoretically robust and practically relevant (Smith, 2020). The University of Birmingham (UoB), in collaboration with the Ghana Institute

of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), has initiated a transnational CoP aimed at strengthening public management capacity in Ghana. This initiative is supported by the International Science Partnerships Fund (ISPF), a UK government programme that promotes global research collaboration and innovation. The ISPF Institutional Support Grant, secured by Dr Shailen Popat (Department of Public Administration and Policy, UoB), allocated approximately £50,200 to this project, building on earlier funding from the Birmingham International Engagement Fund (BIEF) and departmental research grants.



CPD participants and some trainers at the Edgbaston Campus

The visit to Birmingham in March 2025 marked a critical step in operationalising the CoP. It brought together a delegation of 14 senior Ghanaian officials - including city managers, civil servants, and academic leaders - for a week-long programme of knowledge exchange. The visit aimed to consolidate previous training efforts, co-develop contextually relevant training materials, and explore pathways for expanding the CoP to other jurisdictions. The initiative aligns with broader strategic goals at UoB, including enhancing international partnerships, increasing research impact, and positioning the university as a leader in global public policy innovation. Moreover, the initiative reflects a growing recognition of the importance of collaborative governance in addressing “wicked problems” in public service delivery—issues that are complex, multi-sectoral, and resistant to simple solutions (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Torfing and Ansell, 2017). By fostering sustained engagement between academics and practitioners, the CoP model supports the co-design, co-production, and co-assessment of policies that are responsive to local needs and grounded in shared expertise. This case study situates the Ghana CoP initiative within this broader theoretical and practical landscape, offering insights into the dynamics of international collaboration in public administration.

Purpose and objectives of the visit

The March 2025 visit of Ghanaian public managers and academics to the University of Birmingham (UoB) was conceived as a strategic intervention to advance the development of a transnational Community of Practice (CoP) in public management. The initiative is grounded in the recognition that effective governance in the 21st century requires not only technical expertise but also collaborative learning environments that bridge the divide between theory and practice (Fung, 2015; McCourt, 2018). The visit aimed to operationalise the CoP model by fostering sustained engagement between Ghanaian and UK stakeholders, thereby enabling the co-production of knowledge and the contextualisation of governance frameworks. The specific objectives of the visit were fivefold. First, it sought to enhance institutional collaboration between UoB and the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), building on prior engagements and formalising pathways for joint research and training. Second, the visit aimed to contribute to applied research in public administration by generating empirical insights into the challenges and innovations in local governance in Ghana. Third, it was designed to position UoB as a global leader in public policy education and international development, in line with its strategic goals. Fourth, the initiative aimed to build capacity among Ghanaian public managers through exposure to UK governance models and peer learning. Finally, the visit was intended to strengthen UoB's eligibility for future funding under the International Science Partnerships Fund (ISPF) and similar programmes. By aligning these objectives with the principles of collaborative governance and experiential learning, the visit exemplifies how CoPs can serve as vehicles for both academic inquiry and practical reform. It also reflects a broader shift in international development practice towards partnership-based models that prioritise mutual benefit and knowledge reciprocity (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012).

Activities and engagements

The visit was structured around a series of carefully curated activities designed to facilitate knowledge exchange, relationship-building, and collaborative learning. These engagements were informed by the CoP framework, which emphasises the importance of shared practice, joint enterprise, and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). The programme included plenary sessions, thematic workshops, and institutional visits, each contributing to the overarching goal of co-producing knowledge and strengthening governance capacity. The Opening Plenary, held at the University of Birmingham, served as the formal launch of the Ghana Community of Practice initiative. It featured keynote addresses from Prof. Samuel K. Bonsu (Rector, GIMPA), Dr Nana Ato Arthur (former Head of Local Government Service, Ghana), and Mo Baines (CEO of the Association for Public Service Excellence, UK). These presentations set the tone for the week, highlighting the shared challenges and opportunities in local governance across both contexts.

Subsequent workshops and roundtables focused on thematic areas such as decentralisation, participatory governance, and sustainable urban development. These sessions were designed to be dialogic, allowing participants to share experiences, interrogate assumptions, and collaboratively design training modules tailored to the Ghanaian context. The workshops also drew on comparative case studies and theoretical frameworks from public administration literature, thereby integrating academic rigour with practical relevance (Osborne, 2006). The

delegation also undertook institutional visits to key governance bodies in the West Midlands. At the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), participants engaged in a knowledge exchange session with the Deputy Mayor, exploring regional governance structures, economic development strategies, and inter-agency coordination. A subsequent visit to the Lord Mayor of Birmingham provided insights into civic leadership, ceremonial governance, and the symbolic dimensions of public office.

The week concluded with a Closing Plenary, which provided a platform for reflection, feedback, and forward planning. Participants articulated their key takeaways, identified areas for further collaboration, and committed to sustaining the CoP through virtual engagements and future in-person exchanges. The session also included a preliminary roadmap for the development of co-authored publications and joint funding proposals. Collectively, these activities exemplify the principles of experiential learning and collaborative inquiry. They also demonstrate how CoPs can function as dynamic spaces for professional development, policy innovation, and institutional transformation (Bate and Robert, 2002; Smith, 2020).

Key findings and outcomes

The Ghana Community of Practice (CoP) visit to Birmingham yielded several significant outcomes, both immediate and strategic, that underscored the value of transnational collaboration in public management. These findings are drawn from participant reflections, workshop outputs, and institutional feedback, and are situated within the broader literature on collaborative governance and experiential learning (Bate and Robert, 2002; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).



The Head of the Ghanaian Local Government Service, Dr Stephen Nana Ato Arthur and the Chief Director of the Office of the Head of the Local Government Service, Madame Felicia Dapaah Agyeman-Boakye, honouring Shailen at the end of the CPD in Edgbaston

Institutional strengthening and partnership development

One of the most tangible outcomes was the deepening of institutional ties between the University of Birmingham (UoB), Office of the Head of Local Government Service (OHLGS), and the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). The visit facilitated the formalisation of collaborative pathways, including plans for joint research projects, co-authored publications, and reciprocal staff exchanges. These developments align with the literature on academic-practitioner partnerships, which emphasises the importance of sustained engagement and mutual benefit (Nutley, Walter and Davies, 2007).

Capacity building and professional development

Participants reported enhanced understanding of governance frameworks, particularly in areas such as decentralisation, intergovernmental coordination, and participatory planning. Exposure to UK models of local governance—through both plenary discussions and site visits—provided comparative insights that participants found directly applicable to their own contexts. This aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which posits that knowledge is constructed through concrete experience and reflective observation.

Co-production of training materials

A key deliverable from the workshops was the co-design of training modules that integrate academic theory with practical case studies from Ghana. These materials are intended for use in future capacity-building programmes and reflect the CoP principle of shared repertoire—tools, documents, and concepts developed through collective practice (Wenger, 1998). The collaborative nature of this process also supports the notion of “knowledge democracy,” where diverse forms of expertise are valued and mobilised (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012).

Policy influence and strategic alignment

The presence of senior civil servants and city managers ensured that the insights generated during the visit would inform policy and practice upon return to Ghana. Several participants indicated plans to adapt workshop content into local training initiatives and governance reforms. This outcome reflects the potential of CoPs to act as incubators for policy innovation, particularly when embedded within institutional structures (Smith, 2020).

Emerging Research Themes

The visit also surfaced several thematic areas for future research, including urban resilience, digital governance, and inclusive service delivery. These themes will inform the next phase of the CoP's development and provide a basis for collaborative grant applications. The identification of shared research priorities is consistent with the literature on transnational policy learning, which highlights the role of networks in shaping research agendas (Stone, 2004).

Implications and future directions

The outcomes of the Ghana CoP visit to Birmingham have several implications for the theory and practice of public management, particularly in the context of international collaboration. First, the initiative demonstrates the utility of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as vehicles for professional learning and institutional innovation. By fostering sustained interaction among diverse stakeholders, CoPs can bridge the gap between academic knowledge and policy

implementation, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of public administration research (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Second, the visit illustrates the importance of context-sensitive capacity building. Rather than imposing external models, the initiative prioritised mutual learning and the co-production of knowledge. This approach aligns with postcolonial critiques of development practice, which call for greater recognition of local expertise and the decolonisation of knowledge systems (Chilisa, 2012). The co-designed training materials exemplify this ethos, blending global frameworks with Ghanaian case studies to produce contextually grounded learning tools.

Third, the initiative highlights the strategic role of universities as conveners of global networks. UoB's leadership in this project not only enhances its international profile but also contributes to its mission of civic engagement and global impact. The university's ability to leverage funding, convene stakeholders, and facilitate knowledge exchange positions it as a key actor in the global governance ecosystem (Marginson, 2011).

Looking ahead, the CoP will continue to evolve through virtual engagements, annual in-person exchanges, and collaborative research projects. Plans are underway to expand the network to include public managers from other African and UK cities, thereby increasing its reach and diversity. Future funding applications under ISPF and similar schemes will be informed by the documented impact of this visit, ensuring the sustainability and scalability of the initiative.

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