Article
Future Online Learning for Public Administration

Ani Matei and Dragos Valentin Dinca *

Faculty of Public Administration, National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA), 012244 Bucharest, Romania
* Correspondence: dragos.dinca@administratiepublica.eu

Abstract: In this article, we analyze the perspectives of professional training for public administration workers, starting from the insights gained from online courses run during the past two years in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. In order to understand the nature, type, and magnitude of the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of continuous professional training for public administration, we carried out a systematic bibliographic analysis, as well as questionnaire-based empirical research conducted among public institution employees in Romania. This article was conducted based on the hypothesis that the professional training activities over the past two years have been organized predominantly online, and we aim to analyze the sustainability of these new teaching systems/methods. The limitations of the study are due to the fact that each administrative system has structural particularities and its own legal framework regarding the professional training of public administration workers; for this reason, the proposed model may not be successfully applied in all countries. We provide a model of online professional training for public administration workers that includes sustainability criteria and is based on experience accumulated over the past two years.

Keywords: professional development and continuous training; online learning; public administration; sustainability; the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic

1. Introduction

This article aims to substantiate and synthesize the main trends regarding the contents, forms of organization and development, and sustainability of future professional development and continuous training programs designed for public administration workers.

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has had a major impact on the manner in which such programs are designed and organized. Capitalizing on this impact from the perspectives of usefulness and sustainability represents, in both our opinion and that of other researchers, a necessity as well as an opportunity in the field of continuous training for public administration workers. As such, our study encompasses both systematic bibliographic research and sociological, statistical conclusions arising from empirical research based on a questionnaire carried out among a representative sample of employees of public institutions in Romania who have attended professional development and continuous training programs over the past few years.

Education, along with professional training, represents a fundamental right. Thus, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights mentions (at [1], art.14(1)) that “everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training.” This article is inspired both by the constitutional traditions common to EU member states and by the Additional Protocol to the ECHR [2] (art.2). According to [3], the extension of this article regarding access to vocational and continuous training was considered in agreement with the Social Charter [4] (art.10). These documents have been ratified by the member states of the European Union, with certain adequate provisions being also included in the constitutions of the respective states, as well as in other organic documents. In this context, the Constitution of Romania has established that “the right to education is ensured through compulsory general education, as well as by means of other forms of education.
and training” [5] (art.52). We can find similar provisions in the Constitutions of Bulgaria, Moldova, Albania, Slovenia, and other European states.

For public servants, there are special mentions which—apart from their right to access continuous professional training—also provide their obligation to undertake such training. The Administrative Code of Romania stipulates that “public servants have the right and obligation to continuously improve their skills and professional training. Public authorities and institutions have the obligation to ensure the participation of every public servant to at least one professional training and improvement program once every two years” [6] (art.458).

Special laws or documents designed for public administration workers can also be found in Serbia, Moldova, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and so on.

The counterpart to the right to the professional training of public servants [7] (p. 5) is the obligation of the state and the local collectivities to establish the associated legal and institutional framework and to provide the resources necessary for its materialization [8] (p. 78).

Additionally, unlike an employee whose employment is regulated by the Labour Law, a public servant also has an obligation to perfect their professional training, an obligation deriving from the fact that they exercise prerogatives of public power, such that their actions are a subject of general interest. In this context, the public servant has an obligation to follow training programs organized at the initiative or in the interest of the public institution [9] (p. 2), [10] (p. 110).

Generally, professional development and continuous training represent an ensemble of processes, by means of which—after attending specialized programs—employees develop the skills, knowledge, competencies, behaviors, and work techniques they already have a basic qualification in, with a view to achieving a higher level of efficiency in their objectives and tasks. Such training aims to improve already existing professional abilities [11] (p. 24).

The professional development and continuous training process include six stages: analyzing needs, designing the training program, developing training materials, selecting/calling the participants, delivering the programs, and monitoring/evaluating the training programs [12] (pp. 28–42).

For the training to be significant and efficient, the program organization methodology must be established by taking into account both the needs of the organization and the specific needs of each participant, adapted to the context and influences of the external environment.

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has offered an additional incentive to adapt to the new context, taking into account the specific influences affecting professional development and continuous training programs. The future of online education in the field of public administration has become a topic of great interest.

The reputed academic Bruce McDonald III—concluded that, with regard to “the future of public administration education,” “it is unlikely that all education will be offered lately online at any point in the near future. Instead, the traditional classroom experience will continue to dominate public administration classes.” [13] (p. 4).

Without being directly related to the present context—which is implicitly due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and the recent geopolitical situation—older publications [14] have presented the results of a survey carried out in 96 institutions within the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), which included “the rationales for offering or not offering online education, concerns with technology, made of online instruction, student services, faculty and staff demands, and enrolment patterns.” The authors concluded that “apprehension about the quality and effectiveness of online education persists in the field of public affairs, as well concerns about faculty and staff workloads in online education.” [14] (p. 247)

All these arguments have established continuous training as both a right and an obligation, complemented by considerations regarding the current state of online education and its pace in the current pandemic context, representing the topicality and opportunity of the present study.
Uncertainties regarding the effectiveness of online teaching methodologies and the persistence of the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic must be accompanied by considerations and assessments regarding the sustainability of continuing training programs, in accord with the general developments of education at all levels and the specificities of training programs for public administration.

2. Extensive Bibliographic Context

The present chapter extends the bibliographic research with a focus on the technological and organizational support of online learning, as well as the foundations of sustainable approaches.

In the field of public administration, digital teaching methods have been an important subject for longer than the past two years. There have been previous attempts to precisely define and conceptually outline distance learning in public administration. Thus, Kern Dieter [15] (p. 19) considers “e-learning as the approach using different internet and web technologies to enable, to evoke, to promote and/or to present learning processes and the development of competencies.”

There have also been studies analyzing relevant technology, existing platforms, and the use thereof [16,17], highlighting their adaptability, accessibility, and use costs. Comparisons have been made between face-to-face learning and online education, as well as hybrid models [18].

Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of online training in the field of public administration [19] in terms of financial resources, time saved, and adaptation to the learning pace of every participant [20], thus encouraging public institutions to access distance learning programs for their own employees.

Options for integrating the new technologies in the training process for public administration have been analyzed from the viewpoint of the existing barriers [21], ascertaining that resistance to change or technological gaps [22] are factors limiting the development of this type of professional training.

There has also been interest with regard to the manner in which the introduction of the Moodle e-learning platform [23], or other technical supports/instruments as part of the teaching process, is related. Moreover, the perception and level of acceptance of continuous online training by public administration employees have also been analyzed [24,25].

Thus, we can surmise that relevant studies have mainly focused on the following directions:

- Defining online learning in the field of public administration;
- Existing technologies, facilities, and their flexibility;
- Comparison with classical models and the benefits of online learning;
- Integration barriers and elimination methods;
- Perception/degree of acceptance towards online learning by public institution employees;
- Identifying methods to support the future development of online learning in the field of public administration.

All of these considered aspects reflected the practice of online learning for public administration, especially encouraged by the existing technologies and emphasized benefits. However, these practices have been conditioned by the access to technology on the part of public institutions, for which reason they are much more developed in Western Europe and North America. Eastern Europe was also experiencing new learning models; however, they have not yet become a frequent practice.

The past two years have led to significant changes in public institutions caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. These changes can be grouped into five categories, all leading to physical distancing:

- Re-organization of the workspace;
- Use of new technologies and their diversification;
- Relationship with the public;
- Review of certain work instruments and remote work;
- Medical protection of the staff.
In this new context, professional development and continuous training activities for public administration have also been transformed, with classical courses being replaced by online training. Implicitly, the specialized literature is rich in studies and analyses regarding this new context.

Thus, the impact of the pandemic on public administration [26]; digitalization [27]; the training/learning process, with a view to rethink, reposition, and adapt to the pandemic situation [28]; existing technologies, aiming to integrate them in training processes [29]; and the transformations caused [30] or projections for the future of professional training for public administration have been studied.

A temporary but not yet fully accepted conclusion is that existing research emphasizes a wide-scale evolution and use of online training for public administration, benefiting from previous experiences and the existing technology, which, nonetheless, can be viewed as an evolution mainly imposed by the pandemic context.

The fact that the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic seems to be coming to an end and people and institutions are returning to normality has given rise to opportunities for capitalizing on the outstanding experience gained under the effects of the pandemic, as well as the sustainability of the continued training model [31].

Starting from this conclusion, we must also acknowledge that the interaction between sustainability and public administration has been the object of numerous studies and analyses examining sustainability as a conceptual focus for public administration [32] and as an integral part of public administration processes [33] or as a concern [34]. From the viewpoint of continuous training, sustainability is viewed as a “subject which must be integrated to the greatest extent possible in the learning process” [35] (p. 9).

From this perspective, a potential model framework could be put forth by the German Sustainability Code [36], which contains 20 criteria. These will also be included in the Romanian Sustainability Code, which is currently being elaborated on and can be grouped into four categories: strategy (significance, vision, and objectives), process management (rules and structures), environment (ecological sustainability aspects), and society (social sustainability aspects). Criteria 1–10 refer to the sustainability policy, while criteria 11–20 refer to sustainability aspects (i.e., the use of natural resources).

The application of criteria 1–4 (strategic analysis and action, materiality, objectives, and depth of the value chain) involves the elaboration and implementation by the public organizations of sustainability strategies, including the professional training component. On the one hand, the topic of sustainability should be a training subject, although it has not been identified in the training topics taught in the last two years, nor in the ones desired for the future. On the other hand, the training component can be specifically focused on methods for developing and applying sustainability strategies. At the national level, in Romania, considering that the Sustainability code is currently being elaborated, training on this subject must become a national priority, being integrated into the training plans of every public institution.

For the “Materiality” criterion, digitalization brings opportunities and options, contributing to the elimination of carbon emissions and the preservation of resources, leading to a need to continue and develop professional training in public administration in the online format.

Consideration of the “Objectives” criterion requires clear formulation in matters of sustainability in the organizational strategy, including the establishment of monitoring and reporting responsibilities. The objective of increasing the training level of employees is a sustainable development criterion that must be included in the strategy.

From the perspective of the value chain, the sustainability criteria therein are to be verified. From the viewpoint of the professional training process in public institutions, the process itself can be considered along with the integration of certain training topics regarding the development of employee competencies to analyze the depth of the value chain, such as “Green purchasing”.
Process management (criteria 5–10) requires the clear establishment of responsibilities, which in the field of professional training involves establishing the person responsible for the process, with the role of analyzing and integrating the sustainability elements. Furthermore, public organizations must review their own procedures and processes in order to integrate sustainability aspects. Applying these criteria at the organizational or administrative level involves including course topics such as “Sustainable processes” or “Elaboration of sustainable operational and system procedures.” The “Control” criterion requires the establishment of sustainability-focused performance indicators in the periodical planning and control internal processes; that is, professional training must focus on learning how to formulate sustainability-related performance indicators. The “Stimulation systems” criterion focuses on increasing employee motivation to apply the sustainability criteria, which requires public organizations to review their motivation plans/methods and integrate components related to sustainability, which can serve as a professional training topic.

Integration of the “Involvement of interested parties” criterion requires the public administration to identify such parties and ensure their involvement in the sustainability process. By means of professional training, employees can be taught methods for identifying and involving interested parties, together with the elaboration of risk matrices, influence maps, and so on.

In professional training, “Innovation” (sustainability criterion) refers to an orientation towards activities contributing to reducing negative impacts on the environment, which targets both the training process itself and the promoted topics, as well as the training subjects, aspects which must also be considered when applying the environmental criteria (the ecological sustainability aspect; criteria 11–13). The environmental aspects impose reductions in natural resource consumption, which naturally leads to the option of online courses, which are optimized in terms of duration and period.

The criteria focusing on society (14–20) take into account the manner in which the employee’s rights are observed (in this case, the right to professional training), the application of the equal chances principle, and the increase in qualification level, as well as the manner in which the involvement of the staff in society and in sustainability management is encouraged, which also involves improving the awareness and adhesion of the staff to sustainability values by means of training. This category also includes the measures, standards, systems, and processes targeting the prevention of illegal behaviors and corruption (e.g., elements such as anti-corruption training).

3. Methodology

As noted in the pre-amble of this article, in order to fulfill the proposed research objective, we opted for an appropriate theoretical–empirical methodology, which includes both systematic bibliographic research, as well as empirical social statistical research, implemented through a questionnaire, addressed to a representative sample of individuals employed by public institutions of Romania, who have attended professional development and continuous training programs in the past few years.

In addition, the sample also included stakeholders from central public administration institutions, who have been assigned to design and organize the programs mentioned above, as well as professors and specialized trainers from relevant universities in Romania.

The systematic bibliographic research was based on important works and documents regarding the right and obligation of civil servants to professional development and continuous training, technological support, and the new methods of organization under the conditions imposed by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, foreshadowing the future of training programs under the conditions of capitalizing on the practices necessitated by the pandemic and ensuring the sustainability of the mentioned programs.

The structure and content of the questionnaire are presented in Appendix A.

The questionnaire begins with five questions aimed at the content of and identifying the manners in which training had been carried out in the past two years. The first question was designed to identify the percentage of respondents who had attended training pro-
grams in the last two years. Those who attended such programs were asked to indicate the associated topics, being provided with a pre-defined list (also including the option "other") comprising: Bases of public administration, Strategic management, Public function management, Communication, Performance management, Use of new technologies—ECDL, Quality management, Public procurement, Material resource management, Document management, Project management, E-government/e-administration, Decisional transparency, Management of classified information, and Organizing and archiving. This list was designed and perfected through the contributions of stakeholders from training institutions and universities.

Furthermore, the respondents who attended training activities indicated whether these had been held in the traditional format, face-to-face, online, or blended learning (both online and face-to-face modules). For online courses, they were asked to mention the platform used: Zoom, Webex, Google meet, Microsoft Teams, or others.

Next, by means of an open question, the participants indicated the advantages and disadvantages of the online courses, as per their own opinions and experiences.

The fifth question in the first part targeted the evaluation of online training activities from a qualitative point of view through scoring (on a scale from 1 to 5) the quality of the agenda, the content, the support materials, the platform used, the discussion management methods, the objectives of the sessions, the interactivity, and the course duration.

The second part aimed to identify the intentions of respondents with respect to online training activities in the future. Thus, participants were asked for their opinion regarding the quality of the programs offered through the online methodologies, their impact on the future development of their institution, the contents of the annual training plans/strategies of the public institutions, the optimal duration, participation, and method of organization in the future.

In this context, we assessed training models/instruments from the viewpoint of their utility in continuous training.

The last question, designed in an open format, invited the participants to identify the manners in which the disadvantages of online training (which they had previously indicated) could be eliminated.

The third part of the questionnaire comprised identification elements for the target group, including their level of education, seniority in administration, function level (management/operations), and the type of institution the respondents worked in.

The sample was composed of 95 representatives of public institutions, along with 15 stakeholders from national and regional institutions acting in the professional development and continuous training of public administration workers (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Institute of Administration, Regional Continuing Education Centres for Public Administration), as well as universities offering relevant training programs in the field of public administration.

Of the 95 representatives of public institutions, 56 were from local public institutions, 22 from decentralized institutions, and 17 from central public institutions.

The questionnaire response rate was 94.7%.

Data were collected by means of a platform specialized in taking surveys. The platform centralized the data and generated the graphs.

4. Results

The results of the present study arise, on the one hand, from social–empirical research and, on the other hand, from analysis of the bibliographic context mentioned above.

For a clearer understanding, with the aim of outlining the future of online learning in the field of public administration, we present these results according to certain criteria specific to the design and implementation of the future programs, including the content of the programs, forms of organization, and their implementation.
4.1. Content of the Programs

The topics on which the respondents were questioned were established by analyzing those which were relevant over the past few years and by consulting the stakeholders mentioned in the previous chapter. The levels of interest expressed by the participants and the need for training within public institutions are depicted in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Topics of the training programs (Q1). Source: Authors.](image)

It can be noted that the most frequently chosen options (≥10%) referred to: Bases of public administration, Public procurement, Decisional transparency, and Use of new technologies.

Based on these data, we may design a curriculum adapted to the interests and training needs of public institutions, classifying certain topics, according to the practices for designing academic curriculums, as: fundamental (≥10%), complementary (≥5%, <10%), or optional (<5%).

Thus, we arrive at the following classification (Table 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bases of public administration</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic management</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politic function management</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of new technologies</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality management</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public procurement</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As evidenced by the socio-empirical research, in the topics above or independently from them, other training topics/chapters are considered useful for the development of the public institution in terms of organization and systems, development and implementation of public policies and affairs, strategic planning and management, and so on, should be introduced.

Their impacts could be presented and considered in relation to the statistical averages of variable Q6 ($q_6^i, i = 1,13$).

For this purpose, we prepared Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Future topics/chapters for institutional development. Source: Authors.

This figure indicates that Strategic Planning (3.37) and Activity Planning (3.34) had the highest levels of interest. In fact, the high statistical average values for most of the topics/themes suggest their absence or the sporadic approach of the programs organized so far, thus offering a useful perspective for the future.
4.2. Forms of Organization and Technological Support

Over the past few decades, professional development and continuous training programs have been carried out in the classical face-to-face format, with online modules being few and infrequent.

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has led to a radical change in this balance, despite the fact that many or most of the public institutions did not benefit from the technological support required for an online organization in its entirety.

In this context, in terms of the form of organization applied over the past two years, programs were held predominantly online (64.1%), in the blended learning format (10.26%), or—despite the existing restrictions—in the classical face-to-face format (25.64%), as shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Forms under which training programs were organized and held during the pandemic.](image-url)

Among the advantages identified, the participants in the online courses mentioned their flexible schedule, the possibility of attending the course regardless of their work schedule, the availability of teaching materials, the possibility to learn at their own pace, time saved, the comfort of their own space, the ease of monitoring the contribution of each participant, the possibility to attend from any location, low cost, and personal protection against the pandemic.

The disadvantages/weaknesses of online training, in the opinion of the respondents, were a lack of physical interaction and socialization, low support in clarifying certain subjects, the inadequate training of lecturers in such teaching methods, low-quality internet connections, the high number of hours spent in front of the computer, the fact that information is presented more briefly, the lower level of interactivity, deficient evaluation (especially in case of group projects), and the lack of IT abilities of certain participants.

Capitalizing on the experience gained from organizing continuous training programs in the last few years, different forms of organization are intended for the future. Although the intention of attending online programs—regardless of the pandemic context—was 80.36% (according to the responses to Q9), the optimal method for organizing continuous training programs is presented in Figure 4.
The situation presented in Figure 4 expresses the habituality and conservatism of the participants, ignoring many of the previously mentioned advantages/disadvantages. This is further confirmed by the fact that the majority of the respondents opting for programs in the classical face-to-face format were over 35 years old.

More objective information on this situation can be obtained by performing correlation and regression analyses using the results from Q8, Q1, and Q9.

As the options expressed by respondents for the various approaches of blended learning in relation to the majority, minority, or balanced weights of online modules, were roughly equivalent, in order to simplify the statistical analysis, we use a variable that sums the three according to the formula:

\[ q_{i.b} = q_{i.2} + q_{i.3} + q_{i.4}; \ i = 2.8. \]

In this context, for the mentioned sample, the obtained Pearson linear correlation coefficients were as follows (Table 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>q8.1</th>
<th>q8.2</th>
<th>q8.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>q8.1</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>−0.697 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q8.2</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>−0.697 **</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q8.5</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>−0.381 **</td>
<td>−0.373 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As is well-known, the statistical correlation indicates the intensity and direction of a statistical relationship between variables. The negative value of all correlation coefficients can be interpreted as an inverse variation of the variables, defined in terms of their intensities (i.e., the absolute values of the coefficients).

This finding corresponds to reality and the manner in which the questionnaire was designed, which required respondents to choose a single response option. The significance of the correlation was close to zero for both levels: 0.01 and 0.05, respectively.
An interesting statistical link was achieved by performing a regression analysis between the variables already mentioned and the participation in (or intention to take part in) professional development and continuous training programs. The empirical data offered by Q1 and Q9 were non-variable; which, when used in the regression, were used to calculate:

\[ Q_p = \frac{1}{2} (Q1 + Q9). \]

The regression coefficients are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Regression coefficients for \( Q_p \) dependent variables. Source: Authors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (Constant)</td>
<td>0.586</td>
<td>0.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q8.1</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q8.6</td>
<td>0.205</td>
<td>0.429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q8.5</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>0.446</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we associate the coefficients in Table 3 with the ANOVA results, we find that the F statistic has a value of 0.661, and the overall significance of the model was 0.078; this means that the independent variables had an influence on the dependent variable, at various levels but not to a complete extent. Therefore, adding a few more different variables in the regression analysis is expected to be beneficial and will allow for more rigorous modeling of the level of participation in the mentioned programs.

This observation was further confirmed by the high level of residuals in the statistical model (\( r = 18.158 \)).

However, even in the statistical context detailed above, we can note that the influence of the manner in which programs are organized is directly proportional to the intention to participate, the greatest influence belonging to the classical (face-to-face) and blended learning formats.

4.3. Sustainability of Continued Training Programs

Due to its complexity, the concept of sustainability requires specific approaches, from at least two perspectives, in the context of the present research.

The first aims to integrate the contents of continuous training program elements with sustainable, economic, and social development in compliance with the objectives promoted by the UN, UNESCO, European Union, national and regional strategies and programs, and so on.

The second perspective relates to designing, promoting, and organizing the programs we refer to through means that provide them the necessary consistency for their permanence and strategic evolution, thus ensuring their quality, modern and effective methods of implementation, optimal duration and participation, in accordance with the continuous improvement and training needs in the public administration field.

Separation of these two perspectives—even if only for academic reasons—is difficult to achieve. This is due to the existence of vast specialized literature, the conceptual complexity previously mentioned, and the limitations this research is subject to.

Therefore, the results of the investigation carried out focus on a specific and non-exhaustive framework that can substantiate—from a strategic and operational point of view—the context in which continuous training programs are designed and organized. We seek to correlate this framework with a few empirical aspects regarding the existence of professional development and continuous training strategies/plans within public institutions, the optimal duration and number of attendants, and the quality and modernity of the methodology, resulting from the empirical research carried out and presented in this paper.
Inspired by the German Sustainability Code [36], with specific reference to continuous training as an integral part of the sustainable approach to economic and social processes specific to the beginning of the millennium, we establish below (see Table 4) the appropriate measures that can be associated with the sustainability criteria described in [36].

Table 4. Measures ensuring a sustainable framework for professional development and continuous training. Source: Authors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>- The development, implementation, and application of sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maternity</td>
<td>strategies in public institutions, including the professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>training component;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Depth of the value chain</td>
<td>- Promoting forms of continuous training that are appropriate, in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>terms of organization and contents;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>- Reviewing training procedures and processes; Establishing who is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>responsible for the process;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rules and Processes</td>
<td>- Developing training performance indicators; Revising incentive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>plans/methods and integrating certain sustainability components;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Incentive Schemes</td>
<td>- Identifying and involving stakeholders in the training process;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Stakeholder Engagement</td>
<td>- Focusing on activities that contribute to reducing the negative impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Innovation and Product Management</td>
<td>on the environment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Usage of Natural Resources</td>
<td>- Rational, limited use of natural resources in the training process (e.g.,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resource Management</td>
<td>environmentally friendly supplies, natural light);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Climate-Relevant Emissions</td>
<td>- Observing the rights of employees (in the case at hand, the right to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee Rights</td>
<td>professional training);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>- Equal opportunity, accessibility to training processes for employees;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Human Rights</td>
<td>- Raising awareness through training and supporting employees in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Corporate Citizenship</td>
<td>adhering to the values of sustainability;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Political Influence</td>
<td>- Limiting political influence on decisions related to training topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and the development of professional development and training programs;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Conduct that Complies with the Law</td>
<td>- Measures, standards, systems, and processes aimed at preventing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Policy</td>
<td>illegal behaviour and corruption.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The implementation of these measures may be achieved through the development of concrete institutional approaches, through which public institutions must place professional development and continuous training among the most important pillars of their own sustainable evolution.

In the context provided by this sustainable framework of professional development and continuous training, we provide some the results from the empirical research below.

With regard to the modernity and methodological adequacy of the implementation of the programs under discussion, an empirically fundamental opinion is provided by the results to question Q12 (Figure 5):

According to most of the respondents, interactive presentations and practical applications integrated into the programs can lead to more efficient development.

Along with concerns for modernity and methodological adequacy, another important element of sustainability is represented, in our opinion, by the optimal duration (D. opt.) of and participation (P. opt.) in the programs (Q10 and Q11, respectively).

These can be statistically estimated using the following formulas:

\[
D. \text{ opt.} = 1.5 \times m(q10.1) + 3.5 \times m(q10.2) + 5.5 \times m(q10.3) + 6 \times m(q10.4),
\]

\[
P. \text{ opt.} = 10 \times m(q11.1) + 12.5 \times m(q11.2) + 18 \times m(q11.3) + 20 \times m(q11.4),
\]

where \( m(q_{ij}) \) is the average value of the variable \( q_{ij} \); \( i = 11, 12, j = 1, 2, 3, 4 \).
Based on the empirical results and using the two equations above, we can infer that:

$$D.\ opt. = 3.35; \ P.\ opt. = 13.27.$$ 

Therefore, through integer approximation, we can state that $D.\ opt. = 3–4$ h and $P.\ opt. = 15–16$ attendants.

Integrating these empirically derived results, we can provide conclusions regarding an essential criterion of the sustainability of continuous development and training programs— their quality—through the results shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5. Methodological methods/instruments preferred by the participants. Source: Authors.

The trainer encouraged the involvement of the participants.

The course length was adequate.

The course was interactive.

The objectives of the training session were reached.

The support materials were well documented and useful.

The key-concepts were sufficiently explained.

The content of the training session was well structured.

The agenda of the training session was clearly presented.

Figure 6. Assessments regarding the quality of professional development and continuous training programs. Source: Authors.
In conclusion, in this chapter, we presented the most important results that can be inferred from the empirical research, interpreted in relation to the sustainability criteria specific to the programs mentioned.

5. Conclusions

The present work is part of a large context, highlighted by rich literature, regarding the re-valuation of the methods, forms of organization, and content of professional development and continuous training programs intended for public administration workers as a result of the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

The major and complex impact of this pandemic has caused the transfer of a great majority of these programs into the online context. Naturally, this is not limited to these particular programs.

In most European states, education has experienced such a reality at every level.

As has been shown by specialized studies, some of which were mentioned in this paper, the context of the new forms of organization for the training and development process is controversial and uncertain.

For this reason, we can state and support the necessity of such a study.

However, given the provisions, methods, and organizational practices, we cannot state that the results of this study are fully applicable to public institutions from other states; however, they may be fundamental to a new argument with the purpose of designing a regional or European approach.

In Romania, professional development and continuous training are both rights and obligations. This is not limited to employers but also to the public institution, which should ensure both access and the necessary material and financial means, all of which are integrated into the training strategies/plans designed and implemented at the mentioned level.

This is precisely the perspective from which the empirical research associated with this paper highlights a major lack of involvement on the part of public institutions. In particular, both the level of participation in the programs in question and the existence of training strategies/plans were found to be inadequate.

A more detailed analysis arising from informal discussions with the participants further highlighted the great level of diversity in terms of strategic provisions (where they exist), as well as a fundamental lack of strategic and content convergence, even within public institutions at the same level of public administration.

This reality has led us to introduce, through this paper, the idea of a curriculum providing a classification of programs according to criteria similar to those applicable in Bachelor- or Master-level higher education.

Such a curriculum can guide officials from public institutions, becoming an important element in ensuring the compatibility of these programs and the convergence of existing strategies/plans.

It is also worth noting that (see Figure 1) 38% of the respondents stated that, in the past two years, they have also taken part in other programs that, when analyzed, were determined by singular educational programs which do not fit into an in-depth vision in agreement with their well-defined training needs.

Furthermore, we also identified differences between the strategic provisions and those applicable in reality, as assessed through the empirical research, in terms of the forms of organization chosen for the programs.

As can be noted from Section 4.2, the respondents mostly opted for the classical face-to-face and blended learning forms of organization.

At the same time, our empirical analysis showed that, even in terms of correlation and regression, the variables that describe the participation and various forms of organization were significant and 2-tailed, indicating that, in addition to the forms of organization of the programs mentioned above, we must also take into account other variables, whose identification should be the object of continuous training strategies/plans at the institutional level.
Another objective of the present paper was to integrate the methodology and contents into the general context of sustainability, with specific reference to the sustainability of professional development and continuing training programs.

The final approach from this perspective provided conclusions arising from both the documents of international and national bodies and from the specialized literature, as well as the results of the empirical research attached to this paper, regarding the intention to attend, the program optimization, scheduling and grouping of participants, and the quality of the mentioned programs.

The sustainability framework proposed in the present work may also be viewed as an important tool for designing and implementing continuous training strategies/plans at the institutional level.

From the perspective of this paper’s general objective regarding future online education for public administration, the conclusions were not in perfect harmony.

On the one hand, the past two years have been dominated by online forms of learning, while options for the future are mostly oriented towards classical or blended learning programs.

As such, despite the advantages of online learning, in terms of accessibility, compatibility with work schedules in public institutions, and/or lower costs, its formative effectiveness has been judged to be lower, and, therefore, the options expressed above are expected to be maintained.

Over the past decade, the training of public administration workers has also been supported by European programs facilitated by structural funds related to the development of human resources and human capital, the increase in an administrative capacity, and so on.

In addition to these, the digitalization of public administration is currently being systematically implemented.

All of these processes, which complement professional development and continuous training programs, will have an influence on and ensure the effective development of online learning, the value of which will increase with the improved structure of current and future programs.

However, this is an issue that must be assessed in terms of its medium- or even long-term evolution.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.M. and D.V.D.; methodology, A.M. and D.V.D.; software, A.M. and D.V.D.; validation, A.M. and D.V.D.; formal analysis, A.M. and D.V.D.; investigation, A.M. and D.V.D.; resources, A.M. and D.V.D.; data curation, A.M. and D.V.D.; writing—original draft preparation, A.M. and D.V.D.; funding acquisition, A.M. and D.V.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** A questionnaire through the [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) (accessed on 11 April 2022) platform was used to collect the data. The database can be made available to the publisher.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Appendix A. Questionnaire on the Use of Online Methodology for the Continuous Training of Civil Servants**

You are invited to participate in empirical research on the use of online methodology in future continuous training programs for civil servants and elected politicians.

The research refers both to the current and future content of such training, as well as to the most appropriate method of organization, under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis, and the European geopolitical situation.
The empirical research tool is the questionnaire provided to you hereinafter, and which was formulated based on the study of the curriculum of Master’s degree programs, of the experiences and good practices of the European states, as well as by consulting a representative group of teachers, trainers and stakeholders from the central and local public administration in Romania.

Responses will be processed anonymously and only in aggregated form.

Thank you for taking part in this research!

Q1. Have you attended long or short-term training programmes in the last 2 years?

YES [ ] NO [ ].

If yes, what topic did the attended training programme have:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>If YES, Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bases of public administration</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Management</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public function management</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance management</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of new technologies—ECDL</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality management</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Procurement</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material resources management</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document management</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-government/e-administration</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisional transparency</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of classified information</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing and archiving</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2. If you have attended in the last 2 years long or short-term training programmes, they were:

q.2.1. in classic, face-to-face format. [ ]...
q.2.2. blended learning, mainly face-to-face. [ ]...
q.2.3. blended learning, face-to-face and online balanced. [ ]...
q.2.4. blended learning, mainly online. [ ]...
q.2.5. online. [ ]...

Q3. If you attended online courses, they were held on the platform:

a. Zoom.
b. Webex.
c. Google meet.
d. Microsoft Teams.
e. other.

Q4. List 3 advantages and 3 disadvantages of online courses:

Advantages:
1. . .
2. . .
3. . .

Disadvantages:
1. . .
2. . .
3. . .
Q5. How would you evaluate the quality of the online courses attended?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Total Agreement</th>
<th>Partial Agreement</th>
<th>Ordinary</th>
<th>Partial Disagreement</th>
<th>Total Disagreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The training agenda was clearly presented.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The content of the training session was well structured.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The key notions have been sufficiently explained.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Supporting materials were well documented and useful.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The platform used was technically appropriate.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Methods of conducting discussions were effective.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Training objectives reached.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Course was interactive.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The trainer encouraged the participants’ activism.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The duration of the course was adequate.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q6. Please select the training topics you consider useful for the future development of the institution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>To a Very Small Extent</th>
<th>To a Small Extent</th>
<th>The Same</th>
<th>To a Large Extent</th>
<th>To a Very Large Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>q.6.1 Leadership</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.2 Strategic planning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.3 Integrity management in public administration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.4 Risk management</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.5 CAF (Common Assessment Framework)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.6 Strategic management – Balanced Scorecard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.7 Development of operational and system procedures</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.8 Decisional transparency and confidentiality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.6.9 Developing and implementing public policies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Q6.10. Decision-making practices in public administration

- **To a Very Small Extent**: 1
- **To a Small Extent**: 2
- **The Same**: 3
- **To a Large Extent**: 4
- **To a Very Large Extent**: 5

### Q6.11. Communication/moderation of debates

- **To a Very Small Extent**: 1
- **To a Small Extent**: 2
- **The Same**: 3
- **To a Large Extent**: 4
- **To a Very Large Extent**: 5

### Q6.12. Planning and carrying out activities

- **To a Very Small Extent**: 1
- **To a Small Extent**: 2
- **The Same**: 3
- **To a Large Extent**: 4
- **To a Very Large Extent**: 5

### Q6.13. Business analysis in the public sector

- **To a Very Small Extent**: 1
- **To a Small Extent**: 2
- **The Same**: 3
- **To a Large Extent**: 4
- **To a Very Large Extent**: 5

Other (please specify).

### Q7. The annual training plans of the institution also include the following types of courses:

- **Q7.1. Online** YES [ ] NO [ ]
- **Q7.2. In blended-learning system** YES [ ] NO [ ]

### Q8. What do you think is the best way to conduct the courses for public institutions:

- **Q8.1. In classical, face-to-face format** [ ]
- **Q8.2. Blended learning, mainly face-to-face** [ ]
- **Q8.3. Blended learning, face-to-face and online balanced** [ ]
- **Q8.4. Blended learning, mainly online** [ ]
- **Q8.5. Online** [ ]

### Q9. In the future, regardless of the pandemic context, do you intend to participate in online courses?

- **YES** [ ] **NO** [ ]

### Q10. What would be the optimal duration of an online course/day?

- **Q10.1. 1–2 h**
- **Q10.2. 3–4 h**
- **Q10.3. 5–6 h**
- **Q10.4. over 6 h**

### Q11. What would be the optimal number of participants in an online course?

- **Q11.1. less than 10**
- **Q11.2. 10–15**
- **Q11.3. 16–20**
- **Q11.4. more than 20**

### Q12. What training methods/tools should be used in online courses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods/Tools</th>
<th>To a Very Small Extent</th>
<th>To a Small Extent</th>
<th>Balanced</th>
<th>To a Large Extent</th>
<th>To a Very Large Extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>q.12.1 Presentations, interactive presentations;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.2 Teamwork, in small groups and individually;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.3 Role play;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.4 Practical applications;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.5 Case study;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.6 Simulation /practical scenarios;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.7 Individual and group projects;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.8 Facilitated group discussion;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.12.9 Brainstorming;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other (please specify).
Q13. How should online courses be conducted in order to eliminate the disadvantages mentioned in question no. Q4?

Biographical data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age in completed years</th>
<th>The last school graduated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. post-secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. university studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. postgraduate studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. doctoral studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position in public administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seniority in public administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

References


35. Meuleman, L. Public Administration and Governance for the SDGs: Navigating between Change and Stability. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 5914. [CrossRef]