

RESEARCH TRENDS IN PUBLIC SECTOR ACCRUAL ACCOUNTING: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to critically analyze the evolution of the academic debate on accrual accounting in the public sector. Specifically, it identifies emerging themes, highlights the main findings, and proposes insights for future research.

The adoption of accrual accounting in the public sector is closely linked to new public management (NPM) principles (Hood, 1991, 1995). It developed to enhance governmental efficiency and effectiveness (Connolly & Hyndman, 2006), often replacing cash-based accounting systems (Lapsley, 1999).

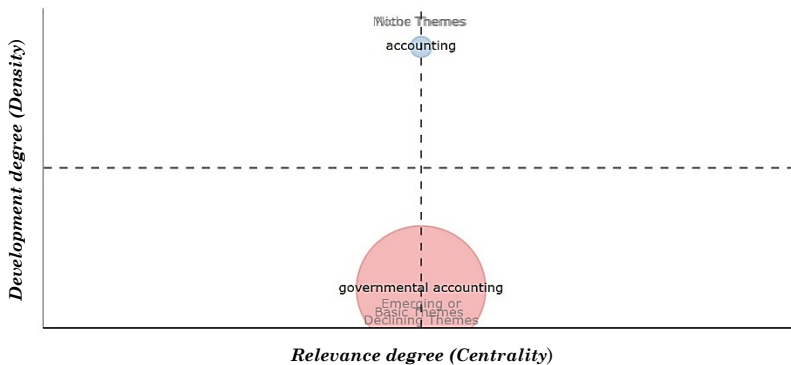
Previous literature suggests that accrual accounting improves the accuracy of information on government solvency and public assets, facilitates public service cost determination (Pina & Torres, 2003), and supports financial management (Fédération des Experts Comptables Européens [FEE], 2007). However, some scholars remain critical (Guthrie, 1998; Christiaens & Rommel, 2008; Lapsley et al., 2009), arguing that it does not effectively address financial control issues, as it provides a narrow perspective on performance by focusing primarily on costs and efficiency (Hepworth, 2002).

Despite these concerns, accrual accounting was first adopted by Anglo-Saxon countries, followed by its gradual implementation across some European nations (Pina et al., 2009). This led to the need for an international standard-setting body, resulting in the establishment of the International Public Sector Accounting Standards Board (IPSASB). Moreover, the 2008 financial crisis and the 2010–2011 sovereign debt

crisis marked a turning point in its adoption in Europe, raising the need for greater transparency and accountability in the public sector, which led to Directive 85/2011 and the development of the European Public Sector Accounting Standards (EPSAS) framework (Rossi et al., 2016).

This study investigates the state of the art and the conceptual structure of accrual accounting in the public sector through an extensive bibliometric literature analysis through the software Bibliometrix (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020). Data were collected from Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), providing a comprehensive perspective of Scopus’s extensive coverage and WoS’s rigorous selection (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). A Boolean search strategy was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords using the query: [“Accrual*” AND (“Public Sector*” OR “Public Govern*” OR “Public Administration*”)]. The research was limited to English-language journal articles and book chapters examining the topic from an economic perspective. To ensure academic rigor, only publications from journals ranked at level 1 or higher in the Association of Business Schools’ Journal Quality Guide were considered. The initial search yielded 311 publications and resulted in a final dataset of 211 publications after removing duplicates. According to the regulatory developments, the reference period was spitted into three phases: from the first published paper to the adoption of accrual accounting by a major public organization (1992–2000); from 2000 to the publication of Directive 85/2011 (2000–2011); and from the Directive’s adoption to the present (2011–2024). This classification enabled the identification of four thematic categories — basic, niche, motor, and emerging/declining — offering a perspective on the evolution of the academic debate.

Figure 1. Thematic map: First period



The thematic map of the first period reveals only two main themes. The basic theme is broadly defined as accounting, reflecting the general and unstructured nature of early research. The emerging theme,

The third period is characterized by a proliferation of research topics. Accrual accounting remains the basic theme, alongside IPSAS, underscoring its established role in the field. However, EPSAS is categorized as a niche theme, highlighting the relatively recent development of European accounting reforms. Accounting reform transitions into a motor theme, reflecting its increasing influence on the academic debate.

Further investigation will explore, through a co-citation analysis, the connections between the research themes across the reference periods and within the thematic areas. Additionally, a more detailed examination will assess key findings and critical issues, determining whether the literature presents consistent results or remains fragmented, with mixed findings.

Ultimately, the proposed analysis underscores the strong academic recognition of accrual accounting in the public sector and highlights the need for further research to deepen the understanding of the issues identified and discussed in this study.

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