Merit-based recruitment in the South African Public Service: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

Section 195 (i) of South Africa's Constitution mandates that public administration must reflect the nation's diversity, with recruitment and personnel management practices based on competence, fairness, and impartiality, while addressing historical inequalities to ensure broad representation. This creates a dual obligation for public administration: to foster inclusivity and equity while ensuring merit-based recruitment. Merit-based recruitment is crucial for meeting the public service's human resource needs and achieving employment equity by making opportunities accessible to all societal groups. While the practical application of merit-based recruitment presents opportunities, it still encounters considerable obstacles, such as political interference, and fragile institutional structures. This paper explored both the challenges and opportunities of merit-based recruitment in the South African public service through an analysis of government reports, academic literature, and policy reviews. The findings reveal that while the concept of merit-based recruitment is embedded in policy, its execution is hampered by political interference, nepotism, a lack of institutional capacity, skills shortages, and tensions between affirmative action and meritocracy. The paper recommends strengthening monitoring and evaluation measures employed by the Public Service Commission (PSC) to effectively promote and oversee the implementation of merit-based recruitment processes in the public service.

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1. Introduction

The public service in South Africa plays a vital role in socio-economic progress and tackling the inequalities arising from apartheid. It provides essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing, fostering equitable growth and the well-being of citizens. To meet the National Development Goals of the country, a skilled and capable workforce is necessary, as outlined in Section 195(i) of the Constitution, which stresses competence, fairness, and diversity in public administration (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The Constitution also promotes addressing past inequalities by ensuring wide representation in the public service, covering race, gender, and disability, while focusing on candidates with the needed skills and expertise. Section 195(a) further underscores the need for professionalism and ethical behaviour in public administration to ensure high-quality service delivery, accountability, and public trust (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In alignment with Vision 2030 and the National Development Plan, South Africa seeks to maintain the rule of law, merit-based practices, ethical leadership, and professionalism in public service recruitment and HR management. This necessitates cultivating integrity, transparency, and accountability to sustain high ethical standards and effective governance. The anticipated standard is that recruitment based on merit should involve hiring decisions grounded on objective criteria like skills, qualifications, and competence (Cameron, 2009). Despite these expectations for the public service, the actual practice of merit-based recruitment is unsuccessful.

This is demonstrated by empirical research like that of Kaizer (2022), which shows that the execution of merit-based hiring in public services is obstructed by political factors, such as the cadre deployment policy of the African National Congress (ANC), complicating the process by favouring the appointment of party loyalist unqualified candidates. Scholars including Nkoana et al. (2024) highlight that many government employees obtain their positions through nepotism and lack the skills to perform their tasks, resulting in services not reaching local communities. Consequently, individuals hired through nepotism often engage in misconduct including corruption and fraud (Mamokhere & Kgobe, 2023). These incidents cause government institutions to receive unfavourable audit results. The community suffers the effects of issues like poor management of public funds and inefficiency, resulting in inadequate service delivery (Thusi & Mashabela, 2023). The annual report from the Public Service Commission also revealed that human resource professionals often observe that job

positions are tailored to favour certain individuals, contradicting the principles of meritocracy (Public Service Commission, 2022).

In addition to these problems, the practice of meritocracy is further challenged by affirmative action policies, with increasing evidence showing that affirmative action acts as a form of indirect discrimination in employment (Dupper & Garbers, 2012; Khaitan, 2017; Cossette-Lefebvre, 2020). This occurs because affirmative action gives preference to previously disadvantaged individuals over those with the appropriate skills, qualifications, and experience. Therefore, it is evident that affirmative action disregards the merit principle in hiring officials within the public sector. This highlights the difficulty in balancing affirmative action policies aimed at remedying historical inequalities with meritocratic ideals. While numerous studies have concentrated on affirmative action as a means of addressing the wrongs of apartheid, there has been limited attention on how these policies overlook meritocratic principles. Given these challenges, it is essential to explore the complexities of merit-based recruitment within the South African public service, examining the challenges and opportunities associated with this approach. Furthermore, the paper looks into the equilibrium between equity and merit, assess the consequences of the skills gap, and utilise international best practices to propose tailored solutions for South Africa's specific situation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Merit-Based Recruitment in the Public Sector of South Africa

After South Africa's shift to democracy in 1994, the establishment of a merit-based approach was solidified. The 1996 Constitution, in Section 195(1)(i), clearly indicates that public administration should be anchored in a high standard of professional ethics and should foster the efficient, economic, and effective utilization of resources (Republic of South Africa, 1996). These principles formed the basis for a meritocratic system in public service. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several policies were implemented by the government, including the Public Service Act of 1994 and the 1997 White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Batho Pele), to put into effect systems for merit-based recruitment and performance management (Ncholo, 2000). These policies are designed to guarantee that hiring practices and promotions are conducted based on fair, open, and impartial criteria. The notion is supported by Rishi (2020) indicating that recruiting based on merit guarantees that individuals who are most qualified, considering their skills, qualifications, and suitability for the position, are

assigned to roles in public service. Thus, this approach is essential for building a capable state, as it enables public servants to carry out their duties effectively and make informed decisions that benefit society as a whole.

2.2 Challenges for Implementing Merit-Based Recruitment in South Africa

In practice, the adoption of merit-based recruitment within the South African public sector is frequently hindered by political influences, including the African National Congress's (ANC) cadre deployment policy that favours party loyalty over capability (Magomane, 2012; Nzo, 2019). According to scholars such as Zulu, Yalezo and Mutambara (2022) the ANC cadre deployment policy has contributed to a range of governance issues, including corruption, inefficiency, and mismanagement, particularly at the local government level. The consequences of the issues are felt most acutely in service delivery, where citizens are often left without access to basic services like water, sanitation, and housing. Haider (2019) and Jarbandhan (2022) note that implementing merit-based recruitment in South Africa is further complicated by the need to balance this principle with affirmative action policies designed to address the historical injustices of apartheid. The notion behind affirmative action was to promote the inclusion of previously disadvantaged groups, such as black South Africans, women, and people with disabilities, in public service roles (Schotte et al., 2023; Mujtaba, 2023).

However, affirmative action creates tension between the goals of equity and merit (Archibong & Adejumo, 2013). The author believes that this is because the policy allows unqualified people to hold key positions based on gender and race. This policy is further criticized for conflicting with meritocratic principles, as efforts to ensure broad representation can result in the selection of individuals who may not possess the required skills or qualifications (Sunam et al., 2022). Adams (2021) concludes that affirmative action acts as a form of indirect discrimination, counter to the principles of meritocracy. Consequently, this leads to worries about whether prioritizing the correction of historical imbalances might compromise the efficiency and effectiveness of public service. Several studies on affirmative action have been undertaken but fewer studies focused on whether affirmative action is based on equity and merit or only focused on equity. Thus, this research aims to close this knowledge gap.

Based on the literature, evidence suggests that the difficulty in balancing merit with affirmative action is intensified by the significant shortage of skills in South Africa, thereby restricting the number of qualified candidates for public service roles (Ramafoko, 2015). Some scholars highlight that critical fields such as public finance management, engineering, and information technology are particularly affected by this shortage, making it difficult to fill key positions with competent individuals (Mafunisa, 2014; Mkhonza & Letsoalo; 2017; Legoabe & Worku, 2023). Moreover, this skills gap has been further exacerbated by the frequent migration of skilled professionals to the private sector, which gives better salaries, working conditions, and opportunities for career advancement compared to the public service. As a result, the public sector struggles to retain talented workers, leading to high turnover rates and a constant need to recruit new staff (Enwereji & Emmanuel, 2022). The failure to retain individuals with scarce skills undermines the long-term stability of public institutions, as well as their ability to provide consistent and reliable services to citizens.

The literature also draws attention to the impact of cadre deployment on public service performance. According to Mlambo et al. (2022), the appointment of party loyalists to senior positions within the public service has led to widespread inefficiencies, as many of these individuals lack the necessary qualifications or experience to fulfil their roles effectively. This has resulted in poor governance, with significant consequences for service delivery in areas such as housing, water, and sanitation. Foley and Williamson (2019) further argue that the politicization of public service recruitment has eroded public trust in government institutions, as citizens perceive that positions are being filled based on political connections rather than merit. This perception is supported by evidence of widespread corruption and maladministration in many government departments, particularly at the municipal level, where cadre deployment has been most prevalent (Masenya, 2017).

2.3 Opportunities for Implementing Merit-Based Recruitment

Haider (2019) presents the opportunities for merit-based recruitment, firstly, the merit system gives a pathway to professionalize the South African public service by ensuring that only qualified and capable individuals are appointed. This can enhance institutional efficiency, reduce corruption, and improve public service delivery. This is backed up by empirical literature which indicates that meritocratic recruitment is associated with lower corruption (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018). In other words, the merit-system curbs corruption in the public

service. Meritocratic practices further curb nepotism to an even greater degree than they reduce politicisation (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019). In other words, this system strengthening accountability and transparency mechanisms in recruitment processes can mitigate the effects of corruption and political interference. Secondly, the merit system is deemed to be able to assist in balancing meritocracy and transformation (Sealy, 2010).

Looking at the opportunities of adopting a merit-based system, global examples of merit-based recruitment provide vital insights for South Africa. Nations like Canada and Singapore have established strong merit-based systems that emphasize hiring and promoting individuals based on their qualifications and professional expertise, rather than political ties (Silvanto & Ryan, 2018). Adopting similar strategies could bolster South Africa's public service and enhance governance quality. Merit-based recruitment offers a pathway to professionalize the South African public service by ensuring that only qualified and capable individuals are appointed (Gajduschek, 2007). This can enhance institutional efficiency, reduce corruption, and improve public service delivery. Further, focusing recruitment on objective criteria such as skills, qualifications, and competence would help rebuild public trust in governmental institutions and enhance service delivery outcomes. Despite the issues, the literature points to various opportunities for reforming the recruitment process within South Africa's public service. Musopero and Lee (2021) suggest that adopting a hybrid approach that balances the principles of merit and equity could help to address the tensions between affirmative action and meritocracy. Such an approach would ensure that historically disadvantaged individuals are given fair opportunities to enter the public service while maintaining a high standard of professionalism and competence.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the Human Capital Theory. This theory asserts that the skills, knowledge, and experiences of individuals are valuable assets or "capital" that enhance their productivity and economic worth (Nafukho et al., 2004). In the context of merit-based hiring, this theory implies that public institutions should focus on attracting candidates with the most pertinent skills, qualifications, and expertise. This is because this approach enables public institutions to enhance their efficiency and performance while ensuring they employ the most capable workforce to meet their objectives. The implementation of this theory is crucial in South Africa, where numerous authors frequently highlight the inadequate levels of service

delivery, along with the occurrence of service delivery protests (Masuku & Jili, 2019; Mbandlwa et al., 2020; Msenge & Nzewi, 2021; Nkoana et al., 2024). The cause of inadequate service delivery is that individuals are appointed without the necessary qualifications, technical skills, and experience (Kalonda & Govender, 2021). Thus, given this situation the application of this theory becomes vital.

The reason for employing this theory is its relevance to merit-based recruitment practices, as it highlights the importance of choosing candidates based on their capabilities, qualifications, and potential to make meaningful contributions to the aims of public institutions. Furthermore, the theory is also pertinent because it connects professionalism and performance, with a belief that merit-based recruitment will enhance the efficiency and capability of the public service workforce. The study's investigation of the obstacles and opportunities within the South African public service aligns with Human Capital Theory, which can be used to grasp how impediments like nepotism, political interference, and skill shortages may hinder the recruitment of human capital. On the other hand, the theory also illustrates how overcoming these hurdles can result in a more robust and skilled workforce capable of addressing the country's socio-economic challenges. In other words, the theory promotes investing in the cultivation and hiring of highly skilled individuals to yield long-term benefits for society. By employing Human Capital Theory, the study can evaluate how merit-based recruitment can improve the quality and efficiency of South Africa's public service, addressing both the challenges and opportunities involved with these practices.
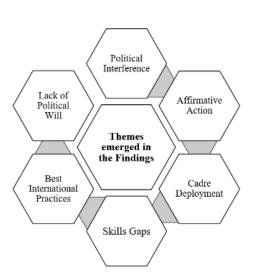
3. Research Methods

To fulfil this study's aim of exploring the complexities of merit-based hiring in the South African public sector, a systematic review of research on merit-based recruitment was conducted. A systematic review was chosen as it allows for a rigorous and methodical process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research on the subject, ensuring the inclusion of relevant, high-quality sources. The process involved the following steps: Initially, the authors utilized the keywords "merit-based recruitment," "meritocracy," "professionalism in the public sector," "recruitment and selection practices in the public sector," and "talent management in the public sector" to locate pertinent sources through search engines like Google Scholar, JSTOR, Semantic Scholar, and University Libraries. This search strategy was

employed to ensure a comprehensive and systematic identification of relevant academic literature from reputable academic databases and sources.

In addition to academic literature, information for the research was also gathered from South African government reports, legislative frameworks, and policies. This allowed the research to be enriched by not only academic information but also the practical, policy-driven context of merit-based recruitment within the South African public sector. Subsequently, article selection was confined to scholarly works that included key terms like "merit-based recruitment," "meritocracy," "recruitment and selection practices in the public sector," "talent management in the public sector," and "professionalism in the public sector" in the title. The selection criteria were designed to narrow the focus to the most relevant research. Only articles written in English and published between 2016 and 2024 were included. This period was chosen to ensure that the review captured the most recent research trends, developments, and innovations in the field, reflecting the latest knowledge and perspectives on merit-based recruitment. A thematic analysis was employed as a qualitative meta-synthesis method for this research.

Thematic analysis was chosen because it facilitates the coding and categorization of data into broad themes, enabling the identification of patterns and insights within the literature (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). According to Terry et al. (2017), thematic content analysis involves six key stages: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The authors meticulously adhered to these six stages to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the data. The themes that emerged from the findings were identified as follows:

Figure 1

Themes identified from the findings

*Source***:** Author's Compilation

Each selected academic literature on merit-based recruitment was scrutinized to assess whether it addressed the challenges and opportunities of implementing merit-based recruitment in the South African Public Service.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 The lack of political will and political interference in the implementation of merit-based recruitment

Thusi et al. (2023) highlight the importance of political will as a determinant of the success of merit-based recruitment in the South African public service. Regrettably, some leaders within the public service lack the political will to give precedence to merit-based recruitment over political loyalty and patronage (Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2023). In truth, this has far-reaching implications for the integrity and effectiveness of the public service, leading to a culture of nepotism and cronyism that undermines public trust and hinders service delivery. The lack of political will is accompanied by political interference and patronage networks which breed problems such as cadre deployments and lead to poor service delivery, increased corruption, and weakened democratic institutions (Thusi et al., 2023). Shava and Chamisa (2018) highlight that the South African Public Service is dysfunctional because of political interference and cadre deployment which prioritizes the recruitment and employment of loyal political party cadres with struggle and political party credentials without the necessary academic qualifications, experience, and skills. The authors clearly stated that this often breeds problems such as maladministration, corruption, and mismanagement of state resources as these candidates lack capacity and skills. A report of the PSC on the appointment and verification of senior management staff (SMS) qualifications showed that 176 of 3966 SMS were unqualified for the positions they occupy across various government departments which is a factor that contributes to the maladministration, corruption, and mismanagement of resources (Mavuso, 2024). These circumstances frequently result in negative audit results and inadequate service provision, causing communities to express their frustration through protests.

4.1.2 The lack of adequate institutional frameworks and capacity as a barrier to merit-based recruitment and enabler for cadre deployment

There are inadequate institutional frameworks that underpin recruitment processes in the South African public service, some of these inadequacies are prevalent because of capacity constraints. Musopero and Lee (2021) illustrate that the lack of capacity and institutional frameworks further exacerbates the challenges of implementing merit-based recruitment in South Africa. This is evidenced by the continuous undermining of the Public Service Commission (PSC) as the main institution responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of recruitment processes (Jarbandhan, 2022). Mokgolo and Dikotla (2023) allude that the inability of oversight bodies such as the PSC to effectively monitor and evaluate recruitment processes due to capacity constraints, limited powers, political interference, and lack of cooperation from government departments and institutions undermining merit-based recruitment and subsequently perpetuates political patronage and nepotism. The practice of cadre deployment and political interference is inconsistent and leads to underperformance in government departments and institutions like the Electricity Supply Commission (ESKOM), Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), and South African Airways (SAA) (Mlambo et al., 2022). As a result, these entities require substantial financial assistance annually to maintain their operations.

4.1.3 Affirmative action as a barrier to merit-based recruitment

Affirmative action in the South African public service advocates for equity and representation, this concept was legislated through the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 (Omar, 2020). From a South African context, Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 was aimed at promoting the representation of previously disadvantaged groups in the workplace through the recruitment of black people, women, and people with disabilities. Although that is the mandate of affirmative action, several researchers perceive it differently. Firstly, Omar and Kiley (2022) argue that affirmative action is a dividing tool that is aimed at promoting representation and equity in the workplace for marginalized groups. Thaver (2017) contends that the policy constitutes reverse discrimination and surpasses the merit-based principles. This argument is echoed by April et al. (2023), who note that despite its well-meaning purpose, affirmative action is a form of reverse discrimination as it benefits one segment of society

while disadvantaging another. This shows that in South Africa this phenomenon creates tension with meritocracy as it overrides the importance of merit practices in recruitment.

This is primarily due to the fact that affirmative action emphasizes the hiring of individuals from previously disadvantaged groups, regardless of their suitability and fulfillment of the minimum position requirements (Fershtman & Pavan, 2021). This act comes with transformational targets and quotas which contentiously contribute to the tension between equity and meritocracy in public service recruitment practices. The Zondo Commission report on state capture showed that affirmative action had a role in the undermining of meritocracy and merit-based recruitment as government processes were manipulated using affirmative action as a shield, this problem continues to affect the modern public service in South Africa (Zondo, 2022). Notable examples of this include the appointment of Dudu Myeni as chairperson of SAA despite her lack of experience due to affirmative action and redress (Zondo, 2022). Moreover, this highlighted that recruitment practices made in favour of political parties, redress, representation, equity over merit, experience, and qualifications in Public Service tend to make institutions such as SAA vulnerable to corruption, mismanagement, and poor performance.

4.1.4 The skills gap as a barrier to implementing merit-based recruitment

Mkhonza and Letsoalo (2017) argue that the skills gap caused by the past regime has an impact on what has characterized the public service in the last 30 years. This proves that the skills gap is another factor that contributes to the challenges of implementing merit-based recruitment in the public service of South Africa. This challenge is significant and detrimental to the effectiveness and functioning of the public service as the lack of skilled and qualified employees results in the lack of competence and efficiency which negatively impacts the delivery of public services and contributes to the decline in public trust and confidence in the public service (Thusi & Chauke, 2023). A report by the Auditor General of South Africa in 2017 shows that municipalities performed poorly in terms of financial management and service delivery due to the lack of skilled and qualified staff in key positions, this was backed by a National Treasury report which found that only 57% of senior managers in government departments and entities had the necessary qualifications between 2015 and 2019 (National Treasury, 2022). Nkgapele and Mokgolobotho (2024) additionally highlight that talent shortages persist in the public service, particularly in critical fields like information

communication technology, health, education, and engineering, predominantly within local government.

4.1.5 The best international practices for implementing merit-based recruitment

The challenges of merit-based recruitment overshadow the positive aspects of implementing merit-based recruitment. Adenlawo and Chaka (2024) posit that merit-based recruitment practices from developed countries are characterized by transparency and objectivity which are deemed foundational steps towards professionalizing the public service and building effective institutions that advance the delivery of quality services to citizens. South Africa can transform and revolutionize its public service by adopting international practices that promote transparent and effective recruitment processes that prioritize merit over patronage (Jarbandhan, 2022). This will lead to improved service delivery, efficiency, and greater accountability and trust in public service. However, international cases illustrate that the transformation of public service through merit-based recruitment practices takes place over time with the help of strong monitoring and evaluation to ensure progress is being made (Nalubega & Uwizeyimana, 2019). On the other hand, Haider (2019) indicates that the execution of merit-based recruitment processes might be burdensome and sometimes extremely costly. The author also notes that the expenses affect not only the applicants but also the selection committees, which must review the applications.

Mavuso (2024) highlights the importance of shared consensus and participation from all stakeholders, including government, civil society, and the private sector in the implementation bringing back the importance of stakeholders such as the PSC and government departments such as the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). Western Countries to this day have targeted recruitment programs for underrepresented groups, which can be redesigned and tailored to suit the local context of South Africa against the abuse of policies such as Affirmative action and the Employment Equity Act in favour of cadre deployment and political interference (Konateh et al., 2023). Moreover, Ashton (2022) shows that the Public Service in South Africa relies on anti-corruption measures such as background checks from AfiSwitch and Managed Integrated Evaluation (MIE) against the rigorous systems and standards used in developing countries that operate in a manner that favour merit-based recruitment. In other countries, governments have internal systems that conduct background checks for all candidates, mandatory conflicts of interest disclosures, and the use of anti-fraud

software and data analytics to detect any irregularities in recruitment practices to ensure that public service prioritizes merit over patronage (La Cascia et al., 2020).

On the other hand, developed countries use e-government initiatives to streamline recruitment processes, through online applications, assessments, automated interview scheduling, and electronic communication with candidates (Koman, Toman, Jankal & Borsos, 2024). Within the sphere of Public Service in South Africa, e-government initiatives have been introduced but they encounter obstacles, such as difficulties for rural community members in accessing electronic recruitment due to inadequate or unreliable internet connectivity (Nkgapele, 2024). Additionally, certain government bodies have made little to no attempt to adopt e-recruitment. This is evidenced by government institutions and departments still utilizing paper-based Z83 forms, which are submitted by mail or in person to government offices. Nevertheless, communication and scheduling are conducted electronically. This situation has created opportunities for recruitment processes to be manipulated, undermining meritocracy.

4.2 Discussion
4.2.1 The lack of political will and political interference

The findings of this study suggest that the merit-based recruitment process within South Africa's public service is compromised by factors including insufficient political commitment, political interference, patronage networks, poor institutional structures, and a shortage of skilled and qualified staff. Political commitment is crucial for implementing merit-based recruitment; however, South Africa experiences considerable shortcomings in this area. Public service leaders frequently give priority to political loyalty and patronage rather than competence, fostering a culture of nepotism and cronyism that undermines public trust and impedes service delivery. Political interference, coupled with practices like cadre deployment, leads to the appointment of unqualified individuals in critical roles, thereby weakening institutional effectiveness. This issue is highlighted in the PSC report, which shows that many senior managers do not possess the necessary qualifications. Such practices result in poor administration, corruption, and inefficiencies, as observed in organizations like Eskom and SAA which depend heavily on financial bailouts. Tackling political interference and promoting accountability are crucial for restoring the integrity of recruitment processes and ensuring effective service delivery.

4.2.2 Affirmative action and the skills gap

The findings indicate that affirmative action, which is enshrined in the constitution of the country through the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 to redress past inequalities and the legacy of discrimination through promoting the representation of historically disadvantaged groups, however, the implementation of affirmative action has fraught challenges. The issue of affirmative action in recruitment processes is complex and multi-faceted in South Africa (Shava & Chamisa, 2018). In truth, affirmative action has been misused to appoint individuals based on their demographic characteristics, rather than their skills and experience. This has led to the appointment of unqualified individuals, which undermines the effectiveness and professionalism of public service and contributes to a decline in service delivery standards. The findings of the study further revealed that the practice of affirmative exclusion in senior management positions has far-reaching consequences for the effectiveness of government institutions in South Africa. Proving that affirmative action in the public sector has a devastating impact on the quality of public service, eroding public trust and confidence in the government's ability to deliver on its mandate.

In addition, affirmative action in senior management positions creates a sense of disillusionment among qualified and experienced individuals who are passed over for promotion or appointment due to their demographic characteristics. This can lead to a brain drain, as skilled and experienced individuals seek opportunities elsewhere, which is a factor that weakens the capacity of government institutions to deliver effective services and the ability to retain skilled individuals, leading to skills gaps and shortages (Mkhonza &Letsoalo, 2017). The findings of the study demonstrate that the current skills gap in South Africa is a significant problem that exacerbates challenges faced by the public service. The lack of qualified and skilled for senior management positions has been identified as a major factor contributing to the inability of public service to effectively deliver on its mandate to effectively implement merit-based recruitment. Moreover, the skills gap is also perpetuated by the practice of affirmative action in recruitment processes, which often leads to the appointment of individuals based on their demographic characteristics rather than their skills and experience. This exacerbates the skills gap as qualified and experienced candidates are overlooked in favour of less qualified candidates. The findings show that this is a significant challenge that undermines the effectiveness of merit-based recruitment practices in the South African public service. The disconnect between equity objectives and competency needs weakens the efficacy of public

services and erodes public confidence. To reconcile equity with meritocracy, South Africa needs to adjust affirmative action policies to focus on skill development and capacity building in conjunction with diversity objectives.

4.2.2 Lessons from international best practices

The study highlights the importance of drawing lessons from the experiences of other countries in implementing merit-based recruitment practices. Countries like Singapore, Canada, and New Zealand have adopted transparent and objective recruitment processes, leveraging strong institutional frameworks and e-government initiatives (Jarbandhan, 2022). These practices enhance accountability, reduce corruption, and promote efficiency in public service. However, adopting such models in South Africa requires addressing systemic challenges, including political interference, capacity constraints, and limited technological access in rural areas. Strengthening oversight bodies like the PSC, integrating anti-corruption tools, and expanding e-recruitment systems are critical steps. Adapting global practices to fit South Africa's distinct socio-political landscape, along with encouraging stakeholder collaboration, can assist in creating a merit-based recruitment system that fosters fairness, proficiency, and confidence. These conclusions indicate that South Africa has the potential to draw lessons from other countries' experiences and adopt optimal practices in merit-based hiring processes.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper shows that merit-based recruitment is a critical component of a well-functioning and effective public service as it promotes transparency, accountability, and the recruitment and selection of qualified individuals based on their skills, knowledge, and experience. However, the South African public service continues to battle several limitations in implementing merit-based recruitment due to political interference, institutional capacity, skills shortages, a lack of political will, and tensions between affirmative action and meritocracy. These issues undermine the integrity of recruitment processes and impede the ability of the public service to deliver public services and maintain the trust of citizens. The paper's findings led to the formulation of recommendations to tackle the challenges of merit-based recruitment in South Africa's public service: Strengthening monitoring and evaluation measures employed by the Public Service Commission (PSC) in order to effectively promote

and oversee the implementation of merit-based recruitment processes in the public service; Ensure that affirmative action is implemented in a transparent and non-discriminatory manner with a focus on addressing past inequalities while also maintaining high standards of professionalism and meritocracy in the public service; Introduce strict regulations in the recruitment and selection process of senior management staff to guard against cadre deployment in favour of meritocracy and skills; The government should use the National School of Government to address skills gaps and ensure that qualified and skilled candidates are available for recruitment in the public service; and South Africa needs to continuously improve and benchmark best practices from other countries to ensure that their systems are in sync and informed by world standards to leverage the potential and advantages of merit-based recruitment.

Disclosure statement

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