Advancing public service professionalism: A path towards effective governance in South Africa

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore the significance of advancing public service professionalism to achieve effective governance in South African public sector, laying the groundwork for exploring the underlying principles and strategies in this endeavor. Advancing public service professionalism not only serves as a catalyst for enhancing governance outcomes but also plays a pivotal role in fostering trust, accountability, and inclusivity within government institutions. The study adopted a qualitative semi-systematic literature review with the aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of professionalism in South African public sector, the role of the government in professionalizing and its importance in improving service delivery. Data was collected from extensive literature using documents from 2015 to 2024, extracted from Scopus, Google Scholar, Sabinet, and Web of Science databases. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The articles established that systemic issues such as corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, political interference, and capacity constraints undermine the ability of the public sector to meet the diverse needs of citizens. The study concludes that by leveraging the insights gleaned from literature policymakers can formulate evidence-based strategies to address systemic challenges and cultivate a culture of excellence, integrity, and accountability within the public sector.

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1. Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has immense potential to improve the lives of millions across the globe. The last two decades have seen technology rapidly transforming the world. In modern societies, the efficiency and effectiveness of public services are crucial for the well-being of citizens. A key aspect of improving public services lies in professionalizing the individuals who work within them. The journey towards a professionalized public service involves elevating standards, enhancing skill sets, and fostering a culture of excellence (Singo & Mafunisa, 2023). In contemporary governance discourse, the quest for effective governance remains a paramount concern for nations worldwide.

Central to this pursuit is the professionalization of public service, which serves as a critical pathway towards ensuring accountability, transparency and efficiency within government institutions (Habib, 2020). In contemporary governance, the advancement of public service professionalism stands as a pivotal endeavor to ensure effective governance. Professionalism within public service encompasses competencies, integrity, and accountability, all geared towards serving the public interest diligently (Jarbandhan, 2022). By enhancing service delivery, strengthening governance structures, fostering innovation, and building public trust, professionalization becomes instrumental in achieving efficient and citizen-centric governance. Strategies such as rigorous recruitment, continuous training, performance management, ethics promotion, and collaborative initiatives are fundamental in cultivating a skilled, ethical, and competent public service workforce (Menbarrow, 2021).

As societies navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the professionalization of public service emerges as a cornerstone for sustainable development and the realization of democratic principles. This article delineates the significance of advancing public service professionalism to achieve effective governance, laying the groundwork for exploring the underlying principles and strategies in this endeavor. In South Africa, after the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa embarked on extensive civil service reforms to transform its public sector. This included efforts to address inequalities, improve service delivery, and increase the efficiency of government institutions. Zindi and Ndhlovu (2023) however, expressed worry regarding South Africa's inefficient service delivery system. They contended that the government's inability to supply basic services led to protracted service delivery riots around the nation. The South African government needs to invest in nurturing and maintaining talent if it is to meet the problems facing the public sector.

Consequently, professionalizing the public sector is one of its top policy priorities since it can successfully change and bring about public sector reform (Habib, 2020). To ensure the growth of their professional skills and capabilities toward optimally fulfilling their duties, executives and support staff in the public sector must adopt and maintain professionalization (Maserumule, 2022). The reforms involved restructuring government departments, implementing performance management systems, and enhancing recruitment processes to promote diversity and professionalism (Kaizer, 2022). The idea of professionalism in public service has changed over time to reflect changes in global trends, technological developments and societal expectations. Traditionally, bureaucratic systems emphasizing rule-based procedures have been the hallmark of public administration (Ndevu & Muller, 2017). To address the intricate issues of the modern world, Obed (2023) argued that the public sector must, nonetheless, modernize and become more professional in the coming decades. Professionalizing the public sector can therefore help the public sector to carry out its mandates in an ethical and successful manner. The goal of professionalizing the public sector is to improve public financial management and leadership via development, training and education.

The developments in new governance paradigms, globalization, and democratization have all had an impact on the professionalism of public service efforts. These elements have emphasized how crucial it is to have knowledgeable, moral, and responsible employees that can provide high-quality services and build public confidence (Menbarrow, 2021). Even though the value of professionalism in public service has been acknowledged, many government agencies still struggle to ensure that their employees uphold high levels of professionalism. Efforts to professionalize the public sector are hampered by problems like ethical failings, poor performance management systems, bureaucratic inertia, and inadequate training and development programs (Hagelund, 2016; Obed, 2023).

Despite a growing body of scholarship on governance reform in South Africa, most of the literature concentrated on issues such as corruption, accountability, and institutional capacity. While these themes are important, there is comparatively less emphasis on public service professionalism as a foundational driver of effective governance. Existing studies often examine professionalism narrowly in relation to compliance with codes of conduct or ethical frameworks, but they seldom interrogate the broader dimensions such as continuous skills development, value-based leadership, meritocratic recruitment, and fostering a culture of service excellence within the public sector (Bamidele et al., 2020; Maserumule, 2022; Singo

& Mafunisa, 2023). Furthermore, much of the available literature remains descriptive, outlining challenges without offering integrated, context-specific strategies that link professionalism directly to measurable improvements in governance outcomes. This creates a clear gap in the research, as there is limited empirical and conceptual exploration of how strengthening professionalism in the South African public service could serve as a lever for rebuilding trust, improving service delivery, and advancing sustainable governance reforms. Addressing this gap is essential, particularly in light of persistent governance failures and declining public confidence in state institutions.

The rapid pace of technological innovation and the increasing complexity of societal problems further exacerbate these challenges, necessitating a renewed focus on enhancing the professionalism of public servants to effectively address emerging issues (Crocker, 2020). Hence, this study addresses the following objectives:

1. To identify the challenges and barriers hindering the professionalization of the public service.
2. To assess the impact of professionalized public service on governance outcomes, such as service delivery, transparency, and public trust
3. To explore strategies and best practices for promoting and sustaining professionalism within government institutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Professionalism as a Concept

The term "professionalism" originates from the word "profession". According to Matshabaphala (2014), it refers to a vocation or occupation that requires specialized training, knowledge, skills, and often formal education. Professions typically have a code of ethics, standards of practice, and sometimes require licensing or certification. Examples of professions include medicine, law, engineering, teaching, accounting, and many others. Hence, professionalism in the public sector can be conceptualized as a set of values, attitudes, behaviors, and standards that guide the conduct of public servants in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities (Maserumule, 2022). Stillman (2017) further defines professionalism as adhering to high standards of competence, integrity, accountability, and ethics. It involves not only acquiring the necessary qualifications and expertise but also embodying a commitment to serve the public diligently. At its core, professionalism in the public sector emphasizes the

delivery of quality services, upholding ethical principles, and maintaining accountability to citizens and stakeholders (Habib, 2020; Kaizer, 2022; Obed, 2023). Professionalized public servants possess the skills to navigate complex challenges, make informed decisions and deliver services efficiently.

Professionalism ensures that public servants have the requisite skills and knowledge to provide quality services to citizens. This leads to improved outcomes in areas such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social welfare (Dyrud, 2020). More so, a professionalized public service fosters transparency, accountability and trust in government institutions. This, in turn, promotes good governance and strengthens democratic principles. Professional development encourages innovation and the adoption of best practices within the public sector. Ahmad and Saad (2020) acknowledge that professionalism enables public servants to adapt to changing circumstances, embrace new technologies and find creative solutions to emerging challenges. Citizens are more likely to have confidence in government institutions staffed by competent and ethical professionals. Professionalism helps mitigate corruption, nepotism and favoritism, thus enhancing public trust in the integrity of public services.

2.2 Key Dimensions of Public Service Professionalism

Analyzing the key dimensions of public service professionalism provides insight into the core attributes and behaviors that define effective and ethical governance. The following dimensions, competency, integrity, accountability and ethical conduct, play a critical role in ensuring that public servants uphold the highest standards of professionalism.

According to Mlambo et al. (2022), professionalism in public service leads to enhanced service delivery by ensuring that public servants have the necessary skills, expertise, and resources to meet citizens' needs effectively. Competent and well-trained public servants are better equipped to deliver high-quality services, address complex challenges and respond to citizen inquiries and requests promptly. Professionalization promotes efficiency, accountability, and innovation in service delivery processes, leading to streamlined procedures, reduced bureaucratic red tape, and faster response times (Afegbua, 2015). By focusing on continuous improvement and best practices, professionalized public service organizations can optimize resource allocation, prioritize service delivery initiatives, and adapt to changing circumstances and citizen demands.

Transparency: Professionalization fosters transparency in governance by promoting adherence to ethical standards, accountability mechanisms, and open communication practices. Public servants who operate with integrity and professionalism are more likely to uphold transparency principles, disclose relevant information, and engage stakeholders in decision-making processes (Zindi & Sibanda, 2022). Professionalized public service organizations implement robust systems for monitoring, reporting, and auditing activities to ensure compliance with legal and regulatory requirements and promote accountability (Kaizer, 2022). Transparent governance practices enhance public confidence in government institutions, facilitate citizen participation, and mitigate the risk of corruption, fraud, and mismanagement

Public Trust: Professionalized public service is a cornerstone of building and maintaining public trust in government institutions and officials. According to Jarbandhan (2022), trust in government is strengthened when public servants demonstrate competence, integrity, and accountability in their interactions with citizens and stakeholders. Professionalization contributes to a positive organizational culture characterized by ethical conduct, merit-based decision-making, and a commitment to serving the public interest. Transparent and responsive governance practices, coupled with effective service delivery, reinforce citizens' confidence in the government's ability to address their needs, protect their rights, and deliver on its promises (Menbarrow, 2021) Conversely, a lack of professionalism, ethical lapses, or perceptions of incompetence within the public service can erode public trust, fuel skepticism, and undermine the legitimacy of government institutions.

Competency: Competency refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that public servants must possess to effectively perform their duties and responsibilities (Obed, 2023). In the context of public service, competency encompasses both technical expertise related to specific job functions and broader competencies such as problem-solving, communication, and leadership skills (Singo & Mafunisa, 2023). Public servants are expected to have the necessary qualifications and training relevant to their roles, whether they are in healthcare, education, law enforcement, or other fields. Competency in technical areas ensures that public servants can effectively carry out their duties and contribute to the delivery of quality services (Afegbua, 2015). Sometimes, public servants encounter complex challenges and issues that require analytical thinking, creativity, and adaptability. Competency in problem-solving enables public servants to identify root causes, evaluate potential solutions, and make informed decisions to address issues effectively (Dyrud, 2020). Effective communication is essential for

public servants to interact with colleagues, stakeholders, and the public. Competency in communication involves the ability to convey information clearly and concisely, listen actively, and engage in constructive dialogue to build consensus and resolve conflicts (Jarbandhan, 2022).

Leadership: Leadership is also crucial for public servants in supervisory or managerial roles to inspire and motivate their teams, foster collaboration, and drive organizational change (Dyrud, 2020). Effective leadership promotes a culture of excellence, innovation, and continuous improvement within public institutions. For example, in the healthcare sector, competency is crucial for ensuring that medical professionals provide high-quality care to patients. This includes having the necessary medical knowledge, technical skills, and expertise to diagnose and treat illnesses effectively. Bamidele et al. (2020) posit that a competent physician accurately diagnoses a patient's condition, prescribes appropriate treatment based on evidence-based medicine, and monitors the patient's progress to achieve optimal health outcomes.

Integrity: Integrity is the adherence to moral and ethical principles, honesty and consistency in actions and decisions (Gruzd, 2020; Mlambo et al., 2022). In the public service context, integrity is paramount for building trust with citizens, maintaining the legitimacy of government institutions, and upholding the rule of law. Public servants are expected to be truthful and transparent in their interactions with stakeholders and the public. They should provide accurate information, disclose potential conflicts of interest, and avoid misrepresentation or deception. Menbarrow (2021) mentions that integrity requires public servants to act impartially and without bias when making decisions or administering policies and should treat all individuals fairly and equitably, regardless of personal beliefs, affiliations or socioeconomic status.

Ethical Conduct: According to Singo (2018), ethical conduct involves adhering to moral principles, values, and professional standards in all aspects of work. In public service, ethical conduct is essential for maintaining public trust, upholding the rule of law, and safeguarding the integrity of government institutions. Public servants are expected to uphold the rule of law and abide by legal and regulatory frameworks governing their conduct. They should ensure that laws and policies are implemented fairly and consistently, without discrimination or favoritism. More importantly, public servants often handle sensitive information and personal data entrusted to them by citizens or government agencies. Ethical

conduct requires public servants to maintain confidentiality, protect privacy rights, and safeguard sensitive information from unauthorized disclosure or misuse (Singo, 2018; Jarbandhan, 2022). Many public service organizations have established codes of conduct or ethics guidelines outlining expected behaviors and standards of professional conduct. Public servants are expected to familiarize themselves with these codes and adhere to them in their interactions with colleagues, stakeholders, and the public (Dyrud, 2020).

2.3 Civil Service Reforms in African Countries Towards Professionalisation of Public Service

The perceived inefficiency and corruption in the public sector prompted civil service reform in African nations in the 1980s. In contrast to previous decades, Tanzania and other African countries saw a reduction in the efficiency of their civil services (Maserumule, 2022). The reforms aimed to reduce the size of the civil service and streamline operations to address these issues. Tanzania's experience in the 1960s and early 1970s provides a dramatic illustration of how efforts to combat corruption and restore efficiency were made in the civil service through reform (Ndlovu et al., 2022). In contrast to subsequent years, Tanzania's civil service was more efficient and impervious to corruption in the 1960s and early 1970s, despite its smaller size. Under the direction of President Julius Nyerere, this period saw a significant emphasis on public service and a dedication to socialism, the civil service was distinguished by a commitment to accountability, professionalism, and dedication (Stillman, 2017). But as time went on, the civil service grew quickly, becoming bloated and ineffective. In response, various reform measures were implemented to improve the performance of the public service sector.

Many African countries embarked on programs to downsize their civil service, reducing the number of employees to make it more efficient. This involved restructuring, reorganizing, and sometimes even retrenching civil servants to eliminate redundancies and improve productivity (Dyrud, 2020). For example, in Nigeria, the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the 1980s included measures to downsize the civil service. More so, the Civil service reforms aimed to introduce merit-based systems for recruitment, promotion and retention of employees. This was intended to ensure that positions were filled by qualified individuals based on their skills, qualifications, and experience rather than political patronage or nepotism (Evetts, 2011). For instance, Ghana implemented reforms to strengthen its civil

service by emphasizing meritocracy and professionalism. The investments in training and capacity building programmes were made to enhance the skills and competencies of civil servants. This included providing opportunities for professional development, specialized training, and skills upgrading to improve service delivery (Afegbua, 2015). Countries like Kenya focused on developing training institutions and programs tailored to the needs of the civil service (Ahmad & Saad, 2020).

In addition, African countries' introduced performance management systems and accountability mechanisms became crucial aspects of civil service reform. This involved setting clear performance targets, conducting regular evaluations, and implementing reward and sanction mechanisms based on performance outcomes. Uganda, for example, established performance contracts for civil servants to enhance accountability and productivity (Hagelund, 2016). The embracement of technology to modernize administrative processes and service delivery was another key component of civil service reform. Implementing e-government initiatives, digitizing records, and automating routine tasks helped streamline operations and improve efficiency (Menbarrow, 2021). Civil service reforms have been a significant aspect of governance across various African countries. While the focus may have shifted over time, efforts to improve efficiency, reduce bureaucracy, and enhance accountability have remained consistent.

Following the 1994 genocide, Rwanda underwent significant civil service reforms aimed at rebuilding state institutions and promoting national reconciliation (Ahmad & Saad, 2020). The government implemented measures to streamline bureaucracy, improve governance structures, and combat corruption. Rwanda's civil service reform efforts have been characterized by strong leadership, innovative approaches, and a focus on meritocracy and performance (Mlambo et al., 2022). In the early 2000s, Ghana undertook civil service reforms to modernize its public sector and improve service delivery. The government introduced measures such as the Single Spine Salary Structure (SSSS) to standardize salaries and reduce disparities among civil servants (Nelson & Treviño, 2021). Reforms also focused on enhancing transparency, accountability and professionalism within the civil service. In recent years, Ethiopia has implemented civil service reforms to strengthen governance and promote economic development (Sadeghi & Fekjaer, 2019). In order to improve service delivery, Tadesse (2019) pointed out that the Ethiopian government has undertaken initiatives to professionalize the civil service, improve human resource management practices and enhance

service delivery. Reforms have included the introduction of performance-based management systems and capacity-building programs for civil servants.

Nigeria has embarked on various civil service reform programs aimed at addressing inefficiencies and enhancing public sector performance. Ndlovu et al., (2022) mentioned that reforms have focused on digitizing government operations, improving service delivery, and promoting transparency and accountability. Initiatives such as the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) aim to streamline payroll processes and eliminate ghost workers. The Tunisian government also introduced service delivery reforms in its country. Okafor (2018) opines that following the Arab Spring in 2011, Tunisia initiated civil service reforms to address longstanding grievances and promote good governance. The government implemented measures to professionalize the civil service, enhance meritocracy and combat corruption. Reforms have included the establishment of independent oversight bodies and the adoption of new laws to promote transparency and accountability (Ndevu & Muller, 2017; Onuoha et al., 2021).

2.4 Guiding Theory: New Public Management (NPM)

New Public Management (NPM) is a theory that emerged in the 1980s and gained attraction worldwide as a response to perceived inefficiencies and bureaucratic obstacles within traditional public administration systems (Legreid & Christensen, 2017). It emphasizes principles borrowed from private sector management practices to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. In the context of South Africa, which has faced challenges related to corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability in its public sector, NPM can offer valuable insights and strategies for reform (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). According to Imperial (2021), the NPM emphasizes setting clear performance targets and holding public servants accountable for achieving them. In South Africa, implementing performance measurement systems and linking them to rewards and sanctions can incentivize professionalism and discourage corruption (Andersen et al., 2016). In line with NPM principles, South Africa has implemented performance management systems across various government departments and agencies. For instance, the Public Service Commission regularly evaluates the performance of public servants against predetermined targets and indicators. Through performance appraisals and performance-based incentives, such as bonuses or

promotions, professionalism is promoted, and accountability is enforced (Hodge & Greve, 2016).

The NPM advocates decentralizing decision-making authority to lower levels of government and empowering public servants to make decisions based on local needs and priorities (Frederiksen & Hansen, 2017). This can enhance responsiveness and efficiency in service delivery in South Africa, where centralized decision-making has often led to inefficiencies and delays. South Africa has made efforts to decentralize decision-making authority to provincial and local levels of government, in line with NPM principles (Alonso et al., 2015). For example, the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 empowers municipalities to manage their affairs and provide services tailored to local needs. This decentralization aims to enhance responsiveness and efficiency in service delivery by bringing decision-making closer to the citizens. The NPM suggests introducing market-like mechanisms such as competition and user choice into public service delivery to improve efficiency and quality (Hodge & Greve, 2016). In South Africa, this could involve outsourcing certain services to private providers or introducing competition among public agencies to provide services more efficiently. While South Africa's public sector traditionally operated as a monopoly provider of services, NPM principles have influenced the introduction of market-like mechanisms to promote efficiency and quality (Alonso et al., 2015). For instance, the Department of Basic Education has encouraged competition among schools through initiatives like the School Governing Body Elections, which allow communities to participate in the management of schools and promote accountability through competition for resources and performance.

The NPM underscores the importance of strong leadership and managerial capabilities within the public sector. Hodge and Greve (2016) mention that investing in leadership development programs and training initiatives can help cultivate a culture of professionalism and effective governance among public servants in South Africa. South Africa has recognized the importance of strong leadership and managerial capabilities within the public sector, aligning with NPM principles. For example, the National School of Government provides training and development programs for public servants to enhance their leadership and managerial skills (National School of Government (NSG) Report, 2020). Investing in such programs helps cultivate a culture of professionalism and effective governance by equipping public servants with the necessary competencies. The NPM emphasizes a customer or citizen-centric approach to public service delivery, prioritizing the needs and preferences of citizens.

In South Africa, promoting citizen participation and engagement in decision-making processes can help ensure that public services are responsive to the needs of the population (Zindi & Ndhlovu, 2023).

3. Methodology

A qualitative semi-systematic literature review was adopted for the study to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of professionalism in South African public sector, the role of the government in professionalizing and its importance. This paper reviewed current literature (on public sector professionalization) to broaden further the understanding of its challenges and prospects. The focus is not on the number of articles written on a particular topic but rather on the content of existing debates in understanding of the impact of professionalism in South African public sector. This study used Scopus, Google Scholar, Sabinet, and Web of Science databases to search for relevant articles on public sector professionalization articles, ensuring comprehensive coverage.

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) approach was then used to search for articles. The use of PRISMA had several advantages that fitted the semi-systematic nature of this article. The study adopts the PRISMA framework to guide data collection because it offers a robust and transparent method for conducting systematic literature reviews (Kumar, 2019). Since this research relies exclusively on secondary data, PRISMA provides a clear structure for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant academic sources in a way that minimises bias and enhances reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The framework ensures that all stages of the review process from database searching to eligibility assessment are systematically documented and replicable.

Using PRISMA also strengthens the methodological rigour of the study by enforcing predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, thereby improving the quality and relevance of the evidence synthesised. Additionally, the PRISMA flow diagram visually presents the progression of articles through the review process, enhancing clarity and enabling other researchers to trace the logic behind data selection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Overall, PRISMA is employed to promote credibility, consistency, and transparency, ensuring that the study's findings are grounded in a comprehensive and well-structured evidence base.

Table 1

Article retrieval limits

Retrieval Limit	Explanation
Database	Scopus, Google Scholar; Sabinet, and Web of Science databases
Search field	Title, abstract, keywords
Keywords	Professionalism AND South Africa", "Ethical Leadership AND public sector" OR "Professional Ethics in South Africa"
Open access	All
Years	2015-2024
Author names	Exclude unidentified names
Publication stage	All
Document Type	All
Affiliation	All
Country	South Africa
Source type	All
Language	English

Source: Researchers' Construction, 2025

As shown in Table 1, the search keywords were "Professionalism AND South Africa", "Ethical Leadership AND public sector" OR "Professional Ethics in South Africa". In the initial search which used the first three principles in Table 500 articles were identified. However, when the last 8 principles were applied, 200 articles were eliminated to remain with 300 articles. This number was still considered large for qualitative study. The search was narrowed down to select articles that has the term "Professionalism AND South African public sector" "Ethical Leadership AND in South Africa public sector" OR "Professional Ethics in South Africa public sector" in the title. This led to the exclusion of 130 articles to remain with 170 articles. The exclusion and inclusion criteria were then applied as shown Table 2 to determine whether they were in South Africa. An additional 100 articles were eliminated to remain with 70 articles.

The documents selected were then screened for inclusion in the study based on their titles and abstracts date of publication which were subsequently subjected to a full-text review to assess their relevance in the study. Documents that met the study's inclusion criteria were reviewed, and relevant information was extracted to support the presented arguments. Articles that used multi-case studies that included other countries outside South Africa were excluded. Furthermore, the authors left out all the articles that could not be downloaded. These additional

measures resulted in the elimination of 34 articles to remain with a sample of 36 which were then considered in the final analysis.

Table 2

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for documents used in the study

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Date	Government Documents must have been published between 2015 and 2025. Journal Articles and books must have been published between 2015 and 2024	Any government document published before 2015 was considered irrelevant. Journal articles that did not fall within the last 9 years. Books were published more than 10 years ago.
Topic	Documents regarding professionalism in the South African public sector. Documents regarding professional ethics in the public sector Documents regarding Ethical leadership in the public sector Newspapers regarding professionalization of the public sector.	documents not related professionalism and ethics South African public sector and not directly related to qualitative research. Newspapers not related to professionalization of the public sector
Language	Sources written in English.	Non-English sources.
Publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings Grey literature, i.e. reports Published books.	Non-peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings

Source: Researchers' Own Construction, 2025

Table 3

Reliability and credibility of secondary sources

Secondary data collection method	Reliability and credibility of the sources
Published Printed Sources	The researcher only used documents published by reliable and well-known publishers in 2015.
Books	These are the most authentic secondary sources.
Journals and Conference proceedings	These are reliable and up-to-date, providing data about a specific subject. The researcher utilised accredited journals as sources
eJournals	These were more readily available than printed journals. They are deemed credible as they are peer-reviewed.

Source: Researchers' Own Construction, 2025

The selected articles were then subjected to content analysis whereby the presence of themes was determined from the sampled articles. This analysis was manually, with no

computer software. Texts were read through to determine recurrent aspects in the texts. Latent coding is a strategy whereby aspects that share meanings were grouped together was then used. Thematic analysis was then deployed to group the identified aspects into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

4. Thematic Synthesis

The study findings revealed that challenges and barriers such as ethical dilemmas and corruption, lack of clear career paths and recognition, lack of training and development, bureaucratic structures, political interference and low salaries and benefits hinder the advancement of professionalism of the public service

Table 4

Themes emerging from the study

Themes	Description
Ethical Dilemmas and Corruption	Ethical dilemmas and corruption undermine the integrity of public service institutions and erode public trust in government
Bureaucratic structures	Bureaucratic structures and processes within the public service can sometimes hinder professionalization efforts by promoting rigid hierarchies and resistance to change
Political Interference	Political interference in the public service can undermine merit-based appointments, career progression, and decision-making processes
Low Salaries and Benefits	Low salaries can contribute to a lack of motivation and job satisfaction among public servants
Lack of Training and Development	Without adequate training, employees may lack the necessary expertise to navigate complex governance challenges and deliver high-quality services to citizens.

Source: Researchers' Own Construction, 2025

Theme1: Ethical dilemmas and corruption

The study findings showed that ethical dilemmas and corruption undermine the integrity of public service institutions and erode public trust in government. When public servants engage in corrupt practices or face ethical dilemmas without appropriate guidance or support, it damages the credibility of governance structures. The study findings underline Maserumule's (2022) argument that ethical dilemmas and corruption can undermine efforts to

professionalize the public service by eroding trust, integrity, and accountability. Advancing professionalism requires a commitment to upholding ethical standards and fostering a culture of integrity within the public service. In support, Zindi and Sibanda (2022) pointed out that in many municipalities corruption and maladministration have become endemic and lack of accountability or transparency in rendering services to the people is a cause for concern. Delays due to political interference led to massive service delivery backlogs, for example, handing over of housing units after they have been completed. Sometimes, it is a question of politics versus the needy. Ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest can undermine professional conduct and integrity within the public service (Kroukamp & Cloete, 2018). Pressure to prioritize political interests or personal agendas over the public good erodes trust in government institutions. Weak enforcement mechanisms and accountability frameworks may fail to deter unethical behavior or ensure compliance with ethical standards (Jarbandhan, 2022)

The results from the study established that corruption often exacerbates social inequality by diverting resources away from marginalized communities and vulnerable populations. Ethical lapses, such as favoritism or nepotism, can also perpetuate systemic injustices within the public service (Ndlovu et al., 2022). This finding correlates with Mello et al. (2020) who argue that bribery, fraud or nepotism can tarnish the reputation of government institutions and discourage qualified individuals from pursuing careers in the public sector. High-profile corruption scandals, such as those involving government contracts or procurement, can also damage public confidence in the integrity of the public service. Corruption scandals can tarnish the country's image on the global stage and deter foreign investment, hampering economic growth and development. Advancing professionalism requires a commitment to fairness, transparency, and accountability, ensuring that governance processes prioritize the needs and rights of all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic status or background.

Theme 2: Lack of clear career paths and recognition

The findings from the study showed that public servants face challenges in terms of career advancement and recognition for their contributions. Without clear career paths and opportunities for advancement, talented individuals may be deterred from pursuing careers in the public service or may seek opportunities elsewhere. For example, lack of transparent promotion processes or performance-based incentives can demotivate public servants and

hinder efforts to attract and retain top talent. In support, Mokoele et al. (2018) argued that without clear career paths, talented individuals within the public service may become disillusioned and seek opportunities elsewhere. This brain drain can weaken institutional knowledge and impede the development of effective governance structures. However, Sadeghi and Fekjaer (2019) emphasize that recognizing and rewarding excellence through defined career trajectories can incentivize talented professionals to remain within the public sector and contribute to its improvement.

The study results established that ambiguity surrounding career advancement and recognition can lead to demotivation among public servants. The findings are in line with Obed's (2023) observations when individuals perceive limited opportunities for growth and advancement, they may become disengaged, and their performance may suffer. A lack of clear career paths and recognition can undermine the principles of meritocracy and accountability within public service. Kroukamp and Cloete (2018) pointed out that without transparent criteria for advancement and acknowledgment of accomplishments, perceptions of favoritism or nepotism may arise, eroding trust in the integrity of governance institutions. Establishing merit-based systems for career progression and recognition reinforces accountability, ensuring that individuals are rewarded based on their performance and contributions to public service objectives.

Theme 3: Lack of training and development

The study found out that inadequate training and professional development opportunities can hinder the acquisition of essential skills and competencies of public servants. Insufficient investment in training and development programs can hinder the professionalization of the public service. Dyrud (2020) mentions that when public servants lack the necessary skills and competencies to perform their roles effectively, it can lead to substandard service delivery and a lack of confidence in government institutions. Qwabe and Ojogiwa (2022) pointed out that inadequate training for frontline staff in customer service skills can result in poor interactions with citizens and a negative perception of the public service. Training and development programs are essential for equipping public service professionals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to perform their roles effectively. Without adequate training, employees may lack the necessary expertise to navigate complex governance challenges and deliver high-quality services to citizens. Advancing

professionalism requires a commitment to continuous learning and skill development within the public service.

Theme 4: Bureaucratic structures

The results from the study reviewed that bureaucratic structures and processes within the public service can sometimes hinder professionalization efforts by promoting rigid hierarchies and resistance to change. Resistance to new ideas, methods, and technologies can hinder efforts to modernize and professionalize the workforce. Sadeghi and Fekjaer (2019) mention that inflexible administrative procedures and hierarchical decision-making may impede agility and responsiveness to evolving challenges. For instance, cumbersome procurement procedures or lengthy approval processes can delay service delivery and frustrate public servants who are trying to innovate or improve efficiency. Tadesse (2019) added that organizational cultures resistant to change can obstruct efforts to introduce new practices, standards and technologies. Public servants accustomed to traditional ways of working may be hesitant to adopt new approaches or embrace professional development opportunities. Fear of job insecurity or loss of status may create resistance among employees to organizational restructuring or performance improvement initiatives.

Theme5: Political interference

The study found out that political interference in the public service can undermine merit-based appointments, career progression, and decision-making processes. The findings correlate with Zindi and Sibanda (2022), who argued that, in South Africa, there have been instances where political appointments have been made to key positions in government departments based on loyalty rather than merit or qualifications. This practice can erode professionalism and lead to inefficiencies and corruption. Political influence and patronage can compromise merit-based recruitment, promotion, and decision-making processes within the public service. Onuoha et al. (2021) argued that partisan considerations may prioritize loyalty over competence, leading to the appointment of unqualified individuals to key positions. Short-term political agendas may undermine long-term efforts to professionalize the public sector by prioritizing immediate gains over sustainable reforms.

Theme 6: Low salaries and benefits

The results showed that one of the challenges affecting the advancement of professionalism in the public sector is low salaries and benefits of the workers. This makes it difficult to attract and retain top talent, particularly in specialized fields such as healthcare, engineering and education. Tadesse (2019) mentions that competitive salaries and comprehensive benefits are essential for attracting and retaining skilled professionals within the public service. When salaries are low and benefits are inadequate, talented individuals may be deterred from pursuing careers in public service or may seek employment opportunities elsewhere. This can lead to a shortage of qualified personnel, hindering the government's ability to effectively fulfill its governance responsibilities. According to Qwabe and Ojogiwa, (2022), low salaries can contribute to a lack of motivation and job satisfaction among public servants. When employees feel undervalued and financially strained, their morale and performance may suffer, ultimately impacting the quality-of service delivery to citizens. Sethu and Mafunisa (2022) added that inadequate compensation can also lead to issues such as absenteeism, turnover, and corruption, further undermining the effectiveness of governance mechanisms.

In a study done by Tadesse (2019), it was emphasized that adequate compensation is necessary to support professional development initiatives and training programs within the public service. Without sufficient resources allocated to these endeavors, employees may miss out on opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge, limiting their capacity to perform their duties effectively. Investing in professional development not only benefits individual employees but also strengthens the overall professionalism and competency of the public service workforce (Imperial, 2021).

5. Governmental Initiatives Towards Professionalization in South Africa

In South Africa, governmental strategies and efforts toward professionalization have been critical components of broader civil service reforms aimed at enhancing governance, efficiency, and service delivery. South Africa has undertaken initiatives to professionalize its civil service by enhancing recruitment processes, promoting meritocracy and improving training and development opportunities for civil servants.

5.1 Implementation of Performance Management Systems

South Africa has implemented performance management systems to set clear expectations, monitor employee performance, and provide feedback and recognition. This includes establishing performance objectives, conducting regular performance reviews, and linking performance to rewards and incentives. Imperial (2021) pointed out that by promoting accountability and transparency through performance management, South Africa aims to improve individual and organizational effectiveness within the civil service. Performance management systems are used to set expectations, provide feedback, and evaluate employee performance. Public service institutions establish clear performance standards and objectives aligned with organizational goals, and regularly assess employee performance through performance appraisals, goal-setting discussions, and performance feedback sessions (Sethu & Mafunisa, 2022). Jarbandhan (2022) mentioned that effective performance appraisal systems are essential for evaluating employee performance, providing feedback, and identifying areas for development.

5.2 Promoting Talent Management Among Employees

Obed (2023) indicates that talent management involves investing in the ongoing development and training of employees to enhance their skills, competencies, and performance. Talent management within public service institutions involves the strategic recruitment, development, retention, and deployment of skilled individuals to ensure the effective delivery of public services and the achievement of organizational goals (Stillman, 2017; Maserumule, 2022). Public service institutions engage in strategic workforce planning to align their human resources with organizational objectives and priorities. This involves forecasting future staffing needs, identifying critical skills and competencies, and developing recruitment and retention strategies to address gaps and ensure the availability of talent. Effective talent management begins with recruiting individuals with the right skills, qualifications, and values to fulfill organizational mandates.

5.3 Development of Human Resource Management Policies

The South African government has developed human resource management policies and frameworks to promote professionalism and ethical conduct within the civil service. These policies cover areas such as recruitment, performance appraisal, career development and

disciplinary procedures. The Public Service Act 1994 along with regulations and guidelines issued by the Public Service Commission (PSC), provides a legal framework for human resource management practices in the public sector. South Africa's HRM policies such as Employment Equity Act 1998, Labour Relations Act 1995 and Skills Development Act 1998 promote career development opportunities for civil servants to enhance their skills, competencies, and career progression within the public service. In addition, HRM policies outline disciplinary procedures to address employee misconduct, breaches of conduct, or performance issues within the civil service (NSG, 2020). These procedures adhere to principles of fairness, due process, and procedural justice. South Africa's civil service upholds ethical standards and a code of conduct to guide the behavior and actions of public sector employees. The Public Service Code of Conduct, as outlined in the Public Service Regulations, 2016, sets out principles of integrity, accountability, professionalism, and respect for the rule of law.

5.4 Implementation of the Batho Pele Principles

The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service Act 97 of 1995 aims at improving the functionality and administration of municipalities in terms of its services to promote transparency, accountability and public participation in the public sector. It encourages smooth flow and distribution of goods and services so as to meet the demands of the citizens. The implementation of the Batho Pele Principles in South Africa represents a commitment by the government to prioritize citizens' needs and improve the quality-of-service delivery across government departments. The Batho Pele principles emphasize professionalism in service delivery, requiring civil servants to demonstrate competence, integrity, and diligence in their interactions with citizens (Gruzd, 2020). At the core of Batho Pele is a commitment to meeting citizens' needs and improving their overall experience when interacting with government services.

5.5 Establishment of Professional Bodies and Associations

Professional bodies and associations play a crucial role in promoting professionalism and standards within specific sectors of the civil service. In South Africa, organizations such as the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) and the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM) provide platforms for networking, knowledge sharing, and professional development among public servants. The

establishment of professional bodies and associations in South Africa serves as a vital mechanism for promoting professionalism, fostering excellence and advancing the standards of practice within specific sectors of the civil service (Singo & Mafunisa, 2023). Menbarrow (2021) submits that professional bodies and associations provide platforms for civil servants to network, collaborate, and exchange ideas with peers, experts, and stakeholders within their respective fields. These networking opportunities facilitate the sharing of best practices, lessons learned, and innovative solutions to common challenges. For instance, annual conferences, seminars, and workshops organized by IPAM and SAAPAM, bringing together public servants, academics, policymakers, and practitioners to discuss emerging issues and trends in public administration and management. Professional bodies and associations serve as repositories of knowledge and expertise, disseminating information, research findings, and practical insights to members and the broader civil service community (Dyrud, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Advancing public service professionalism represents a critical pathway towards achieving effective governance in South Africa. This journey requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various challenges and opportunities within the public service landscape. Professionalism within the public service entails upholding high ethical standards, promoting integrity, and fostering a culture of accountability and transparency. By prioritizing professionalism, government institutions can enhance public trust, promote good governance practices, and ultimately improve the quality of services delivered to citizens. Key components of advancing professionalism include addressing issues such as low salaries and benefits, lack of training and development opportunities, cultural and diversity challenges, ethical dilemmas, and corruption. By tackling these challenges head-on, the government can create an enabling environment that empowers public servants to fulfill their roles with competence, dedication, and integrity. Ultimately, public service professionalism is not just a goal but a means to achieve broader objectives of effective governance, social justice, and sustainable development. By investing in the professionalism of its workforce and strengthening governance structures, South Africa can build a brighter future for all its citizens, grounded in principles of equity, accountability, and service to the public good.

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