Evidence-based research in public administration: A literature review on policy formulation and service delivery

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Abstract

Research is essential in public administration, supporting evidence-based policy making and effective service delivery. Despite its significance, integrating research into governance remains inconsistent, often leading to subpar policies and limited effects on service outcomes. While previous studies have explored evidence use in policy or service delivery, few have examined how research informs both areas comprehensively, especially in the South African context. Hence, this study aims to examine evidence-based research in public administration, with a focus on its role in policy-making and service delivery. Adopting an interpretivist approach and qualitative design, the study uses desktop data from published documents relevant to the subject. Guided by the Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) framework, the review systematically combines studies from published reports and journals, providing a context-specific and integrated view not covered in earlier reviews. Content and thematic analyses identified patterns in research utilization, theoretical connections, and interpretive insights on accountability and participatory governance. Findings indicate that research enhances informed decision-making, uncovers service gaps, supports transparency and accountability, and encourages citizen participation, although political interference, limited capacity, and resource constraints limit its impact. Despite the limited availability of rigorous, up-to-date studies, the depth of this review is restricted, underscoring the need for stronger evidence to inform public sector policy and service delivery. The study recommends institutionalizing research integration, boosting capacity, and adopting participatory approaches to maximize evidence use. This review contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of research's strategic role in promoting the use of evidence in policy development and service delivery.

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1. Introduction

Research is a foundational pillar of contemporary public administration, strengthening policy development and service delivery. Despite broad recognition of its importance, many governance systems struggle to systematically integrate research into decision-making, resulting in poorly designed policies and inconsistent outcomes. Implementing program goals defined by political authorities, as the public administration's core purpose, requires more than procedural compliance; it demands deliberate reliance on analytical evidence. As an academic discipline, public administration is grounded in governance principles that reflect the rights and responsibilities of active citizenship (Ismail & Hartati, 2023; Carboni et al., 2019). It therefore extends beyond bureaucratic maintenance to informed democratic engagement. Kroukamp (2009) emphasizes that advancing both theoretical and practical understandings of government depends on continuous research that generates and refines knowledge. From this standpoint, evidence-based policy is indispensable, as research directly informs policies, programs, evaluations, and projects that address socio-economic challenges and improve service delivery.

Evolving concerns within the field further underscore this need. Issues such as performance evaluation, governance reform, equity, sectoral development, and strategic management now shape everyday governmental practice (Wei et al., 2024). Yet, methodological foundations remain uneven, as public administration has historically borrowed approaches from disciplines such as political science that do not always align with administrative contexts, thereby limiting theoretical growth and practical impact (McDonald et al., 2022). Historically, research and practice were closely linked; Peters et al. (2022) highlight the Brownlow Committee as an example of research strengthening administrative accountability and executive governance. Reconnecting research with practice while enhancing empirical rigor is therefore essential. Continuous knowledge development is critical in dynamic governance environments (Kroukamp, 2009), particularly given public administration's central role in national development and welfare provision (Sunkad, 2024). Within frameworks such as South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, research becomes central to evidence-informed policymaking.

Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) theory further clarifies this relationship. Evidence-based decision-making systematically integrates the best available research with contextual and experiential insights to guide policy and program choices (Huidrom & Malhi, 2021). In South

Africa, Evidence-Based Policy-Making (EBPM) institutionalizes the use of research and evaluation to improve public outcomes (Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation, 2014). Evidence use strengthens accountability, organizational performance, and good governance. Although the broader Evidence-Based Everything (EBE) movement has faced criticism for overstated or inconsistent assumptions (McDonald et al., 2022), the principle that public decisions should be informed by credible evidence remains fundamental.

Research also equips scholars and practitioners to address real-world governance challenges. It cultivates critical thinking, encourages engagement with societal issues, and supports the development of theoretical and practical solutions (Ismail & Hartati, 2023). Transdisciplinary approaches enhance theoretical, empirical, and methodological rigor in public-sector scholarship (Meijer & Ettlinger, 2025). Strong methodological design and theoretical frameworks enable the testing and refinement of existing theories. Dissertation research, for instance, has advanced understanding of innovation, organizational change, and information technology in the public sector (Prentice, 1984), while applying rigorous research methods to public policy enhances precision and implementation effectiveness (Zhao, 2024).

Decision-makers function as logical agents who define problems, assess data, weigh alternatives, and select optimal courses of action (Aviram & Cohen, 2024). Scholars contribute by addressing complex questions related to public values and the administrative state (Carboni et al., 2019). Engagement with communities of practice strengthens the translation of practitioner concerns into theoretically grounded research. However, bridging theory and policy remains challenging. Debates on evidence use are often overly theoretical, with limited empirical examination of how policymakers incorporate evidence into real decisions (Newman, 2020; Pérez-González, 2024). Although evidence-based policymaking is increasingly used to assess intervention effectiveness, gaps persist between research recommendations and governmental implementation.

This study therefore examines the role of evidence-based research in public administration, focusing on its influence on policymaking and service delivery. Effective governance requires investment in research capacity and skilled professionals capable of generating and applying relevant evidence. While many studies affirm the value of research, few provide comprehensive secondary-data syntheses demonstrating how diverse forms of evidence are actually utilized in public institutions. Existing literature often remains theoretical and fragmented, with limited systematic analysis of how research shapes policymaking across

sectors or where implementation gaps occur. Addressing this fragmentation, the present study maps the relationship between research, policymaking, and service delivery from a context-specific perspective. As the bridge between policy intent and societal outcomes, public administration depends on the effective integration of research. Yet persistent reliance on political priorities over empirical insight undermines accountability, transparency, efficiency, and responsiveness. Accordingly, the central question guiding this study is: How can research be more effectively integrated into public administration to strengthen policymaking and enhance service delivery?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Evidence-Based Policy (EBP), as described by Lukey (2016). EBP is based on the premise that better policies and decision-making result when they are grounded in sound empirical evidence and rigorous rational analysis. This underscores the importance of structured and methodical approaches in public administration, demonstrating that decisions made without empirical grounding are at risk of inefficiency or bias. According to Smith-Merry (2020), the origins of evidence-based policy can be traced to a 1992 article by Guyatt and colleagues, which introduced the paradigm of "evidence-based medicine" in healthcare education. This cross-disciplinary transfer suggests that principles validated in one field, such as healthcare, can strengthen policy rigor in governance, although adaptation to socio-political contexts remains essential. Evidence-based policy relies on rigorous research whose results can be applied in policymaking, highlighting that policy effectiveness is closely linked to the credibility of the underlying evidence.

Kelly and Pande (2025) assert that the evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) movement is founded on the idea that when policy decisions are guided by the best available evidence rather than intuition, political expediency, or short-term interests, outcomes are more likely to benefit citizens. This suggests that EBP not only serves technical efficiency but also supports normative goals, such as fairness, transparency, and public accountability. Head (2016) further notes that advocates of EBP are better able to use evidence in policymaking and are closely linked to broader pressures for improving service delivery and accountability in democratic contexts. This indicates that evidence-driven approaches can act as levers for

reform, particularly where governance structures and service delivery mechanisms have historically been weak.

The integration of rigorous research evidence into public policy debates and internal public sector processes for policy evaluation and program improvement is therefore pivotal. Public administration systems benefit from systematic and repeatable analytical practices, which enhance the reliability of advice concerning the efficiency and effectiveness of policy options and potential alternatives. In this sense, research serves both a diagnostic and prescriptive function in policy planning.

Moreover, the application of evidence-based policy benefits from comparative analysis in public administration. Ayoubi and Noori (2025) note that comparative analysis enables policymakers to make more effective decisions by drawing on international experiences and empirical data. This emphasizes the analytical advantage of learning from global practices while tailoring interventions to local conditions. In evidence-based policymaking, research provides reliable data and analysis, ensuring that policy decisions are not driven by assumptions, bias, or intuition. Decisions devoid of empirical evidence risk reinforcing systemic inefficiencies and perpetuating inequities. Cantarelli et al. (2023) also emphasize that managing information for decision-making in public administration, management, and policy is crucial, given the growing pressure to adopt effective interventions and the rapid expansion of computational capacity. This highlights that while technological advancements amplify the potential impact of research, capacity building is necessary to ensure its effective utilization.

2.2. Role of Research in Policy Making

Van Thiel (2021) argues that public administration conducts research both into policy and for policy purposes, examining all stages of the policy cycle, from the initial setting of the policy agenda to its potential termination. This dual focus implies that research is not merely supportive but constitutive of policymaking, shaping the very processes through which policies evolve. Policy making, and policy itself, is heavily influenced by politics, and research in politics carries the same value as research in public administration. Although the two are distinct, they work together to ensure that effective service delivery emerges from policy decisions. This reflects the complex interplay between empirical evidence and political realities, suggesting that successful policy adoption requires navigating both rigor and pragmatism. Peters et al. (2022) assert that political factors play a significant, if not critical,

role in setting the administrative agenda, shaping how administrative institutions operate, and determining administrative decisions and outcomes. Consequently, even well-founded research may encounter barriers if political alignment is lacking, highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement within the research-policy nexus.

Policy and public administration, as central components of modern governance, directly influence social stability and development. Social research methods, essential for scientifically examining societal phenomena, play an irreplaceable role in shaping public policies and informing administrative practices. Smith-Merry (2020) emphasizes that rigor in research involves systematic processes of data collection, inscription, and interpretation, serving as a measure of validity in both academic inquiry and policy-making. The insistence on methodological rigor implies that policy interventions grounded in weak or anecdotal evidence are less likely to achieve desired social outcomes. Zida et al. (2017) note that EIPM enables more efficient decision-making, such as reducing time spent pursuing policies unsupported by evidence, thereby optimizing resource allocation. This demonstrates that evidence-based approaches enhance outcomes while promoting efficiency within public administration.

The meta-theoretical approach provides an analytical framework for addressing fundamental research questions in public decision-making (Christensen & Lægreid, 2025). Research plays a crucial role in practitioner-oriented fields such as public administration and management, guiding both theory development and the practices of managers and policymakers (Kroukamp, 2009). This suggests a reciprocal relationship, where practice informs research questions, and research, in turn, informs practice; a dynamic essential for adaptive governance. According to the Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (2014), evidence from policy and program evaluations and academic research is typically conducted with rigor and objectivity, aiming to establish a balanced body of knowledge.

Ayoubie and Noori (2025) emphasize that governments and decision-making bodies rely on comparative studies as credible sources for developing public policies and administrative reforms, highlighting research's strategic value as both a legitimizing and operational tool in governance. Parkhurst (2017) concurs that the EBP movement has particularly championed scientific evidence derived from research as the most appropriate form to inform policymaking. This implies that policymakers, particularly politicians in South Africa, should undertake rigorous research before developing policies. Scientific evidence

offers guidance in identifying societal needs, evaluating interventions, and selecting the most effective policy options. Nevertheless, this ideal is often overlooked, as policy decisions are frequently influenced by political power rather than empirical evidence, resulting in policies that may fail to address community needs or achieve intended outcomes.

2.3. Role of Research in Service Delivery

Public administration has contributed to cultural reform in organizations where the resource factor is a key determinant of a public institution's success. Insmail and Hartati (2023) assert that public administration fosters cultural reform in organizations where resources are critical to a public institution's ability to survive, thrive, and provide high-quality service to the community. This observation indicates that research is instrumental not only in policy formulation but also in shaping organizational cultures that support efficiency and effectiveness. The goal is to strengthen the prescriptive dimension of public administration and explore design-oriented factors that enhance evidence-based understanding of their effects on outcomes and impacts (Christensen & Lægreid, 2025). Research thus plays a dual role: explanatory, by identifying what works, and prescriptive, by guiding the implementation of best practices.

Kroukamp (2019) affirms that organizational success is closely linked to the ability to share and leverage knowledge to deliver predictable, high-quality services, demonstrating that knowledge management and research utilization are interdependent factors in effective service delivery. Mhlanga et al. (2021) argue that governments must invest heavily in research, development, and innovation activities, programs, and projects to ensure effective and sustainable service delivery. Such initiatives provide a foundation for strategic policies, frameworks, and models for public service provision, highlighting research's role in improving both immediate outcomes and long-term institutional resilience. Incorporating a research component to support municipal councils, for instance, could enhance governance efficiency by providing empirical findings for operational decision-making, reducing reliance on annual IDP processes often repeated for development projections (Juta et al., 2025). Similarly, the OECD (2020) emphasizes that evidence is critical for improving the quality, responsiveness, and accessibility of public services, demonstrating that systematic research underpins both operational and strategic decisions. Setyarto et al. (2022) note that in an increasingly modern era, public administration must prioritize wise, knowledgeable, responsive, and dedicated

services, further reinforcing the necessity of research-guided administration to meet contemporary societal expectations.

Ayoubi and Noori (2025) and Setyarto et al. (2021) emphasize that research highlights best practices, laying the groundwork for improved transparency, accountability, and good governance. In this context, public services are standardized, and best practices in service provision are both legally mandated and demanded by an increasingly globalized society (Alexander et al., 2021). Grossi and Argento (2022) similarly argue that research has advanced understanding of modern governance and helped reform accountability and transparency standards within public institutions. Collectively, these observations reinforce that research has a normative function, shaping not only the effectiveness of services but also the ethical and governance standards underpinning public administration.

2.4. Importance of Research in Public Administration

Widjaja and Rayshan (2025) define research as a systematic and methodical process undertaken to discover new knowledge, validate existing theories, or solve problems. Mahima (2021) further emphasizes that research is an organized inquiry employing accepted scientific techniques to solve problems and generate broadly applicable information. These definitions suggest that research serves both as a practical tool and a knowledge-generating enterprise, playing a crucial role in evidence-based public administration. Meijer and Webster (2025) assert that research is a powerful instrument for evidence-based policymaking, ensuring that policies are effective, well-informed, and aligned with societal needs. In this sense, research functions as a bridge between academic theory and administrative practice, aiming to uncover realities that have not yet been revealed (Swarooprani, 2025).

Cantarelli et al. (2023) note that the recent evidence-based movement is grounded in rationality, using scientific information to guide policy decisions. Widjaja and Rayshan (2025) highlight that research contributes to knowledge growth, informs decision-making, and addresses questions shaping multiple fields. This underscores the transformative role of research: it enables policymakers to adopt innovative approaches based on verified evidence. In public administration, research findings can be used to inform credible policy decisions, improve community services, and enhance living standards, demonstrating the social impact of research-driven governance. Juta et al. (2025) suggest that incorporating research as a formal

component of governance can strengthen decision-making, introduce new ideas, and guide the formulation of policies that address persistent public sector challenges.

Public administration is increasingly conceptualized as a governance-oriented discipline that emphasizes coordinated action, collective goal-setting, and the translation of societal priorities into actionable decisions (Peters et al., 2022). This perspective reflects a broader understanding of public administration as part of an epistemic project that integrates political choice, institutional design, and administrative rationality. Halden (2022) further asserts that public administration is a specialized domain within the science of administration, encompassing not only the executive branch but also the administrative dimensions embedded in legislative and judicial processes. Analytically, this indicates that the administrative state functions as a complex network of interdependent institutions whose effectiveness depends on coherent procedures, high-quality decision-making, and the systematic application of knowledge. Setyarto et al. (2022) reinforce this view by emphasizing that public administration supports both governmental and private actors in implementing policies efficiently, positioning administration as an enabling system that translates policy intentions into measurable public outcomes.

The purposive and evaluative nature of public administration underscores the need for continuous learning, adaptation, and responsiveness to evidence. Sunkad (2024) notes that public administration operationalizes laws, regulations, and policies to meet societal needs and advance public goals. This interpretation presents public administration as an evidence-oriented governance system in which actors rely on systematically generated, policy-relevant knowledge to anticipate problems, refine instruments, and enhance implementation capacity. This aligns closely with EBP theory, which maintains that public decisions should be grounded in credible empirical data, rigorous analysis, and context-specific evidence to ensure policy effectiveness, strengthen administrative accountability, and improve governance outcomes.

The relationship between research and public administration is increasingly recognized as central to the discipline's theoretical development and practical impact. Given its multidisciplinary foundation, public administration draws on empirical and analytical traditions from multiple fields, enriching its methodological diversity but also complicating its epistemological identity. Wessels and Thani (2021) observe that the discipline relies heavily on empirical social sciences, underscoring research as essential for generating evidence, guiding decision-making, and evaluating policy performance. However, this

multidisciplinarity can also lead to methodological fragmentation, as borrowed methods are sometimes applied without developing a distinct public administration epistemology.

The transformative potential of research is particularly evident in governance. Sunkad (2024) argues that studying public administration is critical for catalyzing positive changes in governmental systems. Peters et al. (2022) emphasize that public administration research often focuses on policy or program evaluations and problem-driven inquiries into complex societal issues, such as climate change, social cohesion, and governance turbulence. This demonstrates a shift toward addressing "wicked problems," where interdisciplinary research is indispensable. Yet, such research often suffers from limited methodological rigor, constrained data availability, and political sensitivities, highlighting the need for stronger scholarly engagement.

Methodological sophistication is central to the effectiveness of research in public administration. Zhao (2024) contends that systematic application of both quantitative and qualitative methods strengthens the scientific basis of policy formulation, enhances administrative efficiency, and promotes equity and justice. However, methodological rigor alone cannot resolve political interference, institutional inertia, or capacity constraints that may hinder evidence use. Itua and Monday (2024) note that quantitative approaches can monitor large-scale trends in poverty, education, healthcare, and infrastructure, but may overlook context-specific dynamics better captured through qualitative research. Integrating these approaches into administrative decision-making remains a critical challenge.

The South African context illustrates the complex interplay between research and public administration. The Department of Science and Innovation (2021) recognizes that collaboration among government, industry, civil society, and academia has substantial potential to drive socio-economic development through research, development, and innovation. The National Development Plan (2030) similarly emphasizes that evidence-based evaluation, planning, and implementation improve policy quality. Mthombothi (2023) reinforces that decision-makers, managers, and program implementers must rely on research to craft and execute public policies. However, the persistent disconnect between available research and its practical uptake suggests both structural and behavioral gaps.

Ayoubi and Noori (2025) further argue that transparency, coherence, effectiveness, and responsiveness in administrative systems depend on the extent to which managers utilize scientific studies, draft appropriate regulations, and implement meaningful reforms. Evidence-

informed governance is therefore a key driver of public trust and satisfaction, yet assumptions that evidence naturally leads to reform overlook political dynamics, vested interests, and institutional resistance that often hinder research translation into practice.

2.5. Challenges in the Integration of Research in Public Administration

Understanding the challenges that hinder the integration of research into public administration is essential for explaining why EBP often falls short of its potential. Contemporary public governance increasingly confronts complex, multifaceted problems that resist simple solutions, making the effective use of research critical. Carboni et al. (2019) argue that public affairs practitioners routinely face "wicked problems," such as inequality, climate volatility, and service delivery failures, which lack clear causes or universally acceptable solutions. This highlights the high-stakes environment in which practitioners operate and underscores a deeper tension: addressing wicked problems requires sophisticated evidence and interdisciplinary analysis, yet public institutions often lack the structures to mobilize such evidence systematically. As a result, research-informed interventions remain sporadic rather than embedded within policy processes.

The growing emphasis on evidence in governmental decision-making further complicates these challenges. McDonald et al. (2022) note that governments increasingly rely on evidence to justify policy choices and influence public opinion. While this indicates a positive shift toward evidence-informed governance, it also reveals a more contentious dimension: evidence itself can become a tool in intergovernmental conflict, with competing interpretations supporting divergent political agendas. Consequently, evidence may illuminate policy choices but also entrench disagreements, particularly when methodological disagreements, selective citation, or political bias influence interpretation.

Structural barriers at the institutional level further constrain the effective use of research. Matlala (2024) identifies key obstacles, including political interference affecting the prioritization of evidence-based policies, limited governmental capacity for interpreting evaluation results, inconsistent data across levels of government, and weak understanding of how research informs policy. Additional challenges include inadequate in-house research capacity, limited funding, low-quality outputs, conflicting findings, doubts about research legitimacy, and insufficient strategic guidance for research activities. These barriers suggest that EBP cannot thrive in environments where organizational culture undervalues research or

lacks the capacity to interpret and apply findings. The issue, therefore, is not merely the absence of evidence but the lack of institutional readiness to engage with it meaningfully.

Even when credible research is produced, its availability does not guarantee policy uptake. Kelly and Pande (2025) argue that generating robust and relevant evidence alone is insufficient to achieve policy influence, highlighting political, organizational, and behavioral filters that shape evidence use. Caboni et al. (2019) similarly emphasize that prevailing research approaches often overlook the lived experiences of practitioners responsible for implementing public policy. These practitioners possess experiential knowledge that is frequently excluded from formal research design, resulting in policy recommendations misaligned with operational realities. This gap reflects a broader issue: research may be methodologically rigorous yet practically disconnected, limiting its strategic value to governance.

Communication barriers further impede research uptake. Newman (2020) contends that researchers often produce lengthy, technical reports, while policymakers favor concise, actionable summaries. This divergence creates a persistent language barrier: complex academic outputs may be inaccessible or cumbersome for decision-makers tasked with rapid decision-making, leading to underutilization of evidence despite its relevance.

Context and applicability also pose challenges. Smith-Merry (2020) argues that co-created knowledge, such as consumer-led research or narrative exercises, may be highly valuable at the point of collection but have limited applicability in different contexts. This raises concerns about the generalizability of participatory findings and the risk of misapplication when context-specific knowledge is extrapolated beyond its intended environment.

A broader challenge is institutionalizing a culture of evaluation. Pellegrini and Vivanet (2021) assert that fostering a culture where policymakers not only use evidence but also proactively shape the research agenda is among the most significant obstacles to effective knowledge creation and utilization. Without an embedded evaluative mindset, evidence use remains ad hoc and reactive rather than systematic.

Capacity constraints and data limitations also present substantial obstacles, particularly in developing contexts. The United Nations (2020) highlights that insufficient reliable data and weak government capacity undermine policies intended to achieve tangible outcomes, such as urban environmental improvements. Osman and Cosstick (2025) note that while academics are

often motivated by the desire to generate evidence useful for policy, they frequently struggle to understand how their research can inform decision-making. This underscores the need for closer collaboration between academic researchers and public sector employees, forming tight-knit communities to facilitate effective knowledge translation.

Despite these challenges, governments worldwide are increasingly committed to evidence-based policy development and decision-making to ensure that policies align with societal needs (The Australian Government, 2023). Head (2016) observes that Australia and other prosperous Western nations have developed strong institutional foundations to nurture EBP capacities, though these enabling factors have evolved unevenly. Cormack et al. (2021) highlight that actors passionate about EBP praised Australia's and other nations' COVID-19 policy responses as a breakthrough for evidence-informed governance.

Practical examples of institutionalized EBP exist. In the UK, the What Works Networks, established in 2013, aim to make the best available evidence accessible for decision-making in government and other public sector organizations (Osman & Cosstick, 2025). Similarly, the UK Alliance for Useful Evidence promotes the use and expansion of social research and evidence (Parkhurst, 2017). However, OECD (2020) reports that although the UK government spends approximately £2.5 billion annually on research, only four out of 24 departments maintain a database of commissioned research, illustrating the uneven application of evidence in policymaking.

Institutionalized frameworks for EBP also exist elsewhere. Smith-Merry (2020) notes that WHO and the UK NICE Guidelines involve expert stakeholders in policy processes to ensure that evidence is credible, valid, and actionable. Pellegrini and Vivanet (2021) highlight the U.S. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which defines evidence levels (strong, moderate, promising) and incentivizes schools to adopt evidence-based practices. Parkhurst (2017) observes that in the U.S., EBP identifies societal problems, such as endangered species, obesity, unemployment, and vulnerability to natural disasters, quantifies their scope, and informs policy solutions and implementation strategies.

Despite these developments, evidence-to-policy translation remains limited. OECD (2020) reports that during the two Obama administrations, only 1% of government funding was guided by evidence. In South Africa, while 45% of senior policymakers intended to use evidence in policymaking, only 9% were able to do so in practice. These examples demonstrate

that the integration of evidence into policy is highly context-dependent and constrained by capacity, institutional design, and incentives.

Innovation and research and development (R&D) are also crucial for expanding evidence-based approaches. Thusi et al. (2023) highlight that government investment in R&D enhances internal and external knowledge to improve service provision. Ayoubi and Noori (2025) suggest that comparative research can inform practical policy guides for public administrators, promoting the adoption of best practices. The OECD (2025) emphasizes that fostering evidence-informed policymaking requires both investment in skills at the political-administrative interface and systemic approaches to building institutional capacity. These efforts are central to promoting good governance, achieving broad societal goals, and ensuring sustainable development and improved well-being.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring how meanings, understandings, and interpretations are constructed within public administration processes. The interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through analyzing texts, narratives, and contextual meanings rather than numerical measurement. Qualitative research focuses on the nature of phenomena, including their qualities, manifestations, contextual emergence, and perspectives, while excluding range, frequency, or cause-effect chains (Ugwu & Eze, 2023).

The interpretive nature of this analysis enabled the researcher to engage deeply with texts such as policy documents, evaluation reports, and academic literature to uncover how research is framed, cited, and applied within governance contexts. An interpretivist approach allowed critical examination of how research informs policy decisions and affects service delivery outcomes. This aligns with qualitative scholarship, which views documents as social artefacts revealing institutional behavior, policy intentions, and administrative challenges. To complement this paradigm, the study employed desktop (document-based) research.

Desktop research, or secondary research, involves analyzing existing data and literature to address research questions (Gupta, 2024). It is a recognized qualitative approach that draws on secondary sources to examine social and institutional phenomena without primary data collection. The study utilized an interpretive qualitative document analysis approach,

systematically reviewing and interpreting documents to identify patterns, meanings, discourses, and relationships. This approach is particularly suitable for understanding institutional practices and the role of knowledge in government decision-making processes.

3.2. Participants of the Study

The study relied exclusively on secondary data drawn from the following document categories: national and sectoral policy documents and white papers; government annual reports and strategic plans; departmental evaluation reports and program review documents; peer-reviewed journal articles on evidence use, policy processes, and service delivery; reports published by research institutions, think tanks, and NGOs; and parliamentary committee reports and oversight briefings. Search terms included research utilization, research and public administration, evidence-based policy, service delivery, and public administration. The search was limited to documents published between 2009 and 2025. The primary geographic focus was South Africa, with comparative international examples drawn from countries with advanced evidence-based policy practices, such as the U.K. and Australia. Documents exhibiting overt political bias, incomplete datasets, or unverified claims were excluded to maintain methodological rigor.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

A structured data extraction matrix served as the primary instrument for organizing and analyzing documents. The matrix captured: document metadata (title, year, author/institution); purpose and policy context; references to research evidence; descriptions of how research informed decisions; and identified barriers to research uptake. The instrument was piloted on a small sample of documents, refined for clarity, and then consistently applied across the full dataset. Data were collected from existing literature, policy documents, journals, and official reports related to public administration. This approach is widely used when analyzing policies, evaluation reports, and institutional documents. A total of 49 documents were retained for analysis.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability:

Credibility: Achieved through triangulation of multiple document types (policies, audits, evaluations, academic studies)

Dependability: Maintained through an audit trail documenting sources, extraction notes, coding decisions, and analytical procedures

Confirmability: Ensured through reflexive memo-writing and transparent presentation of evidence-based interpretations

Transferability: Achieved by providing thick descriptions of document contexts, enabling readers to assess applicability to other settings

Documents were also appraised for authorship, institutional reputation, methodological transparency (for evaluations), and internal consistency.

3.4. Data Analysis

Content analysis. The first stage involved qualitative content analysis, systematically identifying, categorizing, and mapping explicit references to research evidence within documents. This included locating where research was cited, the types of evidence used, and how research recommendations were integrated into policymaking or service delivery discussions. Content analysis enabled identification of recurring patterns and the frequency with which research appeared across different document types.

Thematic analysis. Following content mapping, thematic analysis was employed to generate deeper interpretive insights. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Ahmed et al., 2025): familiarization with documents through repeated readings; generating initial codes from meaningful text segments; collating codes into potential themes; reviewing and refining themes for coherence; defining and naming themes; and producing a narrative synthesis linking themes to the study objectives.

This combined approach allowed systematic categorization (content analysis) alongside interpretive meaning-making (thematic analysis), producing a comprehensive understanding of how research influences public administration.

3.5. Research Ethics

Although the study did not involve human participants, ethical principles were strictly observed:

Use of publicly available information: All documents were publicly accessible or obtained through legitimate institutional repositories

Intellectual property and proper attribution: All sources were acknowledged through appropriate referencing to avoid plagiarism

Integrity and accuracy: Interpretations were grounded in the analyzed materials, avoiding misrepresentation or selective reporting

Respect for institutional sensitivity: Findings were reported objectively and respectfully, especially for sensitive evaluations or performance critiques

Transparency: An audit trail was maintained to ensure methodological transparency and accountability

4. Findings

This section presents the key findings from the literature review guided by the evidence-based policy. The findings highlight patterns, themes, and insights into the generation, translation, and utilization of research evidence in public policy making.

Table 1

Thematic analysis of research findings

Theme	Description	Key findings
Research as a foundation for evidence-based policy formulation	Shows how research informs and shapes policies to be grounded in facts rather than assumptions	Findings emphasized that research data guides policy revisions, ensuring policies respond to real public needs.
Research as a driver of effective service delivery	Demonstrates how research improves efficiency, quality, and responsiveness in public service delivery.	Departments using research-based strategies reported faster service delivery, better planning, and optimized resource allocation.
Research and participatory governance.	Highlights the role of research in promoting citizen involvement and collaborative decision-making.	Results indicated that research supports understanding community needs, enabling more inclusive governance and stakeholder engagement.
Research in promoting accountability and good governance.	Illustrates how research enhances monitoring, evaluation, and transparency within public institutions	Findings are used to hold officials accountable, improve performance tracking, and enhance transparency (e.g., performance audits).
Challenges in implementing evidence-based policy.	Identifies barriers such as political interference, resource constraints, and contractual limitations	Political interests often override research recommendations, and limited resources hinder full policy implementation.

Table 1 summarises the key themes identified from the reviewed literature, highlighting the occurrences, consistency of findings, and the sources that support each theme. It provides a structured overview of the critical constructs relevant to evidence-based policy, research policy, and service delivery.

Theme 1: Research as a Foundation for Evidence-Based Policy Formulation

The literature demonstrates that research is not merely informative but serves as a structural foundation for policymaking. Head (2016) emphasizes that policy development without empirical grounding risks misalignment with societal needs. Analysis further reveals that research facilitates a multi-dimensional understanding by integrating statistical data, expert knowledge, stakeholder consultation, and historical evaluations (OECD, 2020). The consistency of findings across both developed contexts (UK, US, Australia) and developing contexts (South Africa) underscores the universality of this principle. Research data guides policy revisions, ensuring that policies respond effectively to real public needs.

However, the depth of research integration varies. For instance, while the UK invests £2.5 billion annually in policy research, only a few departments systematically maintain databases of commissioned studies (OECD, 2020). This suggests that even when resources exist, structural factors such as institutional commitment and organizational research culture significantly influence evidence uptake. Simply making research available is insufficient; policymakers must also possess the systems, skills, and capacity to interpret and apply evidence effectively (Ayoubi & Noori, 2025). The literature further highlights the value of comparative analysis, demonstrating that international benchmarks and experiences can inform local policy adaptation. By providing credible empirical evidence, research enables policymakers to identify community needs, anticipate challenges, and design responsive, practical interventions, thereby reducing the likelihood that policies are driven solely by political interests and fail to address the root causes of societal issues.

Theme 2: Research as a Driver of Effective Service Delivery

The results indicate that research plays a crucial role in monitoring and evaluation, enabling government institutions to enhance their performance and outcomes. Departments that adopt research-based strategies report faster service delivery, improved planning, and more efficient resource allocation. Research informs practical, operational decisions in service

provision, guiding administrators in optimizing processes and achieving tangible results. Thusi et al. (2023) and Cantarelli et al. (2023) note that R&D, alongside systematic evaluation, equip administrators with tools for resource optimization, program redesign, and outcome tracking.

Pellegrini and Vivanet (2025) illustrate that in the United States, structured incentives linked to research evidence promote measurable improvements in education, demonstrating a direct connection between evidence use and service quality. Cross-country comparisons reinforce this finding. In South Africa, for instance, the OECD (2020) reports that while 45% of policymakers intend to use evidence in decision-making, only 9% are able to do so effectively, highlighting a persistent implementation gap. These insights suggest that research contributes to both strategic planning and operational efficiency; however, its impact is mediated by institutional readiness, including the availability of skills, tools, and systems. Consistent findings across contexts indicate that research-driven service delivery achieves its full potential when supported by capacity building and robust policy enforcement mechanisms.

Theme 3: Research and Participatory Governance

The findings demonstrate that research fosters inclusivity and citizen engagement in governance, thereby reinforcing the principles of good governance in democratic states such as South Africa. The literature consistently emphasizes that research promotes inclusive governance and meaningful public participation (Smith-Merry, 2020; Head, 2016; Cormack et al., 2021). Two key patterns emerge: first, research provides structured information that enables citizens to participate meaningfully in policy processes; second, participatory methods themselves generate evidence that informs policy, creating a feedback loop between public input and decision-making. Smith-Merry (2020) notes that guidelines developed by WHO and NICE formalize stakeholder input, ensuring that both expert and public perspectives shape policy. This indicates that research functions not only as a top-down input but also as a mechanism for bottom-up accountability.

However, analytical scrutiny highlights a critical tension: participatory approaches are highly context-dependent, and strategies that succeed in one governance system may require adaptation elsewhere (Ayoubi & Noori, 2025). Research supports participatory governance most effectively when it is context-aware, iterative, and systematically embedded. Participatory research techniques amplify public voices in administration, enhancing transparency, legitimacy, and public trust in government institutions. The results indicate that

research facilitates understanding of community needs and enables more inclusive, responsive, and participatory governance.

Theme 4: Research in Promoting Accountability and Good Governance

Research strengthens governance by producing measurable performance indicators and audit-friendly evidence (Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation, 2014; OECD, 2025; Zida et al., 2017). Beyond informing decisions, research functions as a monitoring and evaluation tool, enabling both policymakers and citizens to hold institutions accountable. Smith-Merry (2020) highlights that involving expert stakeholders ensures that policies are evidence-informed and auditable. Consistent findings across the literature suggest that research reduces arbitrary decision-making and political bias, thereby enhancing transparency.

However, the effectiveness of this function depends on institutionalization. Without formal mechanisms to integrate research findings into accountability processes, evidence may exist but fail to influence governance outcomes. These findings demonstrate that research is essential for promoting accountability and good governance in public administration, aligning with the principles of good governance theory, which emphasize that those in power are responsible for their actions and must answer to the public. By generating reliable performance indicators, research enables policymakers and administrators to make informed decisions that can be evaluated through measurable outcomes.

Theme 5: Challenges in Implementing Evidence-Based Policy in Public Administration

Although research has the potential to enhance governance, the study finds that integrating evidence into policy formulation remains a significant barrier in public administration. In South Africa, policy-making is influenced by political interests, resource constraints, and bureaucratic resistance, which can limit the use of empirical findings. Despite widespread recognition of its value, research uptake faces systemic obstacles. Carboni et al. (2019) and Newman (2020) consistently identify political interference, limited resources, and low technical capacity as critical inhibitors.

In some cases, research is available but remains inaccessible to policymakers due to poor dissemination, insufficient capacity to interpret data, or inadequate funding to support research initiatives. The findings further reveal that academic research often fails to align with

practical policy needs, making it challenging for administrators to translate evidence into actionable programs. These issues underscore the need for stronger institutional mechanisms to bridge the gap between research and public administration. Political priorities frequently override research recommendations, while limited resources impede full policy implementation. Organizational resistance and entrenched bureaucratic practices further reduce uptake. Additionally, Smith-Merry (2020) and Thusi et al. (2023) demonstrate that even when research is available, its translation into actionable policy is often inconsistent. The repeated identification of these barriers across multiple studies highlights systemic challenges that require institutional reform, capacity building, and targeted strategies for knowledge translation.

5. Discussion

The study highlights the essential role of research in public administration, particularly in policy formulation and service delivery. It emphasizes that empirical evidence is crucial for effective evidence-based policy, enabling policymakers to meet societal needs. This aligns with evidence-based governance, which prioritizes rational decision-making over political or arbitrary choices, as supported by Huidrom and Malhi (2021), who advocate for decisions grounded in the best available research complemented by experiential insights. Evidence-based policy theory, widely cited in the literature, emphasizes the use of research evidence, data, and rigorous analysis to inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies.

Research guides policy choices and protects against arbitrary decision-making, supporting the notion of structured and rational administrative processes. It demonstrates that evidence-based governance enhances institutional capacity by integrating learning systems into policy processes. However, the study notes that the impact of research on policy intent varies, highlighting the importance of examining how institutional culture can either facilitate or hinder the use of evidence.

Research also helps identify service gaps, evaluate performance, and develop strategies. Mhlanga et al. (2021) argue that to ensure effective and sustainable service delivery, governments must invest heavily in research, development, and innovation initiatives that form the foundation for strategic policies and models of public service delivery. This finding aligns with administrative theory, which stresses efficiency and effectiveness in public service provision. Beyond confirming existing literature, this study demonstrates that research fosters

an adaptive governance system, where policy implementation becomes iterative rather than static.

When administrators use research to monitor and evaluate programs, they create feedback loops that support continuous improvement, linking performance management theory with evidence-based governance. These findings reveal that research connects policy formulation with frontline service delivery, strengthening the coherence of the governance process. Nevertheless, improvements in service delivery rely heavily on institutional capacity to interpret and apply research, which remains uneven across departments.

The study further finds that research enhances transparency and allows citizens and oversight bodies to hold public officials accountable. Empirical data provides measurable benchmarks, building public trust and reinforcing democratic principles. This supports arguments in the literature that governance quality improves when policy and administrative decisions are grounded in systematic research. Ayoubi and Noori (2025) and Setyarto et al. (2021) emphasize that research is essential for highlighting best practices, improving transparency and accountability, and promoting good governance. In this context, accountability is not merely an outcome but a mechanism generated by research-based monitoring systems. By producing reliable performance indicators, research transforms administrative processes into observable and measurable actions, reducing the opportunity for inefficiencies or corruption.

The findings also demonstrate that integrating research, especially participatory approaches, enables citizen input in policy and service design. Smith-Merry (2020) notes that the NICE guidelines developed by WHO involve expert stakeholders in the policy process, ensuring that their knowledge is validated and valued. This inclusivity enhances legitimacy and responsiveness, ensuring that services address diverse community needs, consistent with participatory development theory. Participatory research bridges technical expertise and community experience, ensuring that citizen perspectives influence policy outcomes. It complements both accountability and evidence-based policymaking, demonstrating a theoretical convergence between participatory governance and evidence-based governance, an intersection often underexplored in existing literature. However, the study notes that participatory processes may be symbolic when institutions lack the capacity to translate citizen input into actionable policy reforms.

Despite these benefits, the study identifies significant challenges in implementing evidence-based policy. Political priorities, limited research capacity, and resource constraints often obstruct the translation of evidence into policy. The United Nations (2020) highlights that insufficient reliable data and weak governmental capacity limit the effectiveness of policies in achieving tangible improvements, particularly in urban governance. These challenges illustrate that barriers are not merely technical but also institutional and political. Addressing them requires methodological enhancements alongside structural reforms, capacity building, and incentives for evidence utilization.

The findings demonstrate that research supports policy formulation, service delivery, accountability, and citizen participation, yet systemic weaknesses constrain its impact. Future studies should explore how organizational structures, political cultures, and resource allocation influence research uptake. The analysis shows that evidence-based governance is not a single process but an ecosystem requiring institutional capacity, political will, and an enabling administrative culture.

Methodologically, this study relies solely on secondary sources, so insights are dependent on the availability, quality, and diversity of existing literature rather than direct empirical observation. The review is limited to studies published between 2016 and 2024 and is shaped by publication bias, as research demonstrating positive outcomes of evidence use is more likely to appear in academic literature. The absence of primary data limits the evaluation of real-world implementation or the causal mechanisms through which research influences administrative action. Therefore, while the findings provide conceptual clarity and synthesis, they do not constitute empirical verification.

6. Conclusion

This literature review underscores the critical role of research in effective public administration, emphasizing its influence on policy formulation, service delivery, accountability, and participatory governance. It demonstrates that the systematic integration of evidence into administrative processes enables governments to craft rational policies, optimize resource allocation, enhance service delivery, and strengthen democratic governance. The review conceptualizes evidence-based governance as an interconnected system that harmonizes policy formulation, implementation, and accountability, providing a holistic understanding of how research informs multiple governance dimensions simultaneously.

Despite these insights, the study has several limitations. It relies solely on secondary data, focuses on literature from 2016 to 2025, and predominantly draws from South African and selected international contexts. This scope may overlook earlier foundational studies that could provide additional depth. Furthermore, publication bias inherent in journal articles, which favors positive results, may have influenced the findings. The absence of formal meta-analytic quality assessments also restricts the evaluation of the methodological rigor of the sources included.

Nevertheless, the review offers meaningful implications for diverse stakeholders. Policymakers should institutionalize mechanisms for evidence use, such as policy labs, monitoring systems, and structured feedback loops, to strengthen decision-making processes. Public service managers are encouraged to invest in research capacity, data infrastructure, and analytical tools to enable adaptive and responsive service delivery. Civil society and citizens should be actively engaged in participatory processes to improve accountability, legitimacy, and policy responsiveness. Academic institutions can contribute by prioritizing policy-relevant studies and collaborative research to bridge the gap between evidence generation and practical policy application. Providing frontline public servants with clear guidelines and user-friendly evidence tools can further enhance the effectiveness and speed of policy implementation, allowing services to respond more promptly to community needs.

Future research should explore the political and institutional factors influencing the incorporation of research into government decision-making, particularly within the South African context. It is also essential to examine the impact of digital transformation and artificial intelligence on evidence-based governance in resource-constrained settings, alongside comparative studies with developed administrative systems. Emphasizing evidence-based methods has the potential to improve policy formulation and service delivery, provided there is sustained investment in capacity building and a commitment to cultivating a research-oriented culture within public administration.

7. Recommendations

Strengthen the integration of research into policy formulation. Policymakers should establish structured processes to ensure the systematic use of empirical evidence throughout the policy cycle, minimizing arbitrary or politically influenced decisions. Training programs should be implemented to enhance policymakers' skills in interpreting and applying research

effectively. Additionally, developing dedicated evidence synthesis units within public administration can support continuous integration of research into agenda-setting, policy design, and evaluation processes.

Enhance research-driven service delivery. Governments should allocate resources to research, monitoring, and evaluation units to identify service gaps and improve performance through iterative, evidence-informed strategies. Adaptive governance can be fostered by incorporating feedback loops that link frontline service delivery with policy development. Building departmental capacity to interpret and apply research consistently will ensure that evidence informs practical, operational decisions across institutions.

Promote accountability and transparency through research. Strengthening data management and monitoring systems is crucial for enabling research to support accountability and good governance. Clear guidelines should ensure that research outputs effectively inform administrative actions, reducing inefficiencies and curbing corruption. Independent oversight bodies should be empowered to use research-based benchmarks to evaluate government performance, holding public officials accountable for maladministration and strengthening transparency.

Encourage participatory and inclusive governance. Participatory research should be institutionalized by incorporating citizen input into policy design and service delivery, ensuring that engagement leads to actionable reforms. Training administrators in participatory methods and stakeholder engagement can bridge the gap between technical expertise and community needs. Involving research experts in these processes ensures that policy decisions are grounded in accurate, high-quality evidence, promoting collaborative and inclusive governance.

Address challenges in implementing evidence-based policy. To enhance the adoption of evidence-based governance, public administration must cultivate organizational structures and cultures that prioritize research use and incentivize evidence-informed decision-making. This requires sufficient allocation of human, financial, and technological resources to build research capacity. Collaboration across government sectors, academia, and civil society can help overcome political, institutional, and resource-related barriers. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies should be promoted to evaluate the effectiveness of evidence-based practices, ensuring that research is systematically translated into accountable, citizen-centered governance.

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AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Quillbot in summarizing key points and paraphrasing ideas and Grammarly, for grammar, tone, and clarity. The author takes full responsibility for ensuring proper review and editing of content generated using AI.

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