



Qualification Parity and Hierarchical Disparity: Examining the Limits of Professionalisation in South Africa's Public Service Entry Requirements

¹Humphrey Lephetha Motsepe, ²Buti Christopher Moekwa, ³Sheperd Sikhosana, ⁴Mahlodi Joice Sethu

¹University of Venda, South Africa/Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research Centre), South Africa

²Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa

³University of Azteca, Mexico/Higherway Institute of Learning, South Africa

⁴University of Venda, Department of Public and Development Administration, Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, South Africa

ABSTRACT:

The contradiction between South Africa's public service professionalisation agenda and the structural reality of uniform qualification requirements across all tiers of government employment is examined in this article. The design of entry requirements that fail to distinguish between junior and senior roles in a meaningful way has received little attention, despite recent reforms advocating for a more capable, moral, and development-oriented public administration. Through a document analysis of policy frameworks, human resource circulars, and job ads, this study explores how disparate expectations for experience and compensation, along with qualification parity, perpetuate hierarchy without promoting true Continuing Professional Development (CPD). To comprehend how these dynamics affect civil servants' perceptions of fairness, career mobility, and motivation, the article applies occupational closure theory in conjunction with public sector professionalisation theory. According to research, the current system discourages the development of specialized competencies and promotes role ambiguity. In addition, it causes conflicts during the hiring and advancement processes since, in the absence of distinct academic requirements, experience is used as a stand-in for merit. The study concludes that the objectives of professionalisation will remain aspirational unless qualification standards are adjusted to reflect complexity, responsibility, and leadership demands across ranks. To meet South Africa's long-term goals for public service transformation, the paper suggests updating occupational classification frameworks and implementing role-specific qualification matrices.

Keywords: Professionalisation, Public Service, Qualification Requirements, Career Progression, South Africa

1. Introduction and Background

In the wake of widespread governance failures, corruption scandals, and institutional capacity decline, professionalizing South Africa's public service has emerged as a pressing reform priority. In response, the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), published by the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), provides a roadmap for creating a state that is capable, moral, and progressive. To rebuild confidence and functionality in the public sector, this framework emphasises the necessity of methodical improvements in hiring, training, career management, and performance accountability (DPSA, 2022).

Contradictions still exist in the structure of public sector employment, notwithstanding the framework's strategic intent. The lack of distinction between the academic qualifications needed for lower-level and mid-to-senior-level positions is a noteworthy and frequently disregarded problem. Many junior and senior administrative positions require the same entry-level qualification, typically a National Diploma (NQF Level 6) or a Bachelor's Degree (NQF Level 7), according to an analysis of job specifications in the Public Service Vacancy Circular. The only factors that differentiate ranks are experience and salary. As a result of this phenomenon, leadership expectations, strategic influence, and responsibility rise with rank, but academic requirements do not (Public Service Commission, 2023).

A crucial policy question is brought up by this discrepancy: if the state's qualification system does not change in tandem with role complexity, how can it foster a truly professional, knowledge-based bureaucracy? Professionalisation is predicated on the idea that advancement in one's career should be linked to both experience and rising levels of technical and academic competence. By fostering an environment where upward mobility is determined by experiential accumulation rather than organised professional development, the current strategy subverts this principle. This has significant effects on leadership efficacy, institutional capacity, and employee motivation (Naicker & Kgatle, 2021).

Moreover, the uniformity in qualification requirements potentially undermines the state's efforts to attract and retain high-calibre professionals. When employees perceive no academic incentive or structural requirement to pursue further qualifications, the system inadvertently fosters stagnation, rewards tenure over merit, and weakens the functional distinctions that should accompany rank. As noted by Sithole and Masuku (2020), public service transformation cannot rely on policy pronouncements alone but must be underpinned by internal coherence in human capital planning.

When qualification requirements do not match the growing managerial, administrative, or technical responsibilities, there are serious consequences, and the institutional logic of hierarchical structures is called into question. Furthermore, it may be questioned whether promotion processes and performance management systems are legitimate, which could lead to unjust perceptions, low morale, and organizational inertia (Maseko & Khoza, 2023). To determine whether this model promotes or hinders the professionalisation agenda, this article aims to analyse the systemic effects of qualification parity across hierarchical positions. In particular, the investigation will be guided by the following research questions:

- How do current qualification requirements align with role complexity and responsibility in the public sector?
- What are the implications of undifferentiated academic criteria on motivation, continuing professional development, and promotion?
- To what extent does this system enable or hinder the professionalisation agenda?

Through this analysis, the article aims to contribute to the policy discourse on how South Africa can build a career-oriented and knowledge-driven public administration capable of meeting its developmental mandate.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Sector Reform and Human Capital Development

The historical, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds of South Africa are fundamental to the country's complicated public sector issues. The expectation of establishing an effective, accountable, and equitable public service accompanied the shift from apartheid to democracy. These objectives are nevertheless still hampered by the effects of systemic inefficiencies, cadre deployment, and bureaucratic politicization (Khumalo & Mbeki, 2022). Cadre deployment, in which political factors impact bureaucratic appointments, is still a controversial topic that frequently goes against meritocratic ideals. As a result, the public service is still seen as a politicized and occasionally ineffectual organization (Moyo, 2023). In response, a lot of work has gone into making the public service more professional. In order to rebuild public confidence and enhance governance, these efforts have mostly concentrated on anti-corruption programs and ethical leadership frameworks (Fikeni, 2023). Despite their necessity, these reforms have frequently obscured more basic structural issues, especially those pertaining to workforce competency and capacity building. Stated differently, ethical reform without the accompanying investment in human capital development runs the risk of producing a public sector that is both morally conscious and functionally unprepared.

The public sector's approach to human capital development is complex and includes hiring, training, career advancement, and retention tactics. The creation of distinct, unambiguous qualification standards that align with particular positions within the public service hierarchy is an important but little-studied topic in South African scholarship and policy. The differences between entry-level jobs and senior leadership positions may become less clear due to the alarming consistency of qualification requirements across occupational grades at the moment (Public Service Commission [PSC], 2023). The functional logic of the bureaucratic hierarchy, where roles differ greatly in complexity, responsibility, and strategic importance, is undermined by this uniformity. Employee incentives for academic and professional growth are weakened and role clarity is jeopardized when qualifications fail to take these distinctions into account. Because workers lack defined academic or professional goals to meet in order to advance to higher-level positions, this problem further impedes career advancement (Naidoo & Van der Walt, 2023).

The overall efficacy of the public service is practically impacted by the absence of qualification differentiation. Senior public servants may lack essential skills for leadership, policymaking, and strategic decision-making if formal academic progression is not matched with career advancement (Matlala & Mofokeng, 2023). This results in a leadership void that impairs institutional capability and the successful execution of intricate reforms. International literature supports the significance of investing in human capital through well-defined qualification pathways. According to human capital theory, training and education are essential for raising an organization's performance and productivity (Becker, 2020). This implies that in the public sector, obtaining specialized professional and academic credentials ought to be a requirement for moving up the bureaucratic ladder. In the absence of this, public institutions run the risk of sustaining inefficiencies and bolstering patronage or nepotism patterns that are incompatible with sound governance. This view is supported by recent research conducted in South Africa. Public employees who seek ongoing professional and academic development, for instance, are more likely to embrace innovative practices and enhance service delivery, according to research by Maphosa and Maree (2024). On the other hand, the system encourages complacency and a lack of accountability when it permits promotion without such development.

However, articulating policies alone is not enough to close this gap. It calls for institutional changes that align training, promotion, and recruitment practices with these standards and incorporate qualification differentiation into HRM systems (Dlamini & Mashinini, 2023). Furthermore, in order to strike a balance between meritocracy and the demands of social justice, these reforms must be cognizant of the nation's sociopolitical realities, such as employment equity concerns and affirmative action policies. Deliberate human capital development is just as important to the professionalization of South Africa's public sector as ethical reforms. Fostering a skilled and driven public workforce requires the establishment of precise qualification standards suited to occupational roles. In the end, these reforms would improve the state's ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate by fostering meritocratic advancement and improving role clarity.

2.2 Qualification Differentiation and Professionalisation

In order to create a capable, responsible, and efficient bureaucracy, professionalization theory emphasizes the significance of setting clear and distinct qualification thresholds at different career stages (Abbott, 2020). According to this theory, upholding standards, accountability, and trust in public institutions requires professional boundaries that are delineated by formal educational and training requirements. As people advance in their careers, qualification differentiation makes sure they meet progressively more demanding academic and professional standards that correspond to increased responsibility and task complexity. The Public Service Commission (PSC) in South Africa has frequently brought attention to important issues with hiring and selection procedures, such as political meddling, nepotism, and ambiguous job descriptions that go against meritocratic ideals (PSC, 2023). These problems indicate deeper systemic problems as well as procedural shortcomings. The pervasive standardization of academic qualifications for positions with wildly disparate degrees of complexity and responsibility is one such flaw. For instance, senior managerial roles typically only require a bachelor's degree or its equivalent, which is the same minimal educational requirement as entry-level positions (Naidoo & Van der Walt, 2023).

The professional nature of the public service is significantly impacted by this qualification parity. In effect, it gives tenure and experience more weight than formal education and skill development. Experience is unquestionably crucial, but the lack of progressive academic requirements reduces incentives for ongoing professional development and limits the upward mobility of aspirational junior staff members who want to advance academically and professionally in order to be eligible for leadership positions (Maluleke, 2022). This undercuts the development of a meritocratic career ladder that honours aptitude as well as a dedication to education. A well-defined professional development pipeline that explicitly connects academic credentials with increasing levels of responsibility is necessary for a strong and long-lasting public service, according to Sebola (2020) and Maluleke (2022). For advancement into mid-level and senior management roles, such a pipeline should require professional certifications or advanced degrees. By ensuring that individuals in decision-making positions have the necessary knowledge and critical thinking abilities, this connection not only improves the quality of leadership but also ingrains ethical governance.

Leadership appointments run the risk of being made more on the basis of longevity, political affiliation, or patronage than on merit in the absence of such structured differentiation. The South African public sector is still beset by governance failures, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability as a result of this circumstance (Fikeni, 2023). Additionally, it promotes a culture in which professional standards stagnate and formal education is undervalued. The significance of qualification differentiation is widely acknowledged on a global scale. Instead of relying solely on years of service or political connections, the OECD (2019) suggests a "career corridor model" in which advancement is determined by measurable academic and professional progress. Similar to this, UNDESA (2020) emphasizes the need for layered credentials, such as additional degrees and certifications, to guarantee that public employees possess the skills needed to handle changing governance challenges.

Affirmative action policies, the need to strike a balance between representativity and meritocracy, and other sociopolitical factors are all impacted by the lack of such differentiation in South Africa (Dlamini & Mashinini, 2023). In order to create systems that support both equity and excellence, it is necessary to navigate difficult trade-offs when reforming qualification frameworks. One of the fundamental tenets of public service professionalization is qualification differentiation. Building a capable public sector, cultivating ethical governance, and producing competent leaders all depend on the establishment and enforcement of progressive academic and professional standards that are in line with the complexity of the work. Improving South Africa's service delivery results and removing structural obstacles to meritocratic advancement will be made easier by addressing the current parity in qualification requirements.

2.3 International Perspectives on Qualification Frameworks

Examining global models that deal with professionalization and qualification differentiation within bureaucracies can help South Africa's public sector reform initiatives. In order to improve public service competency through structured qualification systems, international organizations like the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have created frameworks and guidelines. The "career corridor model," a progressive framework that directly connects educational requirements to career stages and levels of responsibility in the public sector, is put forth by the OECD (2019). In many bureaucracies around the world, inefficiency and patronage have been sustained by traditional promotion criteria that are based primarily on seniority or political connections. This model aims to abandon these practices. Rather, it highlights the documented development of academic and technical skills as the main foundation for career advancement. The career corridor model promotes a culture of lifelong professional development by requiring public servants to exhibit formal academic accomplishments, mastery of new competencies, and ongoing learning. This is especially important in the context of 21st-century governance, where public servants face increasingly complex and dynamic challenges, including digital transformation, policy innovation, and cross-sectoral collaboration (OECD, 2019).

UNDESA (2020) supports "credential layering" as a way to professionalize the public service, which is in line with the OECD's strategy. The practice of requiring extra certifications, advanced degrees, or diplomas as requirements for mid- and senior-level roles is known as credential layering. This method guarantees that leaders have the academic rigor and current knowledge required to handle changing institutional demands and governance complexities, in addition to their practical experience. The framework developed by UNDESA emphasizes the significance of matching educational credentials with competency frameworks and strategic workforce planning in order to create a public sector that is resilient and adaptable and able to meet both national and international development goals (UNDESA, 2020). Beyond these institutional frameworks, South Africa can benefit greatly from comparative studies conducted in other post-colonial African nations. In their study of bureaucratic systems in Ghana and Kenya, Osei-Tutu and Addison (2023) emphasized the negative consequences of giving experience precedence over academic progress when it comes to public service promotions. According to their research, these practices encourage resistance to innovation and reform, lower employee motivation at the junior and mid-level levels, and contribute to

bureaucratic stagnation. Public institutions' capacity to adapt to social, political, and economic shifts is hampered by this stagnation, which compromises the effectiveness of governance and service delivery. These results are consistent with the South African experience, where a culture that devalues formal education and continuous professional development has been established due to the lack of distinct qualification requirements for junior and senior roles. When promotion criteria do not take into account such accomplishments, South African public servants, like those in Ghana and Kenya, frequently feel that they have few incentives to pursue higher education (Maluleke, 2022). Effective policy implementation and public trust are hampered by this situation, which adds to a leadership deficit marked by a lack of strategic vision and skills gaps.

Further evidence that qualification frameworks need to be contextualized within each nation's sociopolitical realities comes from international best practices. Given South Africa's history of social exclusion and inequality, this entails striking a balance between the demands of employment equity and transformation and meritocratic advancement (Dlamini & Mashini, 2023). In order to prevent systemic disparities from being perpetuated, policymakers must guarantee inclusive access to education and professional development opportunities when implementing models like the career corridor or credential layering. South Africa's ongoing public sector reform benefits greatly from the advice of international viewpoints. The significance of structured qualification differentiation as a professionalization catalyst is highlighted by models such as UNDESA's credential layering and the OECD's career corridor. When adapted thoughtfully, these frameworks can help South Africa build a competent, accountable, and motivated public workforce capable of meeting the complex demands of contemporary governance.

2.4 Empirical Evidence from South Africa

The tangible effects of consistent qualification requirements across various public service tiers have been highlighted by recent empirical research conducted in South Africa. In a particularly perceptive study, Matlala and Mofokeng (2023) used a mixed-methods approach to examine how well middle managers in the province of Limpopo aligned their academic readiness with institutional expectations. According to their findings, there is a notable discrepancy: many middle managers felt unprepared to handle the challenging leadership roles that were entrusted to them, primarily because their formal educations hardly ever went beyond undergraduate degrees. This lack of formal academic advancement is a systemic issue that threatens the stability of the executive succession pipeline rather than being just an individual shortcoming. When faced with increasingly complex organizational challenges, middle managers frequently rely on informal learning strategies like mentorship from more seasoned colleagues or experiential trial-and-error approaches, as there are no explicit mandates for advanced academic qualifications or recognized professional certifications as prerequisites for promotion (Matlala & Mofokeng, 2023). The prevalence of informal learning raises questions regarding consistency, accountability, and the sustainability of leadership practices, even though it can be a useful adjunct to formal education.

This situation has ramifications that go beyond personal capacities and impact institutional continuity and performance. The public sector becomes more vulnerable to leadership failures, inefficiencies, and subpar service delivery results when ad hoc leadership development strategies are used. In South Africa, where the public sector functions in the face of severe socioeconomic difficulties and elevated public expectations, this is especially crucial (Khumalo & Mbeki, 2022). In certain areas of the public service, a culture of entitlement and complacency is fostered by the lack of distinct qualification requirements. There is little incentive for incumbents or aspirants to pursue additional academic or professional development when senior positions do not require qualifications that reflect the higher-order cognitive and strategic demands of such roles. As a result, leadership may be deficient in critical abilities that are necessary for negotiating the intricacies of modern public administration, including financial management, advanced policy analysis, strategic thinking, and adaptive decision-making (Sebola, 2020; Maluleke, 2022).

Sebola's (2020) study also emphasizes how this complacency erodes the professional and ethical norms that public service reform aims to establish. Without strict qualification requirements linked to positions, appointments to leadership positions run the risk of being influenced more by political or patronage factors than by qualifications and merit, which would prolong the inefficiencies and governance shortcomings that have long beset the South African state. Furthermore, junior and mid-level employees' motivation and morale are impacted by the widespread qualification parity. Many competent workers feel that there are few opportunities for growth when promotion pathways do not explicitly reward academic and professional advancement. This can result in disengagement, attrition, and a loss of institutional knowledge (Naidoo & Van der Walt, 2023). This jeopardizes the long-term viability of the state's administrative apparatus by further undermining the public service's ability to attract and retain talent.

The urgent need for South African public institutions to adopt structured qualification frameworks that distinguish roles based on complexity and responsibility is highlighted by empirical findings like those by Matlala and Mofokeng (2023). This should be combined with funding for formal leadership training programs and easily accessible ongoing professional development. Reforms of this kind would improve leadership quality, fortify the succession pipeline, and ultimately boost public sector performance.

2.5 Policy Gaps and Institutional Constraints

Meritocratic ideals are officially supported by South Africa's public sector reform agenda and are reflected in national policy frameworks like the Public Service Regulations of 2016 (Republic of South Africa, 2016). In order to guarantee that the most qualified people occupy public service positions, these rules mandate that appointments and promotions be made on the basis of merit, competence, and fairness. Though these policies offer a solid legal basis, their actual application is still uneven and frequently ineffectual because of inadequate oversight and lax enforcement. Nepotism, political meddling, and opaque selection procedures are among the recruitment irregularities that the Public Service Commission (PSC) has repeatedly documented as undermining meritocracy (PSC, 2023). These reports demonstrate how systemic flaws still permit non-meritocratic practices to thrive in spite of official regulations. Beyond procedural issues, however, the deeper structural problem of qualification requirements for various occupational ranks within the

public service has received little policy attention. The overall integrity of recruitment and promotion systems is weakened by the policy vacuum created by the absence of distinct academic and professional credential requirements across ranks (Naidoo & Van der Walt, 2023).

Human resource management is made unclear and inconsistent by this policy gap. Recruitment and promotion decisions become subjective in the absence of explicit qualification standards linked to job complexity and responsibility, which increases the likelihood of political patronage and favouritism. Furthermore, because there are no clear career pathways linked to qualifications, employees are discouraged from investing in formal academic and professional development. This weakens their motivation for ongoing learning and capacity building (Maluleke, 2022). The complicated sociopolitical environment of South Africa's public sector, where political actors and labour unions frequently oppose strict qualification requirements, exacerbates these institutional limitations. Because strict academic standards may unintentionally exclude historically underprivileged groups who have faced systemic barriers to education, unions usually support employment equity and representativity (Dlamini & Mashinini, 2023). Although these worries are valid and in line with the nation's transformational needs, they occasionally lead to opposition to professionalization programs that are thought to be potentially exclusive.

This tension presents a significant challenge to reformers aiming to establish merit-based, qualification-driven recruitment and promotion frameworks. Balancing the goals of social justice and equity with the need for professional competence requires nuanced policy design and implementation strategies that accommodate historical inequalities without compromising standards (Moyo & Gumede, 2023). In practice, this means developing inclusive professional development programmes, bridging educational gaps, and creating alternative pathways for capacity building, alongside enforcing qualification differentiation. Political meddling, bureaucratic inertia, and resource limitations frequently erode the institutional capacity to enforce current regulations. Many public institutions' human resource departments lack the knowledge, resources, and independence required to strictly implement meritocratic principles in hiring and advancement decisions (Khumalo & Mbeki, 2022). Disparities and inefficiencies are sustained as a result of this institutional weakness, which also leads to uneven policy implementation across departments and provinces.

Policy interventions must go beyond normative recommendations to incorporate procedures for strong accountability, monitoring, and capacity building in public institutions in order to address these issues. Transparent hiring procedures and frequent audits by impartial oversight organizations such as the PSC should be combined with the implementation of precise, legally binding qualification standards connected to job grades and competencies (PSC, 2023). Engaging political stakeholders and labour unions in dialogue to establish agreement on striking a balance between professionalization and equity objectives is equally crucial. Meritocracy and professionalization are supported by South Africa's policy framework, but their effective implementation is hampered by significant gaps and institutional limitations. Comprehensive reforms that incorporate distinct qualification standards, bolster institutional capabilities, and negotiate the sociopolitical complexities influencing the public service landscape are necessary to address these.

2.6 Implications for Public Sector Capacity and Reform

Governance, institutional capacity, and the larger reform agenda are all significantly impacted by the lack of distinct qualification differentiation in South Africa's public service. The public sector's capacity to develop capable leadership and encourage creative, evidence-based policymaking is seriously hampered when entry-level and senior roles demand comparable academic backgrounds. This structural defect directly contributes to ongoing leadership deficiencies and impairs institutions' ability to effectively address intricate socioeconomic issues (Maluleke, 2022). Leadership in the public sector requires not only practical experience but also advanced academic knowledge and strategic skills that develop through continued professional education. Without formal pathways that encourage and reward academic and professional advancement, aspiring public servants lack motivation to pursue further training or specialization. This stagnation limits the pipeline of capable leaders prepared to engage with modern governance challenges such as policy complexity, technological change, and public accountability (Matlala & Mofokeng, 2023). Consequently, institutions remain vulnerable to poor decision-making, inefficiency, and failures in service delivery, which undermine public trust and social cohesion.

The expanding body of research on public administration reform in South Africa highlights that tackling these issues calls for more than just anti-corruption campaigns or initiatives promoting ethical leadership. These are still essential elements of good governance, but they won't be enough if underlying structural flaws like qualification parity aren't fixed (Fikeni, 2023). Rather, enforceable qualification frameworks that take into account the strategic needs of the public service as well as the complexity and responsibility of the job must be incorporated into a comprehensive institutional reform agenda. Such reforms would have several key benefits. First, they would create clear career progression pathways that link academic credentials and professional development with promotion and leadership roles. This linkage fosters a culture of meritocracy where advancement is based on competence rather than tenure, political patronage, or other extraneous factors (OECD, 2019). By incentivizing learning and skill acquisition, it cultivates a motivated and capable workforce.

Second, South Africa's public service is in line with international best practices thanks to qualification differentiation. International models that highlight structured, merit-based professionalization as essential for contemporary, adaptable governance systems include UNDESA's credential layering and the OECD's career corridor approach (OECD, 2019; UNDESA, 2020). By using these frameworks, institutions can become more inventive, resilient, and capable of providing public goods more effectively. Third, by combining professionalization with equity considerations, qualification standard reform tackles institutional capacity issues in a more comprehensive manner. Policies that support inclusivity while maintaining professional standards are necessary due to South Africa's distinct sociopolitical context, guaranteeing historically underprivileged groups fair access to development opportunities (Dlamini & Mashinini, 2023). Thus, a well-crafted qualification framework can be a tool for improved performance as well as transformation.

Lastly, enhancing qualification differentiation supports other reforms in the public sector, including better HRM systems, open hiring procedures, and leadership development initiatives. When taken as a whole, these actions help end the pattern of inefficiency, complacency, and poor governance that has

long plagued the public sector in South Africa (Osei-Tutu & Addison, 2023). Improving the capacity of the public sector and promoting significant reform in South Africa require addressing the absence of qualification differentiation. The public sector can promote a meritocratic culture, encourage lifelong learning, and develop the leadership skills necessary for efficient governance and service delivery by implementing explicit, legally binding qualification requirements linked to job complexity.

2.7 Summary of the Literature Review

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding public sector reform in South Africa appropriately emphasizes governance and ethical concerns, but it falls short in addressing the structural significance of academic credentials in professionalizing the bureaucracy. Meritocracy and role differentiation are undermined by qualification parity across occupational grades, which also sustains structural flaws in institutional capacity and leadership. This review emphasizes the need for distinct qualification standards connected to leadership development, career advancement, and ethical governance by drawing on global models and local empirical research. For public sector reform to be successful and for a capable and responsive state to be realized, this gap must be closed.

3. Theoretical Framework:

Occupational Closure Theory and Public Sector Professionalisation Theory are used in this study. By formalising entry, advancement, and ethics, the former offers a prism through which to view how states seek professional status for their bureaucracy (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2020). It is assumed that the development of knowledgeable and moral employees is supported by well-organised qualification frameworks. To maintain status and regulate labour markets, professions erect obstacles to entry through formal education, licensing, and credentialism, according to the sociological perspective of Occupational Closure Theory (Weber, 1978; Witz, 1992). The absence of distinct qualifications for each rank in the South African public service erodes closure and lessens the perceived prestige of advancement. Together, these theories help unpack why static qualification requirements may erode professional identity, limit occupational prestige, and stifle growth among employees who seek upward mobility based on skill acquisition rather than just experience.

4. Methodology:

Because it uses secondary sources and publicly accessible documents, this study's qualitative document analysis methodology does not need ethical approval. The Public Service Vacancy Circular (2022–2024), the National Framework Towards Professionalisation (DPSA, 2022), and HR policies from the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) are among the materials. Ten distinct job postings from different departments and administrative levels were chosen for the study to evaluate the necessary education and experience. Data was analysed thematically, focusing on the presence or absence of differentiated qualification standards, stated expectations of leadership or complexity, and salary scales. The analysis also considered commentary from oversight institutions such as the Public Service Commission and Auditor-General reports to contextualise findings.

5. Results

Academic qualifications for administrative positions are remarkably consistent across national and provincial government departments, according to a document analysis of job advertisements published in the Public Service Vacancy Circular between 2022 and 2024. The minimum educational requirement for all positions, from entry-level administrative officers to middle management positions like assistant directors, is primarily still at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 6 (National Diploma) or NQF Level 7 (Bachelor's Degree). A serious structural problem with the public service's professionalization and human resource management procedures is indicated by the consistency of qualification requirements.

For instance, a "relevant three-year diploma or degree" is often listed as the educational requirement in job advertisements for entry-level roles such as administrative officer. The same fundamental academic qualifications are needed for middle management roles like assistant director; postgraduate degrees, leadership certifications, or specialized management training are not specifically mentioned or differentiated. The greater complexity and strategic responsibilities that come with senior roles seem to be disregarded by this vague and general requirement. The demands for academic qualifications have not increased in tandem with the variation in experience requirements, which range from no formal experience for junior roles to five or more years for senior management positions.

The Public Service Commission (PSC, 2023) found a systemic failure to use academic qualifications as a mechanism to differentiate authority levels or role complexity, and this finding is consistent with their findings. Instead, the nebulous idea of "relevant experience" is the primary differentiator for promotions and role assignments in job advertisements. An unofficial promotion culture that lacks transparency and consistency is fostered by this over-reliance on experiential criteria in the absence of corresponding formal educational progression (Matlala & Mofokeng, 2023).

The lack of clear requirements for formal leadership or management education among middle and senior management positions is another concerning finding in the data. Candidates were not required to possess any formal management qualifications, such as a postgraduate diploma in public administration, a certificate in public sector leadership, or any other structured leadership training, in at least 80% of the job postings that were examined. This suggests that there is no academic scaffolding for the shift from operational to managerial roles, supporting an informal learning model based on mentoring and experience rather than formal capacity building (PSC, 2023; Matlala & Mofokeng, 2023).

These qualification patterns have ramifications for the pay system as well, as differences in pay scales raise significant concerns about the guiding principles of role design and compensation. A Senior Administration Officer, for example, who normally needs to be qualified at NQF Level 6, can make more than R 294,000 a year. On the other hand, an Assistant Director, who has the same minimum qualifications but much more responsibility and scope, could make over R 400,000 a year. Despite notable wage disparities and job complexity, there is no distinction in academic qualifications between these levels, which suggests that educational credentials are no longer linked to institutional rank and compensation. This disjunction suggests that internal mobility and compensation are more influenced by factors such as tenure, networking, or organisational familiarity than by academic or professional merit (DPSA, 2022).

The goals of the professionalization framework, which are to promote a knowledge-driven, accountable, and performance-oriented public service, are undermined by this structural division of academic depth and rank. Public employees are not motivated to pursue ongoing education or specialized skill development if there are no clear academic incentives connected to promotions. Employees' professional development is impeded, which restricts the creation of a competent and flexible leadership pipeline, which has serious implications for institutional capacity (Maluleke, 2022; Maseko & Khoza, 2023).

Moreover, the uniform qualification requirements appear consistently across various provinces and departments, indicating a systemic design flaw rather than isolated anomalies. This pattern challenges the efficacy of current job classification frameworks and highlights the urgent need for policy reforms that mandate qualification differentiation reflective of role complexity and leadership demands. The entrenched system risks perpetuating operational inertia and impedes the development of a dynamic public sector workforce capable of meeting the evolving governance challenges of the 21st century (DPSA, 2022).

Differentiated qualification frameworks are acknowledged globally as being essential for leadership effectiveness and public sector capacity building. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) promotes competency-based career pathways that combine role complexity and academic advancement, guaranteeing that leadership roles demand advanced degrees and ongoing professional development. Credential layering is also emphasized by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2020) as a way to strengthen meritocratic ideals and professionalize civil services.

Beyond just job design, the absence of such structured qualification pathways in South Africa has real-world repercussions. The lack of clarity surrounding academic standards hinders the public sector's capacity to successfully execute evidence-based policies and leads to uneven leadership quality. Public trust in state institutions is further undermined by the tendency of informal promotion mechanisms to prioritize political affiliation and networking over merit (Osei-Tutu & Addison, 2023; Naidoo, 2021).

Based on these results, the study emphasizes how crucial it is that South African public sector reforms incorporate precise, legally binding requirements for academic credentials that match the complexity and leadership demands of positions. This would improve public trust, institutional performance, and employee motivation in addition to fortifying internal promotion systems.

6. Discussion

The study's conclusions show a basic conflict between South Africa's professed professionalisation objectives and the way its public service hiring and advancement system is set up. The current system of academic qualification requirements undercuts the goal of a capable, moral, and developing state, as stated in the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (DPSA, 2022). A promotion system that primarily relies on experience rather than formal education or technical advancement is suggested by the absence of vertical academic progression between junior and senior roles. This discrepancy calls into question the validity and efficacy of career pathways in the public sector and could restrict the wider effects of professionalisation efforts (Maseko & Khoza, 2023).

One of the main concerns raised by the findings is that academic differentiation is not used as a formal incentive for professional development in the public sector. If advanced positions do not require higher or specialised qualifications, junior staff members are unlikely to view additional study as necessary or advantageous. This fosters a culture of academic stagnation in which credentials are no longer dynamic tools for innovation or upward mobility but rather static tools for entry (Matlala & Mofokeng, 2023). According to Naidoo (2021), professionalisation necessitates a conscious connection between credentials and role complexity, particularly in knowledge-intensive governance contexts, and cannot be accomplished merely by ethics and experience.

Unintentional internal injustices are also produced by this system. Although it is theoretically encouraged, external candidates who are unfamiliar with the institution cannot obtain a promotion from within, even if they have comparable or better qualifications. Ironically, tenure and informal experience are used to promote internal candidates who have not advanced academically beyond the bare minimum, undermining the meritocratic culture that public service reform frameworks aim to establish (PSC, 2023). Through informal gatekeeping, where hierarchy is upheld by procedural familiarity and incumbency rather than objective competency, these dynamics aid in occupational closure.

This phenomenon reflects a blurring of professional boundaries, according to Occupational Closure Theory. Professionals usually create exclusive credentials or licenses for higher positions to establish legitimacy and status (Witz, 1992). However, the lack of role-specific qualification requirements in South Africa's public sector compromises this professional identity by permitting senior positions to be filled without evidence of academic advancement. As a result, lower-ranking employees have less incentive to acquire new skills, leadership credibility is damaged, and the institutional value of senior titles is diminished (Fikeni, 2023).

Furthermore, performance management systems lose coherence in the absence of a tiered qualification framework because advanced knowledge is not formally used to support expectations for innovation, supervision, and strategic oversight. Essentially, leadership shifts from being a cognitive or technical function to an experiential one. This could account for the ongoing deficiencies in coordination and leadership that have been noted in several departments, especially at the provincial and local levels (Maluleke, 2022). The results support the Public Service Commission's (PSC, 2023) recent calls to review the occupational classification system to establish organised, merit-based promotion pipelines as well as to address salary disparities. A clearly defined academic progression model that separates leadership, technical, and administrative streams, each with suitable qualification and training requirements, should be a part of a revised framework.

In summary, while South Africa's professionalisation agenda is well-articulated in policy, its practical implementation is constrained by a recruitment and promotion model that prioritises tenure over talent and experience over expertise. Until qualifications are aligned with increasing levels of responsibility, professionalisation risks remaining symbolic, serving as a rhetorical tool rather than a substantive transformation of the public service.

7. Conclusion

This article has looked at the significant discrepancy between South Africa's current approach to qualification requirements throughout the public service hierarchy and its aspirations for professionalisation. The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector (DPSA, 2022) and other policy frameworks indicate a progressive commitment to creating a bureaucracy that is more capable, ethical, and developmental; however, the operational structures, particularly the parity of academic qualifications across widely disparate ranks, are still out of step with these objectives. According to the study, the prerequisites for junior and senior administrative positions are frequently the same, with experience and compensation serving as the primary differentiators. This structural homogeneity discourages junior employees from pursuing academic or technical upskilling or re-skilling, damages the institutional value of leadership positions, and erodes the foundations of merit-based advancement. The implications are far-reaching: a system that rewards tenure over qualification risks entrenching stagnation, diminishing professional identity, and weakening service delivery capacity.

The article suggests three important changes to bring the professionalisation agenda into line with institutional practice. To reflect the growing complexity, strategic responsibility, and leadership demands of higher-ranking roles, tiered, role-specific qualification thresholds were first introduced. The second is the inclusion of recognised technical and leadership certifications in promotion processes, which guarantees that managers are appointed to positions with the necessary training and experience. Third, a thorough examination of occupational grading and job classification systems to make sure public service structures encourage academic advancement and foster the creation of a competent, knowledge-driven state.

In the end, rhetoric by itself is insufficient to achieve professionalisation. It necessitates a structural change in the institutional relationships between credentials, experience, and accountability. The goals of a high-achieving, moral, and progressive public service will remain aspirational in the absence of this recalibration. In addition to being fair, matching academic and experiential development with career advancement is a prerequisite for long-term institutional resilience and excellence in the public sector.

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