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Editorial Note:

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education. If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

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PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT: A MIRROR OF INERTIA AND A LENS ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION'S EVOLUTION AND PROGRESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Performance management has played a crucial role in transforming South Africa's public sector since 1994. The introduction of the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) in 2001 aimed to institutionalise this transformation by linking individual performance to measurable developmental outcomes. Despite its strategic aims, the PMDS remains contested in complex governance environments, suggesting a deeper philosophical and paradigmatic misalignment between a mechanistic performance architecture and lived institutional realities. The study employs a mixed-method case study of the provincial Department of Cooperative Governance, Traditional Affairs and Human Settlements (CGHST). The study finds that PMDS functions less as a developmental system and more as a negotiated reward-and-control regime. Quantitative results show significant differences in perceived career development challenges by gender and age. Qualitative findings indicate that PMDS is bonus-driven and conflict-prone, with ratings shaped by perceptions of favouritism and political interference, amongst other factors. Interpreted through critical realism's stratified ontology, these patterns unearth outcomes of competing PA logics, including TPA hierarchical compliance imperatives, NPM competitive measurement and rewards, and an informal power network that displaces development in practice. Consequently, the paper develops a mid-range theory of developmental displacement and recommends integrative governance as a PA reform orientation to realign PMDS with stewardship and equitable career progression in complex public-sector contexts. The study concludes that performance management reflects broader inertia within public administration and advocates for a shift towards relational and integrated governance approaches essential for aligning performance frameworks with the institutional and experiential realities of the South African public sector.

Keywords: *Cartesian, Critical realism, Integrative governance, PMDS, Phenomenology,*

Introduction

Performance management has been crucial to transforming South Africa's public sector

since the restoration of democracy in 1994. Inspired by New Public Management reforms, the state introduced the

Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) in 2001 (Penceliah, 2012, p. 197), as a strategic tool to drive measurable developmental outcomes, strengthen accountability and improve employee performance across the public service. The PMDS aligns with constitutional expectations for efficient, effective, and development-oriented public administration (RSA, 1996). The Public Service Act of 1994 authorises departments to manage performance systematically and fairly (RSA, 1994). The PMDS aims to generate measurable performance outcomes (Idris & Mbata, 2017), reward employee excellence, and strengthen organisational accountability (Mello, 2015). The system reflects managerial assumptions that performance can be defined in advance, measured objectively, and improved through standardised targets and assessment instruments. This objective stance differs in practice because the administrative environment in which the PMDS operates is socially and politically complex (Peters, 2017). Scholars have widely criticised performance management—including who defines it, how managers measure it, and what purpose it serves—as a wicked problem rather than a technical human resources management process (Armstrong, 2019, p. 568).

Despite its developmental intent, performance management in South Africa often remains fragmented, compliance-driven, and technocratic, with recurring implementation failures that weaken employee development, credibility and organisational learning (Haricharan, 2023; Majam & Jarbandhan, 2022; Khumalo, 2024; Kroukamp & Cloete, 2018; Maake et al., 2021; Mohangi & Nyika, 2023). These challenges are not only operational, as they reflect tensions produced by paradigmatic, structural, political, and behavioural dynamics that undermine the adaptability of performance management systems in contemporary governance settings. Based

on this fragmentation, a key research gap in both PA scholarship and public service is the limited availability of an integrated framework that can explain why a formally rational, rule-based instrument like the PMDS produces contradictory outcomes in a complex governance environment. Extensive and commendable research has focused on compliance and administrative capacity (Haricharan, 2023; Majam & Jarbandhan, 2022; Khumalo, 2024; Kroukamp & Cloete, 2018; Maake et al., 2021; Mohangi & Nyika, 2023), but this research does not sufficiently account for the ontological and theoretical misalignment between the PMDS's mechanistic design logic and the shifting realities of network governance. Based on this assertion, this paper argues that the PMDS remains rooted in Cartesian rationalism, linearity and control. At the same time, the public service increasingly operates in relational, dynamic and politically mediated settings (Christensen & Lægheid, 2011). The above reflects inertia in PA evolution and progress.

To elaborate, multiple studies highlight persistent obstacles that destabilise performance systems: rigid HR cultures that discourage innovation and development (Haricharan, 2023), political interference that politicises roles and performance decisions (Majam & Jarbandhan, 2022, p. 33), and communication breakdowns that distort the flow and meaning of performance information (Khumalo, 2024). Organisational and paradigmatic fragmentation further weakens institutional coherence by separating performance management from the lived realities of governance work (Kroukamp & Cloete, 2018; Maake et al., 2021; Mohangi & Nyika, 2023). Holistically, these patterns suggest that the PMDS's challenges stem from deeper mechanisms within the public administration system. These dynamics are evident in the North West provincial Department of Cooperative Governance, Traditional Affairs and Human Settlements

(CGHST), which implemented the PMDS (NWDLGHS, 2016) as part of the post-apartheid developmental state agenda. Political-administrative interdependence and institutional legacies shape the department's performance environment and complicate standardised target-setting and neutral performance evaluation.

To explain this incoherence, the study critically engages philosophical lenses that illuminate different dimensions of the PMDS. Firstly, the paper uses René Descartes' Cartesian dualism and reductionism to explain how public institutions simplify performance into discrete, measurable units and treat governance as controllable through managerial design (Blum, 2019; van der Hoorn & Whitty, 2015). This rationalist legacy is evident in the assumptions of scientific management and mechanistic governance (Taylor, 1911; Wilson, 1887; Whetsell & Shields, 2015). Then phenomenology, propounded by Husserl. This stance challenges detached objectivism by foregrounding how performance management is experienced, interpreted and negotiated in practice through ethical tensions and leadership relations (Ongaro, 2017). Critical realism, as propounded by Bhaskar, provides a stratified framework for linking performance perceptions to what occurs in the implementation phase and to deeper generative mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1975; Armstrong, 2019), such as bureaucratic legacies, rigid HR cultures, power asymmetries, and competing paradigms across TPA, NPM, and NPG.

Consequently, this paper applies a critical realist lens to explain why actors in the North West provincial Department of Cooperative Governance, Traditional Affairs and Human Settlements (CGHST) often use the PMDS less as a developmental tool and more as a negotiated reward-and-control practice. The paper develops a mid-range theory of PMDS displacement and

proposes integrative governance as a practical-theoretical pathway for reconfiguring underlying mechanisms by making performance appraisal meaning-making, collective, and contestable; linking evaluation to development; shifting incentives toward coopetition; and institutionalising mentorship and career progression support in the CGHST context. Consequently, the paper maps PMDS challenges to clashes between PA paradigms. The mentioned assists public administration scholarship in explaining why innovative reforms produce inconsistent results in complex, institutionally plural systems.

Research Questions

The study seeks to understand how underlying assumptions in South Africa's PMDS contribute to performance incoherence and institutional inertia in the *provincial Department of Cooperative Governance, Traditional Affairs and Human Settlements (CGHST)*. Further, the study explores:

- How has Cartesian rationalism shaped PMDS design and implementation in CGHST?
- How do employees interpret and experience current PMDS practices?
- What relational and structural factors sustain fragmented performance management?
- How can critical realism bridge objective metrics and lived administrative realities?
- What would an ontologically pluralistic model of performance management entail?

Foundations of Performance Management in the South African context

The Performance Management and Development System aims to create a work environment that aligns employee career aspirations with organisational goals (Malefane, 2016, p. 142). Nevertheless, its implementation is embedded in socially, politically, and culturally complex realities, rendering it a daunting administrative challenge. Understanding this complexity requires tracing the historical evolution of performance management, from early 20th-century theories to modern paradigms (Dooren et al., 2010; Williams, 2004; Katsamunskas, 2012). Seminal thinkers in public administration, including Frederick Taylor, Woodrow Wilson, Max Weber and Christopher Hood (Hood, 1995), have significantly influenced contemporary performance management practices. These foundations, rooted in TPA and NPM, prioritise scientific management, hierarchical control, decentralisation, and performance efficiency. In South Africa, legislative frameworks, including the Public Service Act (1994), the White Paper on Human Resources Management (1997), and the PMDS Policy (NWDLGHS, 2016), institutionalise this evolution. These instruments reflect a rationalist ethos that emphasises control, standardisation, and measurable results (Lyalikov, 2023). The result has been a transition from input-based to multidimensional frameworks that emphasise outputs, outcomes, and public value (Cravino, 2020; Jansen, 2008).

Despite these theoretical underpinnings, empirical studies reveal persistent challenges in implementing performance management within the South African public service. These include HR capacity deficits, weak internal controls, ineffective monitoring and evaluation, politicised recruitment, ethical lapses in leadership, and fragmented communication structures

(Govender, 2017; Haricharan, 2023; Jarbandhan, 2022; Kawasaki et al., 2018; Khumalo, 2024; Maake, 2021; Verbeeten & Speklé, 2015). Scholars increasingly argue that such challenges reflect deeper ontological misalignments, wherein managerial systems designed for stability and predictability fail to adapt to the 'wicked' realities of governance (Julnes & Steccolini, 2015). Recent studies (Shevchenko, 2024; Makhmutov et al., 2024) further illustrate how the persistent emphasis on efficiency and control in performance management, while useful, undermines participatory governance and adaptability—ultimately reinforcing bureaucratic inertia.

Building on these insights, this article critically examines how Cartesian rationalism, grounded in objectivity, linearity, and reductionism, continues to shape South African performance management systems. While these principles contribute to institutional order, they also foster rigidity and fragmentation. West and Blackman (2015) caution that reform must go beyond surface-level adjustments to address structural inertia. This section thus lays the foundation for exploring alternative paradigms, particularly phenomenology and critical realism, as frameworks for overcoming technocratic limitations and advancing context-sensitive performance management in the public sector. These theoretical foundations are essential for reimagining performance management systems that are responsive to South Africa's complex governance realities.

Cartesian Legacies and Administrative Practice

The Cartesian perspective, coined by René Descartes, explains substance dualism (Blum, 2019). According to Descartes, a substance is "the ultimate bearer of properties," meaning it can maintain its existence regardless of any outside

influence (Secada, 2006, p. 67). In his view, the world consists of substances which are divided into mind and body (Lakew &

Lindblad-Gidlund, 2013, p. 2) as illustrated below.

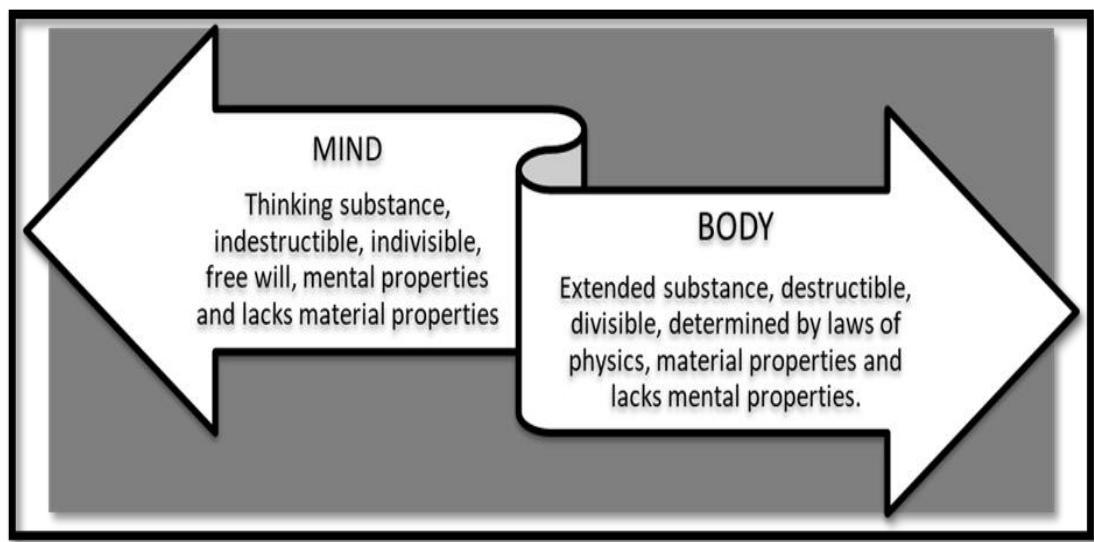


Figure 1: Mind and Body Properties (Hawthorne, 2007, pp. 87-98)

Figure 1 classifies all phenomena as either mind or body. The mind is characterised as a non-material, indivisible, and conscious thinking substance with free will, whereas the body is a material, divisible, and destructible entity governed by physical laws (Lakew & Lindblad-Gidlund, 2013, p. 2). As Van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015, p.

725) argue, entities with mental properties lack material features. Applying this logic to administrative systems, the PMDS is a 'body'—an extended substance that is divisible and governed by formal rules. It is therefore susceptible to disaggregation, measurement, and management as a structured and rational artefact.

PMDS

Regulatory Legislation

With a purpose, goals and objectives, and prescribed steps in the performance process

Stakeholders include: EA, Heads of HR components, Training officers, Training coordinators, HR practitioners, IRC, DMC, PAAP, Supervisors (line managers)

The ultimate goal is to deliver operational and developmental goals in the Public Service

FIGURE 2: The PMDS Object (PMDS Policy, 2016)

Explicitly, the PMDS (2016) is a binding regulatory legislation created by the then NWPDLGHS and now CGHSTA for Executive Authority, heads of HR components, Training officers, Training coordinators, HR practitioners, IRC, DMC, PAAP, and Supervisors who drive the implementation process to achieve operational and developmental goals in the departments (NWPDLGHS, 2016). Its purpose is to regulate, control, and improve employee and managerial performance through measurable incentives, goal setting, and procedural enforcement. The PMDS operates within a complex environment, involving multiple actors and guided by principles such as accountability, individual dignity, and collective responsibility. Performance-based rewards have financial implications for individual development, and the system also carries economic significance. These layers—social, political, institutional, and economic—shape how the policy is experienced and theorised in practice.

The PMDS reflects Cartesian rationalism, privileging clearly defined roles, segmented responsibilities, and input–output logic. By decentralising HRM to the provinces and introducing tools such as the PMDS, the public service reinforces a mechanistic, reductionist order (van der Hoorn & Whitty, 2015, p. 18). While efficient in design, such ordering risks marginalising reflexivity and equity in practical governance, especially when performance becomes a matter of compliance over developmental responsiveness. Since Descartes' seventeenth-century formulations, Cartesian rationalism has advocated for objectivity, dualism, and reductionism within public administration. These principles underpin bureaucratic neutrality and technical rationality, thereby reinforcing management models such as Taylorism (Mastracci, 2024). Cartesian thought is fundamental to

both classical and contemporary paradigms—particularly positivist and functionalist approaches—by emphasising delineated roles, segmented structures, and linear reasoning (Raadschelders, 2011; Beaton et al., 2024; Salarzahi et al., n.d.). While Cartesianism ensures analytical clarity, its reductionist perspective imposes certain limitations. It tends to fragment organisational life and neglect the interpretive and systemic dimensions of governance (Hutchins, 2015; Andreea & Hélène, 2023). This dualistic framework—mind versus body, subject versus object—limits the capacity to engage with complexity, adaptivity, and equity. Consequently, the continued adherence to Cartesian logic contributes to the rigidity and inertia observed in public administration. In response, alternative paradigms such as phenomenology propose more relational and context-sensitive frameworks capable of addressing the dynamic realities of governance.

Challenging Cartesian Logic through Phenomenology

Phenomenology, introduced by Edmund Husserl (Ongaro, 2017, p. 136) and further developed by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Morçöl, 2005, p. 4; Qutoshi, 2018, p. 216), presents a foundational critique of Cartesian rationalism. The perspective rejects rigid subject-object distinctions and the prioritisation of abstract reasoning, but privileges lived experience, context, and intersubjective understanding of the organisational context. Phenomenology offers a more fluid, relational, and participatory view of governance (Ehrlich et al., 1996, p. 23). This perspective supports a hybrid model in which organisations move beyond strict hierarchies toward decentralised decision-making, situational leadership, and the empowerment of adaptable and highly skilled employees (Waugh & Waugh, 2006, p. 506). Decision-

making is not merely procedural but intersubjective—grounded in the shared understanding among actors through democratic dialogue (Stout, 2014). This intersubjectivity reframes decision-makers as relational beings whose lived contexts shape their perceptions and actions (Qutoshi, 2018). Phenomenology provides the ontological basis for such hybridity by offering tools to resist Cartesianism's tendency toward depersonalisation, rigidity, and control. It affirms relationality, plurality, and contextual sensitivity as essential to addressing complex, 'wicked' governance problems and restoring public value.

Critical Realism as a Bridging Framework

Critical realism asserts that the real world operates as an open system, where observable events are underpinned by generative mechanisms and emergent properties (Jackson, 2008; Nichol, 2025). Rooted in the work of Roy Bhaskar, critical realism posits that the social world is stratified—comprising the empirical (what is observed), the actual (what occurs), and the real (the generative mechanisms that produce outcomes) (Jackson, 2008). As a meta-theoretical approach, it offers a stratified ontology and dialectical epistemology, enabling public administration research to explore both empirical regularities and deeper causal structures (Monaghan, 2024). Despite its growing relevance, critical realism remains underutilised in public administration, resulting in fragmented theoretical frameworks and suboptimal governance responses (Mackenzie & Bititci, 2025). This layered ontology is particularly relevant for unpacking wicked problems such as performance management, where linear, mechanistic explanations obscure the deeper institutional, cultural, and relational factors at play (Schedler et al., 2014). By recognising a layered social reality, critical realism bridges Cartesian dualism and phenomenological insights. It rejects reductionist binaries—such as structure vs agency, subject vs object—through

integrative models like the *Social Cube* and *relational realism*, which conceptualise decision-making as emergent, context-bound, and multi-dimensional (Yang, 2022). As governance environments become more dynamic, integrating critical realism with phenomenology offers a more robust foundation for adaptive, reflexive, and context-sensitive performance management models (Ongaro, 2024).

Methodology

The methodology section comprises the research paradigm, research design, case selection, population and sampling, data collection instruments, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations.

Research Paradigm

This study adopts positivism and interpretivism research paradigms. Critical realism mediates between empirical measurement and interpretive accounts by treating observed events and actual experiences as evidence of deeper generative mechanisms operating in context (Armstrong, 2019). Rooted in Cartesian dualism and Enlightenment rationality, the study considers components of performance management as objective, ordered, and measurable (an approach reflected in tools such as the PMDS). This alignment aligns with the positivist paradigm, which supports examining performance management through quantifiable indicators and observable regularities. Simultaneously, the study draws upon phenomenology to emphasise relationality, lived experience, and subjective meaning, particularly concerning how frontline implementers understand and enact performance management in practice. This orientation aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which advocates for exploring how actors construct meaning within their respective contexts.

Research Design

Based on the positivist and interpretivist paradigms identified in the previous section, a convergent mixed-methods research design was employed to capture both patterns and meaning across institutional layers. This design enabled the integration of quantitative data from structured questionnaires and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, collected simultaneously. The rationale for this approach is similar to performance management as a wicked problem—technically measurable but socially constructed and politically mediated. The case of the then NWPDCOGTA and HS and now CGHSTA is a representative microcosm of post-apartheid public administration reform, allowing for depth without losing contextual specificity. Triangulation across methods improved the reliability of findings and reinforced causal inference.

Population and Sample

The target population included public officials at various levels within the department. For quantitative research, a sample of 110 respondents was drawn using stratified random sampling. The sample included professionals such as accountants, organisational development specialists, and professionals from the built environment occupations (engineers, architects, skilled technicians, including inspectors, HR practitioners, and line managers within both departments). For the qualitative research, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with role players involved in performance management oversight and HR implementation through purposive sampling. These included HR practitioners and line managers, including senior or middle-level managers, responsible for performance management and HR implementation. The participants were selected based on their institutional roles, decision-making responsibilities, and experiential insights. This dual sampling

strategy ensured both breadth and depth of perspectives across hierarchical levels.

Data Collection Tools/Instruments

The study employed a dual-instrument design to align with two ways that performance management operates in practice. Firstly, it is a measurable system of ratings and indicators (a positivist orientation consistent with Cartesian/Enlightenment assumptions of order). Secondly, as lived experiences are shaped by meaning and context (interpretivist orientation consistent with phenomenology). The quantitative instrument was a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising closed-ended items and Likert-scale responses, as well as open-ended questions. This instrument operationalised measurable variables including biographical characteristics, perceived fairness in appraisal, institutional and implementation challenges, levels of collaboration, intention to leave, and organisational alignment. This structure enabled the study to test whether performance-management experiences differ systematically across groups and to identify observable patterns relevant to the functioning of the PMDS.

The qualitative tool comprised a semi-structured interview guide designed to capture first-order meanings, contextual tensions, and institutional contradictions. Interview questions explored collaboration and fragmentation among role players, policy–practice misalignment, power dynamics and political interference, role ambiguity, and barriers to employee development. Open-ended prompts allowed participants to describe how the PMDS is enacted, interpreted, and experienced in their own terms. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with informed consent.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS to produce descriptive and inferential

results. The analysis included descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies and medians) and nonparametric tests (e.g., the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests) to examine predictors of career satisfaction. Qualitative data were analysed in ATLAS.ti. A total of 145 meaningful responses were coded into 21 code groups, including mentoring, succession planning, performance inertia, policy fragmentation, and political interference. Thematic coding enabled tracing causal pathways from institutional mechanisms to performance outcomes.

Ethical Consideration

This study received ethical approval from the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) (NWU-00250-19-A7). All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, importance, and procedures, and provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to

withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and implementing secure data-handling practices.

Presentation of Results

This section presents the observed findings on the gap between performance management theory and practice in the then NWPDCOGTAHS, now CGTHS. Gender-based and Age-related differences are relevant to the PMDS because the instrument is not only about performance appraisal but also intended to support employee development, progression, and feedback. If different population groups experience career development challenges differently, this suggests that the PMDS may not be functioning equally or effectively for everyone. At this level, the purpose is to present the empirical patterns emerging from data before interpreting their broader organisational and theoretical significance.

Gender-Based Differences

To assess differences in perspectives on career development challenges between male and female respondents, the following hypotheses were formulated and tested using the Mann-Whitney U test, as shown in the table below.

H₀: There is no significant difference in challenges experienced between male and female respondents.

H₁: There is a significant difference in challenges experienced between male and female respondents.

Table 1: Gender differences

Gender	N	Median	Mean Rank	U	p-value
Female	63	30	61.44	1106.000	0.023
Male	47	29	47.53		

NB: Mann-Whitney U Test,

p- value (0.05)

Gender differences were observed in perceived career development challenges between male and female respondents ($p=0.023$), with females reporting more challenges. The findings suggest that the developmental benefits associated with the PMDS are not experienced uniformly across gender groups. At this level, the data

indicate unequal experiences in career progression and in employee development support.

Age-Related Differences

Regarding age-related differences, the following hypotheses were tested using the

Mann-Whitney U Test, and the results are presented in the following table.

H₀: There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions regarding career development challenges in Age groups 1 and 2.

H₁: There is a statistically significant difference in perceptions regarding career development challenges in Age groups 1 and 2.

Table 2: Age-Group Differences

	Age Group	N	Median	Mean Rank	U	p-value
Group 1	26-35 years	33	32	23.64	78.000	0.030
	Above 55	9	27	13.67		
Group 2	36-45 years	42	29	35.93	486.000	0.447
	46-55 years	26	29	32.19		

NB: Mann-Whitney U Test

p- value (0.05)

The findings indicate a statistically significant difference between respondents aged 26–35 years and those aged 55+ (U = 78.000, p = 0.030). The younger group (26–35 years) reported a higher median score (32) and a higher mean rank (23.64) compared to their older counterparts (median = 27; mean rank = 13.67), suggesting that early-career employees perceive greater career development challenges. By contrast, no statistically significant difference was found between the 36–45 and 46–55 age groups (U = 486.000, p = 0.447), with both groups reporting a median score of 29. At this level, the PMDS is experienced as more constraining for younger employees than for older employees.

Career Aspirations, Interruptions, and Support Structures

This section investigates respondents' career aspirations, the disruptions they faced, and the support structures available to them, emphasising how these personal journeys intersect with the design and implementation of performance management within the then NWPDCOGTA and HS, now CGTHS. The findings reveal how institutional conditions either enable or constrain career progression, thereby influencing the overall effectiveness of the performance management system.

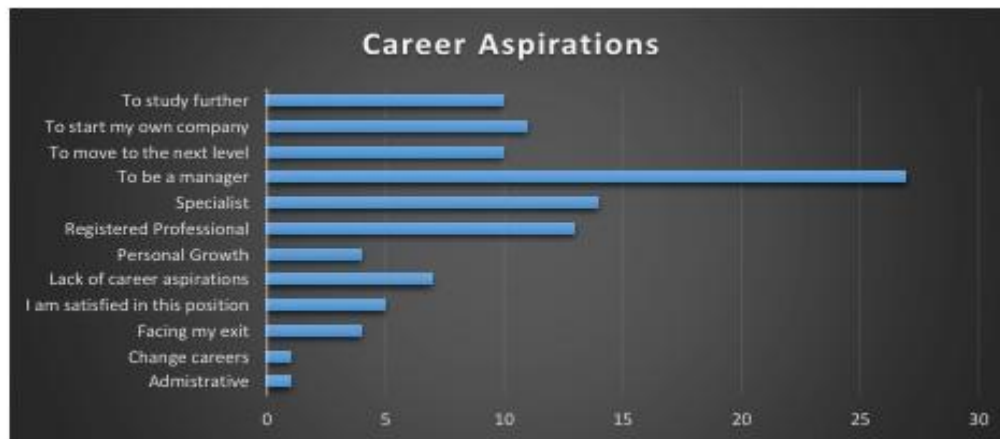


Figure 6: Career Aspirations

Figure 6 shows that most respondents aspire to become managers. For these employees, vertical progression from the bottom to the top is crucial, and many are likely to seek promotional positions to realise their career ambitions. Specialist roles and professional development pathways were also identified,

although less prominently. These findings suggest that employees expect career progression to form part of the organisational value of performance management. Regarding career interruptions, Figure 7 recorded the results.

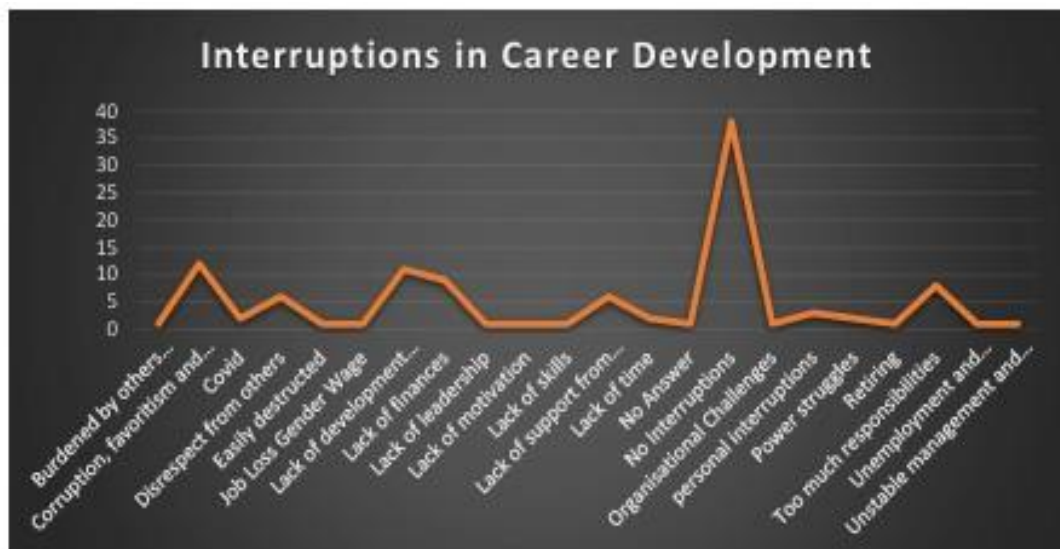


Figure 7: Career Interruptions

Figure 7 shows that while some respondents reported no career interruptions, many identified corruption, nepotism, COVID-19 disruptions, lack of funding, and limited training opportunities as barriers to

career progression. When asked about remedial actions they took to avoid career interruptions, respondents indicated they engaged in self-development, entrepreneurship, and

further training to counteract career stagnation.

Mentorship also emerged strongly in the data. A large majority of respondents (84 out of 110) highlighted the importance of supportive mentorship, especially from senior leadership. At this level, this points to a widespread need for the PMDS to be linked to developmental guidance, career validation and institutional support.

Performance Management as a Reward Tool

Participants overwhelmingly reported that the PMDS is misinterpreted, abused as a tool to settle vendettas and misused as a reward mechanism rather than a developmental tool.

Participant 24 stated:

The PMDS has become a reward tool that both employees and managers abuse.

This view was echoed by participants (25, 2 and 13) who reported that employees often expect high ratings because they are linked to year-end bonuses. Participant 10 explained the intensity of this expectation as follows:

"You find that the person will tell you that this is not your money, do not be stingy with it. It belongs to the government".

Several participants also indicated that final performance scores are altered by review committees due to financial constraints, undermining both the integrity of the system and the constitutional mandate to support employee development (Participants 7, 23). Participant 7 states that the

committee responsible for performance management ratings changes the final score that the line manager has accorded their employees because it is based on a financial budget rather than performance.

Participants further described the PMDS as compromised by perceptions of favouritism, political interference, and emotional strain associated with ratings. Some characterised it as "an event, not a process" while others referred to fear, retaliation and personal vendettas.

Participant 11 states that with ranking performances,

"You cannot leave your drink or water unattended because you do not know what will happen. It is a scary experience."

Participant 24 states that:

The "PMDS is a vendetta to settle managers' scores".

Managers often assign ratings "for peace" due to fear of retaliation (Participants 16, 18), while some viewed the PMDS as a tool for personal vendettas (Participants 11, 24).

Participant 11, who states that where there is money, there is favouritism

Taken together, these findings suggest that, at the observed level, the PMDS is disconnected from its formal development purpose.

Discussion of Findings

This article aimed to examine the persistent challenges of performance management in the then NWPDCOGTA and HS, now CGTHS. Drawing on critical realism, the discussion moves beyond the findings of the previous section to interpret what they reveal about performance management in practice and the deeper paradigm tensions that sustain the gap between formal policy design and lived institutional experience.

PMDS in Organisational Practice

The PMDS does not operate as a developmental system *at the North West provincial Department of Cooperative Governance, Traditional Affairs and Human Settlements (CGHST)*; rather, it is a contested organisational system shaped by reward expectations, managerial discretion, budgetary constraints, and informal power relations between males and females, as well as between young and old employees. The formal purpose of the PMDS is to support appraisal, feedback and employee development, which is central to the principles of the Cartesian. However, participants' lived experiences indicate that, in practice, it is closely associated with bonuses, year-end ratings, and conflict over performance scores. In fact, the PMDS is a financial distributive mechanism rather than a developmental one.

Furthermore, institutional and interpersonal pressures influence performance appraisal. Participants reported adjustments to scores due to budgetary constraints. Managers also assign peace ratings to avoid conflicts or

employee retaliation. Both practices indicate that employee performance does not solely determine ratings; rather, ratings are shaped by organisational constraints and manager-employee relationships. The PMDS is an unstable compromise between formal appraisal and informal accommodation.

The findings also reveal uneven developmental support. Younger employees (26-35) reported more career development challenges than older employees. Female respondents reported greater challenges than their male colleagues. Mentoring and coaching, training and career guidance were considered important but insufficiently available. Consequently, the PMDS does not operate uniformly across the workforce; employees' career progression is influenced by formal assessment procedures and by the uneven distribution of support, opportunity, and recognition.

The participants' descriptions of nepotism, favouritism and political interference further indicate that the PMDS operates alongside informal institutional practices that shape progression and reward. The core contradiction, then, is that a formally developmental system is enacted through reward competition and conflict avoidance.

Generative Mechanisms of the PMDS-Practice Gap

The core practical contradiction of formal systems enacted through competition and conflict avoidance points to deeper structural and paradigmatic tensions within the Department. The PMDS operates within a hybrid and internally contradictory institutional logic. Three orientations are

relevant in the data: TPA emphasises hierarchy, procedural complexity, and organisational order. NPM privileging measurement, competition and rewards-linked performance. The NPS fits Atomistic Governance in Stout and Love's (2015) typology: it treats individuals as independent and stable, and it frames public action through preference expression, interest pursuit, and pluralist competition. The findings of this study show that actors frequently framed and pursued interests in ways that translated into corruption, favouritism, nepotism, and vendetta-like dynamics. In critical realist terms, these orientations operate as real-domain generative mechanisms that shape how PMDs are enacted, experienced, and reported in the observed domain.

TPA remains structurally dominant in the governance of performance management through the PMDS. Organisational order is maintained through these procedural controls and hierarchical decision-making, even when they undermine employees' developmental intent. This manifests as review committees altering final scores to align budgetary ceilings and organisational constraints. Performance is not regarded as a developmental relationship between public managers and employees, but is an administrative output that must be stabilised and harmonised across the South African public service. This leads the performance appraisal system to experience rigid, episodic, and compliance-driven events rather than a developmental process.

Besides the dominance of TPA, the selective adoption of NPM instruments, such as KPIs, performance scores, and bonus-linked ratings, introduces

competitive and self-driven employee agendas. Participants' descriptions of employees expecting high ratings to secure bonuses, conflict around low scores, and managers awarding ratings for peace indicated that performance is a contested commodity rather than a developmental conversation. This orientation helps explain why career progress is narrated in terms of access to seniority positions. This explains why development becomes tied to visible outputs and ratings rather than to employee capability and growth, mentoring, and structured career pathways. Performance is simply measurable and not necessarily meaningful.

Participants' explanation of career interruptions and PMDS misuse manifests through atomistic individual orientation. This is not expressed to advance democratic participation, but rather expressed through corruption, nepotism, favouritism, and political interference to feed personal agendas. This displaces merit and development with network-based access and discretionary advantage. The PMDS becomes emotionally unsafe and politically manipulable (vendetta, favourism, where money is involved. In this view, PMDS becomes a site where individual actors pursue personal gain through financial rewards, protection, advancement, and control, all within and through this formal developmental system.

Drawing on critical realism, the study interprets the findings across three analytically distinct but connected domains: the observed (including empirical patterns and reported experiences), the actual (PMDS in Organisational Practice), and the real

(deeper generative mechanisms rooted in competing public administration paradigms).

PMDS Displacement: Causes and Recommendations

These mechanisms do not operate in isolation; rather, they produce a formal PMDS that is enacted as a reward-and-control practice. The observed findings are not merely implementation gaps; they are the effects of a deeper institutional configuration in which order maintenance through TPA, competition through NPM, and informal power through NPS are in conflict and override the developmental intent of the PMDS. On this basis, the study advances a mid-range theory of displacement in performance management:

In complex governance environments where TPA's order and compliance logic remains dominant, NPM's competitive measurements and reward tools are selectively layered onto weak developmental systems, and atomistic self-interested individuals operate through informal networks. The PMDS shifts from a developmental mechanism to a negotiated reward/control administration. The displacement produces budget-mediating adjustments, strategic scoring and conflict avoidance, weakened trust, and unequal developmental outcomes, explicitly affecting women and early-career employees who depend more heavily on mentorship, transparent career progression pathways, and institutional support in the North West

provincial department of Cooperative Governance, Traditional Affairs and Human Settlements (CGHS).

Overall, integrative governance is recommended in Public Administration Theory because it explicitly resolves key tensions such as order vs choice, through a participatory, self-organising process within complex networks, while remaining open to constataion and amendment (Stout & Love, 2021). When applied directly to PMDS, an integrative governance shift which is grounded in relational process ontology, epistemic communities, stewardship ethics, participatory power-with, coopetition, and networked facilitative administration (Stout & Love, 2015) can reconfigure these generative mechanisms by making appraisal meaning-making collective and contestable as well as development-linked, incentives cooperative-competitive rather than zero-sum, and developmental support (mentorship/career pathways) institutionally structured. The reconfiguration of the real domain is expected to reduce budget-mediated arbitrariness, strategic scoring and conflict avoidance in the actual domain and, over time, to narrow observed inequalities in developmental experience, particularly for women and early-career employees.

Conclusions

This study shows that the PMDS in CGHST functions as a mirror of broader public administration inertia in South Africa, reflecting a formally rational, developmental system which remains shaped by reductionist measures, including compliance logics, despite

complex realities of contemporary governance. Consequently, the PMDS is widely experienced less as a developmental tool and more as an unstable reward-and-control regime in the public service. Empirically, gender and career-stage differences are evident: female officials and early-career employees reported significantly greater challenges in career development. Respondents in quantitative research expressed strong managerial aspirations and noted interruptions linked to nepotism, corruption, and limited training opportunities, underscoring the complexity of implementing the PMDS in public-sector institutions. Qualitative evidence further revealed that the PMDS is commonly viewed as reward-centred and conflict-prone, with performance scores strategically negotiated between employees and public managers. Moreover, performance ratings are sometimes altered to meet budget constraints and are often associated with favouritism, political interference, fear and retaliation. These findings suggest that the PMDS theory-practice gap cannot be reduced to a failure of implementation alone. They, however, reflect deeper paradigm tensions in South African public administration: the persistence of hierarchical order and compliance imperatives, the selective layering of competitive measurement and reward tools, and the operation of informal power networks that compromise fairness and employee development. Consequently, performance management becomes a practice where administrative paradigms and governance realities collide,

producing uneven developmental outcomes and institutional mistrust. Overall, the paper contributes a critical realist, stratified explanation that links observed patterns to actual practices and real-level mechanisms. This move advances the mid-range theory of developmental displacement, explaining how complex and hybrid governance conditions shift PMDS away from development towards negotiation, budget-mediated scoring, conflict avoidance, and unequal developmental outcomes for women and early career employees who depend on transparent career progression pathways. Future research should therefore compare multiple provincial departments to test whether developmental displacement replicates across contexts. Overall, this paper recommends integrative governance as a reform orientation that can realign PMDS with employee and organisational development. This implies building stewardship-based, participatory and networked performance processes that shift performance conversations toward continuous learning and developmental support. Performance management reflects broader inertia within public administration and advocates for a shift towards relational and integrated governance approaches essential for aligning performance frameworks with the institutional and experiential realities of the South African public sector.

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