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FROM NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT TO DIGITAL GOVERNANCE: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM RESEARCH (2005 – 2025)

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Abstract:

Public service reform has move beyond a narrow focus on administrative efficiency towards more collaborative, citizen-centred and digitally enabled forms of governance. Yet the literature has not clearly shown how these reform logics have evolved together, particularly whether New Public Management (NPM) has been replaced or continues to shape newer collaborative and digital approaches. This study addresses that gap through a bibliometric analysis of 9,679 English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus from 2005 to 2025. The final dataset was obtained after screening 26,201 records using stated inclusion and exclusion criteria and was analysed with VOSviewer. Publication output increased from 189 articles in 2005 to 671 in 2024, with 2025 representing a

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partial year. The United Kingdom was the leading contributing country (1,650 publications), followed by the United States (1,480). The International Journal of Public Administration was the most productive journal (334 articles), while Public Administration Review recorded the highest total citations among the listed journals (16,586). Keyword co-occurrence analysis identified NPM as the most frequent and strongly connected theoretical keyword (370 occurrences; total link strength 716). Five thematic clusters were identified: governance and accountability; human capital and capacity building; institutional frameworks; socioeconomic governance; and digital transformation and e-government. The publication pattern also reflects four broad developmental phases, while recent themes show a shift towards artificial intelligence, co-creation and digital transformation. Based on these findings, the study proposes an Evolution of Public Service Reform Framework comprising three overlapping dimensions—Institutional Reform, Human and Governance Capital, and Digital Transformation and Innovation. The framework contributes by showing reform as a cumulative process in which managerial, collaborative and digital logics coexist and interact rather than simply replacing one another.

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Keyword:

Bibliometric Analysis, Digital Transformation, Governance, New Public Management, Public Service Reform

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Introduction

Public service reform refers to the efforts undertaken by governments to restructure and improve the delivery of public services. It includes a wide range of structural and administrative changes aimed at enhancing efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness within the public sector (Ayeni, 2002). Over time, public service reform has been understood as a series of evolving paradigms in public administration, reflecting shifts in how governments organise and deliver services to citizens (Gupta & Lamsal, 2023). Rising citizen expectations, fiscal constraints, demographic changes, climate risks, and rapid digitalisation have fundamentally transformed the operating environment of public institutions, requiring governments to reconsider how public services are organised, delivered, and governed (OECD, 2020; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Consequently, public service reform is no longer viewed solely as an administrative exercise aimed at improving bureaucratic efficiency, but as a broader governance strategy that seeks to strengthen public trust, institutional resilience, collaborative capacity, and digital capability.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
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The intellectual foundations of contemporary public service reform have evolved considerably over the past four decades. New Public Management (NPM) introduced market-oriented reforms, managerial accountability, and performance measurement to improve efficiency within public organisations (Hood, 1991; Kettl, 2015). Although NPM fundamentally transformed public administration, subsequent scholarship argued that its emphasis on managerial efficiency alone was insufficient for addressing increasingly interconnected policy problems characterised by cross-sector collaboration, citizen participation, and technological disruption (Osborne, 2006; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). These limitations encouraged the emergence of New Public Governance (NPG), Public Value Governance, and Digital Era Governance, each extending rather than completely replacing the managerial foundations established by NPM.

Despite this theoretical evolution, an important gap remains in explaining how successive reform logics are connected. Much of the literature examines New Public Management, collaborative or network governance, public value, and digital government as separate streams, or studies reform within particular national and policy settings. As a result, previous research offers limited evidence on whether newer collaborative and digital approaches replace earlier managerial principles or are layered onto them. More specifically, the literature has not sufficiently traced how NPM ideas such as efficiency, performance measurement, and accountability continue to interact with later concerns including co-production, public value, digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and citizen-centred service delivery. This leaves the evolution of public service reform conceptually fragmented and makes it difficult to explain continuity and change across reform paradigms.

Bibliometric analysis provides a systematic way to examine this unresolved relationship by mapping publication trends, intellectual influence, collaboration patterns, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic change over time (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Existing bibliometric reviews have tended to map public administration, governance, e-government, or digital government as separate domains. They have not, however, used large-scale longitudinal bibliometric evidence to trace how NPM-related managerial themes connect with collaborative governance and emerging digital governance within the same public service reform knowledge base. This study addresses both an empirical and theoretical gap by examining whether reform research reflects paradigm replacement or a cumulative pattern of layering and adaptation.

Accordingly, this study analyses 9,679 peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus between 2005 and 2025 to examine the intellectual evolution of public service reform research. Specifically, the study addresses four research questions: (i) What are the major research trends shaping public service reform? (ii) Who are the principal contributors to the development of this field? (iii) How have the dominant thematic areas evolved over time? and (iv) How can these findings be synthesised into an integrated framework that explains the evolution of public service reform beyond existing theoretical paradigms?

Literature Review

Public service reform has evolved over the past few decades in response to changing governance expectations, technological advancements, and increasingly complex societal challenges. Consequently, the literature has expanded beyond traditional concerns of administrative efficiency to encompass collaborative governance, public value creation, institutional resilience, and digital transformation. This section reviews the concept of public

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
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service reform, examines the major theoretical perspectives that have shaped its development, and discusses contemporary reform trends that explain the evolution of public service reform from New Public Management towards digital governance.

Concept of Public Service Reform

Public service reform refers to deliberate and structured efforts by governments to improve the functioning of public institutions, enhance service delivery, and better respond to citizens' needs (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). In recent decades, reform has expanded considerably in response to increasing demands for efficiency, transparency, and accountability in the use of public resources (Hood & Dixon, 2015; Osborne, 2010). Efficiency focuses on achieving better outcomes with limited resources (Boyne, 2003; Walker et al., 2011), while transparency promotes openness in decision-making and public spending (Meijer, 2009; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Accountability ensures that public officials remain answerable for their decisions and performance (Bovens et al., 2014; Hupe & Hill, 2007). Contemporary reform further emphasises administrative modernisation to strengthen organisational adaptability and innovation (Alford & Hughes, 2008; Torfing et al., 2020), alongside citizen-centred service delivery, where citizens actively participate in the design, delivery, and evaluation of public services through greater collaboration and engagement (Pestoff, 2013; Voorberg et al., 2015; Alford & Yates, 2016; Lember et al., 2019).

Theoretical Foundations

The evolution of public service reform has been shaped by changing expectations of government performance, governance arrangements, and public value creation. Rather than replacing one another, major public administration theories can be understood as responses to changing governance challenges (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). New Public Management (NPM) remains a theoretical foundation, emphasising efficiency, performance, accountability, and managerial autonomy. Emerging in the 1980s, NPM introduced private-sector management practices such as performance measurement, decentralisation, market competition, and results-oriented management to improve public sector efficiency and accountability (Hood, 1991; Kettl, 2015). Later sections test its continuing prominence empirically through keyword co-occurrence and network link-strength indicators rather than assuming theoretical dominance.

To address these limitations, New Public Governance (NPG) shifted attention from managerial control towards collaborative governance and networked public administration. NPG emphasises cooperation among governments, private organisations, civil society, and citizens through trust, partnership, co-production, and shared governance (Osborne, 2006; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). While this perspective broadens public service reform beyond organisational performance, it provides limited explanation of how digital technologies fundamentally reshape governance and public service delivery.

The emergence of Digital Era Governance (DEG) represents the latest stage in public administration theory, viewing digitalisation as a transformative force rather than merely an administrative tool (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Mergel et al., 2019). Technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, and digital platforms enable more integrated, responsive, and citizen-centred public services, while introducing new challenges related to cybersecurity, ethics, digital inclusion, and institutional trust (Meijer et al., 2021; Wirtz et al.,

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

2019). Digital governance therefore extends public service reform beyond traditional concerns of efficiency and collaboration.

Although NPM, NPG, and Digital Era Governance have each advanced public administration theory, they are often discussed as distinct or sequential paradigms. The present study instead conceptualises reform as an evolutionary and layered process. It proposes that managerial efficiency and performance systems provide an institutional base; collaborative governance, leadership, human capital, and public value broaden the relational capacity of reform; and digital technologies add new mechanisms for integration, responsiveness, and innovation. These elements are expected to overlap rather than unfold as mutually exclusive stages. This relationship forms the basis of the Evolution of Public Service Reform Framework and provides a testable way to understand continuity between NPM, collaborative governance, and digital governance.

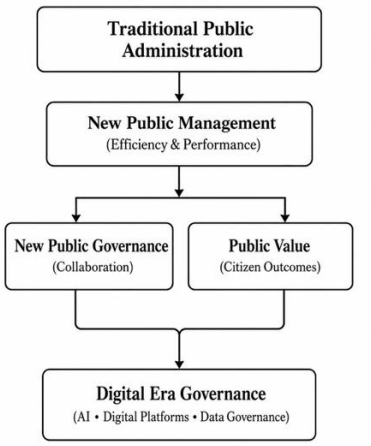


Figure 1: Evolution of Public Service Reform

(Source: Researchers' work)

Contemporary Trends in Public Service Reform

Recent public service reform research increasingly focuses on digital transformation, which extends beyond traditional e-government by reshaping public administration, decision-making, and citizen engagement through technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and digital platforms (Mergel et al., 2019; Dunleavy & Margetts, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2019). However, digital transformation also introduces governance challenges related to transparency, algorithmic bias, accountability, democratic participation, and digital inequality, particularly in areas such as welfare, policing, and public health (Meijer et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018; Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019). These issues highlight that responsible digital governance requires not only technological advancement but also fairness, explainability, and public trust.

Beyond digitalisation, contemporary public service reform increasingly emphasises human capital development and public sector innovation. Strengthening leadership, skills, organisational culture, and administrative capacity is essential for sustaining reform, particularly in developing countries (Grindle, 2010; Andrews et al., 2017; Laking & Norman, 2007; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). At the same time, governments are promoting innovation through approaches such as innovation labs, design thinking, and open government to improve institutional resilience, service quality, and public trust (Borins, 2014; Hartley, 2005; Torfing

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
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Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

et al., 2020; Ansell & Torfing, 2014; Bommert, 2010; OECD, 2017). Collectively, digital transformation, human capital development, and public sector innovation represent the dominant trends shaping the future direction of public service reform.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts bibliometric analysis, which is a quantitative approach used to map, measure, and interpret the intellectual structure of a body of scholarly literature (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). This method is chosen for the aim of study to identify broader patterns, trends, and relationships across a large volume of publications that are not easily visible through traditional literature review approaches (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Paul & Criado, 2020). In this sense, bibliometric analysis treats academic literature as data, where citation patterns reflect research influence, co-authorship networks show intellectual collaboration, and keyword co-occurrence reveals the thematic structure of a field (van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Cobo et al., 2011). The use of bibliometric analysis is further supported by its increasing application in public administration, management, and governance research. It has been widely used to track how research fields develop over time, identify influential studies and authors, and highlight emerging or underexplored areas that require further attention (Vogel & Güttel, 2013; Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruíz-Navarro, 2004; Kumar et al., 2021). This makes it especially appropriate for studying public service reform, that a complex and evolving field with diverse intellectual influences. In order to ensure transparency and reproducibility, this study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework as a guiding protocol for the literature search and selection process (Moher et al., 2010; Page et al., 2021). This structured approach allows an explanation of how the dataset was developed. It also strengthens the reliability and credibility of the findings by ensuring that the process can be replicated and verified by future researchers.

Data Source

The data for this study were collected from the Scopus that selected as the main data source. Scopus is widely recognised as one of the largest and most comprehensive abstract and citation databases for peer-reviewed literature. It provides extensive global coverage across disciplines and includes detailed bibliographic information such as author affiliations, citations, keywords, and source details, which are essential for bibliometric analysis (Elsevier, 2023; Falagas et al., 2008; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Compared to other databases, Scopus provides a stronger balance between broad coverage and data quality for social science research. It includes a larger number of indexed journals, more consistent metadata standards, and more reliable citation information, which are important for accurate co-citation, co-authorship, and keyword analysis (Falagas et al., 2008; Bartol et al., 2014; Harzing & Alakangas, 2016). Using a single high-quality database also ensures consistency in the dataset and avoids duplication issues that may arise when combining multiple sources, thereby strengthening the reliability and validity of the bibliometric analysis (Zupic & Čater, 2015; Donthu et al., 2021).

Search Strategy

The search strategy was designed to peer-reviewed research on public service reform published between 2005 and 2025. It was guided by established bibliometric procedures and aligned with

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

the research objectives of this study (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The search focused on three core keywords: "public service reform", "public sector reform", and "administrative reform". To ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature, Boolean operators and phrase-searching techniques were applied to capture different ways scholars refer to similar reform concepts. Specifically, the Boolean operator OR was used to combine related terms, while quotation marks were applied to ensure exact phrase matching. Based on this approach, the final query used in the Title, Abstract, and Keywords fields of the Scopus database was TITLE-ABS-KEY ("public service reform" OR "public sector reform" OR "administrative reform"). The search was exported from Scopus on 20 May 2026 and initially returned 26,201 records. The date is reported explicitly because Scopus coverage and citation counts can change over time.

The records were then screened using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included when they were journal articles, written in English, indexed in Scopus, and published within the 2005–2025 study period. Book chapters, conference papers, editorials, notes, short surveys, and other non-article document types were excluded. After these criteria were applied, 9,679 articles remained and constituted the final dataset used for all bibliometric analyses. Limiting the dataset to peer-reviewed journal articles also improved consistency in bibliographic and keyword metadata. The full selection process is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram.

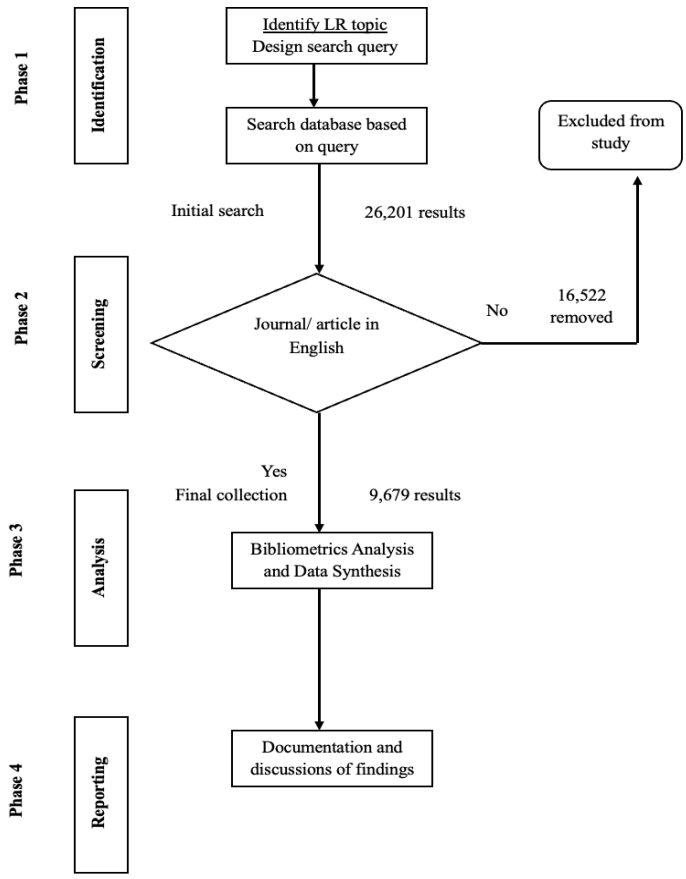


Figure 2: PRISMA Diagram

(Source: Researchers' work)

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

Data Analysis Tools

The bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20, Centre for Science and Technology Studies, Leiden University, The Netherlands), a widely used software for constructing, visualising, and analysing scientific networks (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Donthu et al., 2021). The final dataset of 9,679 peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from Scopus was imported into VOSviewer to generate visual maps of authors, countries, institutions, and keyword co-occurrence, where node size represents publication or citation impact, colours indicate thematic clusters, and link strength reflects the intensity of scholarly relationships (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Cobo et al., 2011; Van Eck & Waltman, 2017; Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Default settings (attraction = 2; repulsion = 1) were applied to ensure consistency with previous bibliometric studies (Zupic & Čater, 2015; Donthu et al., 2021). Institution and country terms were excluded from the keyword analysis to improve thematic clarity, while bibliometric indicators including total publications, citations, CiteScore, and h-index were used to identify the most influential journals in public service reform research (Hirsch, 2005; Falagas et al., 2008).

Results and Findings

Publication Trends

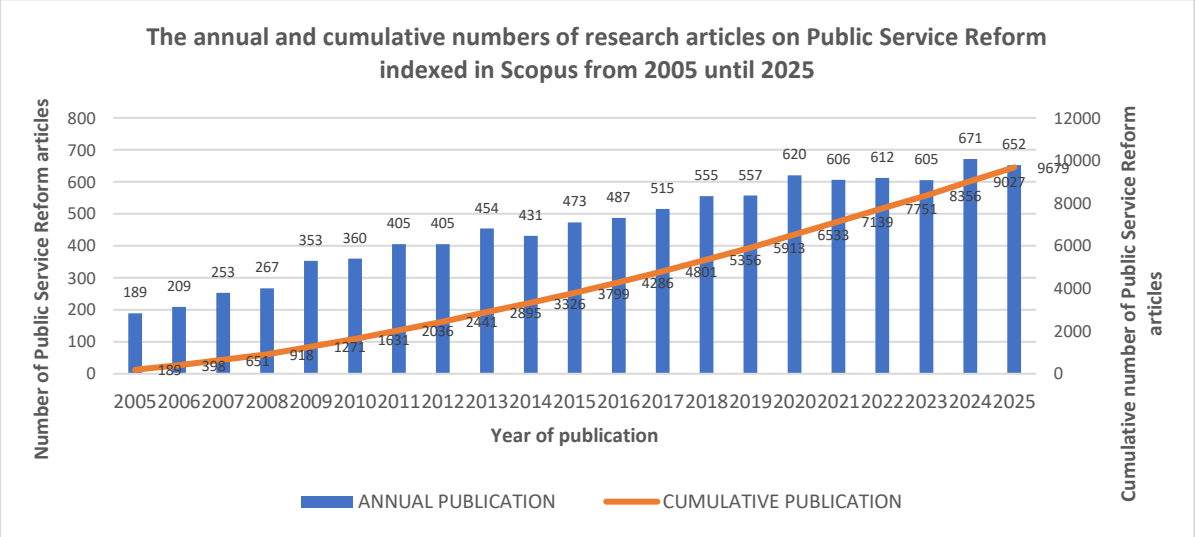


Figure 4: The Annual and Cumulative Numbers of Research Articles on Public Service Reform Indexed in Scopus from 2005 Until 2025

(Source: Researchers' work)

Figure 4 presents the annual and cumulative distribution of peer-reviewed journal articles on public service reform indexed in Scopus between 2005 and 2025. Publication output increased steadily from 189 articles in 2005 to 671 in 2024, demonstrating sustained scholarly interest in the field over the past two decades. The 2025 data represent publications indexed up to the date of data collection and therefore constitute a partial publication year. The publication trend can be grouped into four phases. The first phase (2005–2010) reflects the early development of the field following the widespread influence of New Public Management (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The second phase (2011–2015) represents consolidation, shaped by growing attention

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

to state capacity, austerity, and the limitations of market-oriented governance after the global financial crisis (Lodge & Hood, 2012; Andrews, 2013). The third phase (2016–2020) shows rapid expansion associated with digital government, open governance, and the administrative challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mergel et al., 2019; Dunleavy & Margetts, 2015; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). The final phase (2021–2025) reflects a mature research field characterised by sustained publication output and increasing attention to artificial intelligence, digital platforms, accountability, and public trust (Torfing et al., 2020; Wirtz et al., 2019; OECD, 2020).

These findings indicate that public service reform has evolved through a cumulative rather than replacement process. While New Public Management remains an important theoretical foundation, recent research increasingly integrates collaborative governance and digital transformation to address more complex public sector challenges. Rather than replacing NPM, Digital Era Governance extends earlier managerial reforms through technological innovation and citizen-centred governance. This evolutionary pattern provides empirical support for the proposed Evolution of Public Service Reform Framework, demonstrating that contemporary reform increasingly combines efficiency, collaboration, and digital capability within a unified governance approach.

Top 10 most productive journals on Public Service Reform

Table 1: The Top Ten Most Productive Journals on Public Service Reform Research with Their Most Cited Article

Rank	Journal	No. publication	No. citation	Cite Score 2024	Most cited article	Times cited	Publisher
1	International Journal of Public Administration	334	6193	5.4	Public value inside: What is public value creation?	420	Taylor & Francis
2	Public Management Review	325	12724	11.2	Co-Production and the Co-Creation of Value in Public Services: A suitable case for treatment?	873	Taylor & Francis
3	International Review of Administrative Sciences	277	6941	7.5	Open government: Connecting vision and voice	376	SAGE
4	Public Administration	258	13538	9.3	What's measured is what matters: Targets and gaming in the English public	1133	John Wiley & Sons

					health care system		
5	Public Administration Review	180	16586	11.9	Beyond engagement and participation: User and community coproduction of public services	1504	John Wiley & Sons
6	Public Money and Management	171	2454	5.2	Digital transformation going local: implementation, impacts and constraints from a German perspective	100	Taylor & Francis
7	Public Administration and Development	147	3436	4.0	Public Sector Management Reform in Developing Countries: Perspectives Beyond NPM Orthodoxy	156	John Wiley & Sons
8	Government Information Quarterly	145	15795	18.4	Using ICTs to create a culture of transparency: E-government and social media as openness and anti-corruption tools for societies	1829	Elsevier
9	Public Organization Review	140	2848	3.9	Complexity and Hybrid Public Administration-Theoretical and Empirical Challenges	348	Springer Nature
10	Public Policy and Administration	137	3270	7.9	What's in a Name? Making Sense of Social Enterprise Discourses	349	SAGE

(Source: Researchers' work)

Table 1 presents the ten most productive journals in public service reform research. The *International Journal of Public Administration* leads in publication output (334 articles), followed by *Public Management Review* (325 articles), *International Review of Administrative Sciences* (277 articles), and *Public Administration* (258 articles). In terms of scholarly influence, *Public Administration Review* records the highest citation count (16,586),

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

while *Government Information Quarterly* has the highest CiteScore (18.4) and the most cited article (1,829 citations), reflecting the growing prominence of digital governance research. Overall, the journal landscape indicates that traditional public administration journals continue to shape debates on governance, accountability, and organisational performance, whereas the increasing influence of *Government Information Quarterly* demonstrates that digital governance has become an integral component of contemporary public service reform. The coexistence of governance-focused and technology-oriented journals further suggests that the field increasingly integrates managerial, institutional, and digital perspectives, providing additional support for the evolutionary nature of public service reform proposed in this study.

Country and Institutional Contribution



Rank	Country	TPc	SCP (%)	Most productive academic institution	TPi
1	United Kingdom	1650	61.7	The University of Manchester	78
2	United States	1480	63.1	American University	35
3	Australia	769	61.8	The Australian National University	67
4	Norway	485	53.8	Universitetet i Oslo	83
5	Italy	476	59.2	Università degli Studi di Milano	34
6	China	472	52.1	Fudan University	24
7	Canada	451	58.3	University of Toronto	28
8	Netherlands	445	55.7	Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam	60
9	Germany	424	56.8	Universität Potsdam	22
10	Sweden	379	65.1	Göteborgs Universitet	71

Figure 5: Most Productive Countries and Academic Institutions in Public Service Reform Publications

* TPc: total publications of a given country.
* TPi: total publications of a given academic institution.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
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Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

* SCP: single-country publications.
(Source: Researchers' work)

Figure 3 maps the geographic and institutional landscape of public service reform scholarship. Result show most research on public service reform comes from a small group of high-income Western countries. The United Kingdom leads with 1,650 publications and a single country publication rate of 61.7%. This reflects its long history as both a site and exporter of administrative reform, from the New Public Management era to recent debates on devolution, digital government, and post Brexit restructuring (Hood & Dixon, 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The University of Manchester is the most productive institution in the country with 78 publications, consistent with its strong profile in public policy and governance research. The United States ranks second with 1,480 publications and the highest single country publication rate among the top five at 63.1%. This suggests a stronger tendency toward domestic collaboration, likely linked to the scale of the US academic system and its distinct public administration tradition. Norway ranks fourth with 485 publications and the lowest single country publication rate at 53.8%. Nearly half of its output involves international collaboration. This highlights the outward orientation of Scandinavian scholarship and the influence of cross border networks (Greve et al., 2016). Universitetet i Oslo leads all institutions in the table with 83 publications.

China is the only Asian country in the top ten, with 472 publications and a rate of 52.1%, reflecting increasing integration into global research networks alongside a distinct reform trajectory (Christensen & Fan, 2016). Sweden records 379 publications and the highest rate at 65.1%, suggesting a more domestic research orientation. Overall, the distribution in figure 3 is dominated by countries from Europe, North America, and the Anglophone Pacific. This concentration raises important concerns about the representativeness of public service reform knowledge. The limited visibility of developing countries may not reflect a lack of research activity, but rather structural factors such as publication in non-indexed or regional journals, language barriers, and unequal access to global academic platforms. As a result, locally grounded knowledge remains underrepresented, which may constrain the applicability of dominant theories in contexts with different institutional capacities and reform challenges (Andrews et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 2013; Grindle, 2010).

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

Co-authorship Map

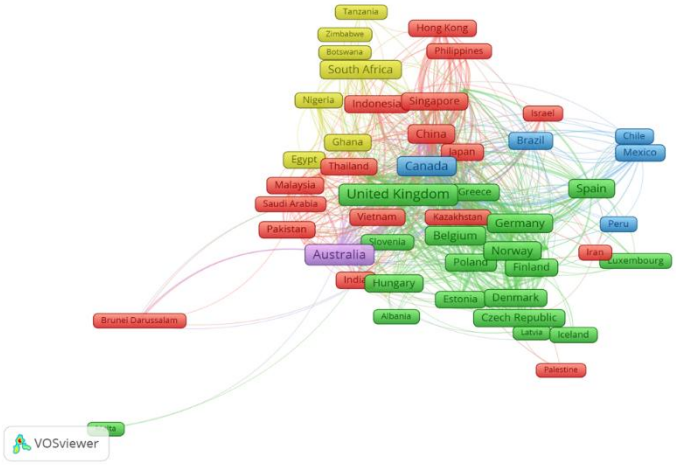


Figure 6: Co-authorship Country Map. Available at https://bit.ly/4t5rBAt
(Source: Researchers' work)

Extending the country level analysis in Section 4.3, the VOSviewer co-authorship map shows the structure of international collaboration in public service reform research. The map applies a minimum threshold of five documents per country. Scopus metadata returned 291 country entities in the dataset (including some regional or institutional miscoding in affiliation records), of which 97 met the five-document threshold and 96 are connected in the visualisation. The remaining one country met the threshold but had no co-authorship links and was excluded from the network display. Users are encouraged to verify country-level counts against the raw Scopus export, as affiliation disambiguation can introduce minor inconsistencies (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). These are grouped into five regional clusters: Europe, Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Oceania. Each cluster is shown in a different colour, allowing a clear view of both regional collaboration and cross regional links (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Glänzel & Schubert, 2004). In Europe, the United Kingdom is the most connected country, with 76 links and a total link strength of 867, the highest in the map. This confirms that the UK is not only the most productive but also the main hub of international collaboration, linking with partners across all regions (Hood & Dixon, 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Other European countries also show strong collaboration, including Norway (367), Italy (303), the Netherlands (296), and Germany (292). Although they have fewer partners than the UK, their collaborations appear deeper and more sustained. This reflects the strong intra-European research culture supported by regional frameworks and long-standing academic exchange (Greve et al., 2016; Lægreid & Verhoest, 2010).

In Asia, China is the leading collaboration node with 43 links and a link strength of 297. Together with its 52.1% single country publication rate, this suggests that China is strengthening domestic research while expanding international collaboration. This aligns with its broader goal to become a global knowledge producer in public administration (Christensen & Fan, 2016; Wang & Christensen, 2017). China is followed by Turkey (30 links; 49) and Singapore (29 links; 104). Singapore shows a relatively high link strength, indicating fewer but more productive partnerships. This reflects its role as a well-resourced and high impact research hub (Drechsler & Randma-Liiv, 2015). Other Asian countries also show growing collaboration,

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

including South Korea (125), Indonesia (65), and Malaysia (60). These trends suggest an emerging regional presence, although overall contributions remain smaller compared to Western countries (Andrews et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 2013).

In the Americas, the United States leads with 71 links and a link strength of 690, second only to the United Kingdom. This reflects both its high output and its strong role as a global collaboration partner (Kettl, 2015; Frederickson et al., 2012). In Africa, South Africa leads with 37 links and a link strength of 68, followed by Ghana with 15 links and 45. Although these figures are lower than those in Europe and North America, they indicate a growing African presence in the field. This development would benefit from further support through capacity building, open access, and stronger international partnerships (Andrews et al., 2017; Grindle, 2010; Fukuyama, 2013). Overall, the co-authorship map shows a field that is international in collaboration but uneven in influence. A small group of high-income countries, mainly in Europe and the Anglophone world, occupy the strongest positions. Countries in the Global South are present but remain more peripheral. Addressing this imbalance is important for building a more inclusive and globally relevant body of public service reform knowledge (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Zupic & Čater, 2015; Donthu et al., 2021).

Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

Top 10 Keyword in the Research on 'Public Service Reform'

Table 3: Top 10 Keyword in the Research on 'Public Service Reform'

Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Link	Total link strength
1	New public management	370	255	716
2	Public administration	348	237	702
3	Governance	320	242	617
4	Public sector	296	217	522
5	Accountability	256	217	555
6	Public sector reform	251	192	541
7	Administrative reform	197	163	320
8	Performance management	171	143	305
9	e-government	148	112	253
10	Public management	141	139	313

Source: Researchers' work

Table 3 presents the top ten keywords of the research on public service reform. The keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted using VOSviewer, applying a minimum co-occurrence threshold of 5 (i.e., a keyword must appear in at least 5 different articles to be included in the network). Of the 16,521 author keywords identified across 9,679 articles, 553 met this minimum threshold and were retained for network analysis, with the top ten by occurrence frequency shown in Table 3. "New Public Management" leads with 370 occurrences, 255 links, and a link strength of 716, confirming its continued role as a key reference point despite ongoing critique. This is followed by "Public Administration" (348 occurrences; 237 links; link strength 702) and "Governance" (320 occurrences; 242 links; link strength 617), which reflect the field's core focus on how governments organise and act. Other prominent terms include "Public Sector""(296 occurrences; 217 links; link strength 522) and "Accountability" (256

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

occurrences; 217 links; link strength 555), the latter showing strong conceptual connections across the literature. "Performance Management" (171 occurrences; 143 links; link strength 305) highlights continued interest in measuring government outcomes, while "e-government" (148 occurrences; 112 links; link strength 253) reflects the growing importance of digital transformation. "Public Management" (141 occurrences; 139 links; link strength 313) serves as a linking concept across themes. Overall, the results show a field grounded in established ideas while increasingly engaging with digital and emerging reform priorities (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Donthu et al., 2021).

Visualization Map of Keyword Cluster

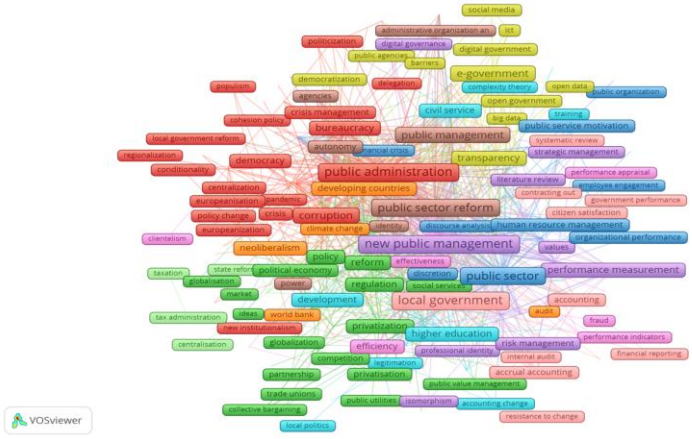


Figure 7: Visualization Map of Co-occurrence Analysis. Available at https://bit.ly/4wdRBfQ

Source: Researchers' work

Table 4: List of Keyword Cluster

Cluster	Keyword
Cluster 1: Organizational governance & accountability	'Public administration', 'administrative reform', 'Corruption', 'bureaucracy', 'decentralization', ''policy diffusion', 'policy transfer', 'new institutionalism', and 'policy change'.
Cluster 2: Human capital & capacity building	'public sector', 'human resource management', 'performance', 'public service motivation', 'work engagement', 'civil service reform', 'turnover intention', 'good governance', 'human capital', and 'leadership'.
Cluster 3: Institutional frameworks	'new public management', 'performance management', 'performance measurement', 'institutional theory', 'strategic management', 'new public governance', and 'risk management'.
Cluster 4: Socioeconomic governance	'globalization', 'privatization', 'public services', 'public-private partnership', 'inclusion', 'collective bargaining', 'austerity', 'public policy', 'regulation' and 'trade union'.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

Cluster 5: Digital transformation & e-government	'e-government', 'digital government', 'open data', 'infrastructure', 'digital divide', 'digital transformation', 'artificial intelligence', 'transparency', 'digitalization', and 'collaborative innovation'.

(Source: Researchers' work)

This co-occurrence map presents clusters of keywords (nodes) that frequently appear together and are strongly linked within public service reform research. Each cluster is formed based on the strength of connections between keywords, meaning that terms appearing together more often are grouped into the same thematic area. In simple terms, each cluster represents a major research conversation within the field. The keyword co-occurrence map groups the 553 keywords into five thematic clusters in public service reform research. Cluster 1 focuses on governance and accountability, including public administration, administrative reform, corruption, decentralization, and policy transfer, and forms the core foundation of the field by addressing how authority is organised and controlled. Cluster 2 highlights human capital and capacity building, with keywords such as human resource management, public service motivation, leadership, and work engagement, emphasising the role of people in shaping reform outcomes. Cluster 3 covers performance systems and institutional frameworks, including new public management, performance management, and strategic management, reflecting how reforms are designed, implemented, and assessed, with NPM and new public governance often used together in practice. Cluster 4 examines socioeconomic governance in bringing together globalization, privatization, public private partnership, and trade union, and showing how reform is shaped by economic forces and social tensions (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Cluster 5 centres on digital transformation and e government, which including digitalization, open data, artificial intelligence, and transparency, indicating the growing importance of technology while recognising issues such as the digital divide. Overall, these clusters show governance and accountability, human resource, institutional design, economic change, and digital transformation as main dimensions of public service reform research (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Donthu et al., 2021).

Thematic Evolution

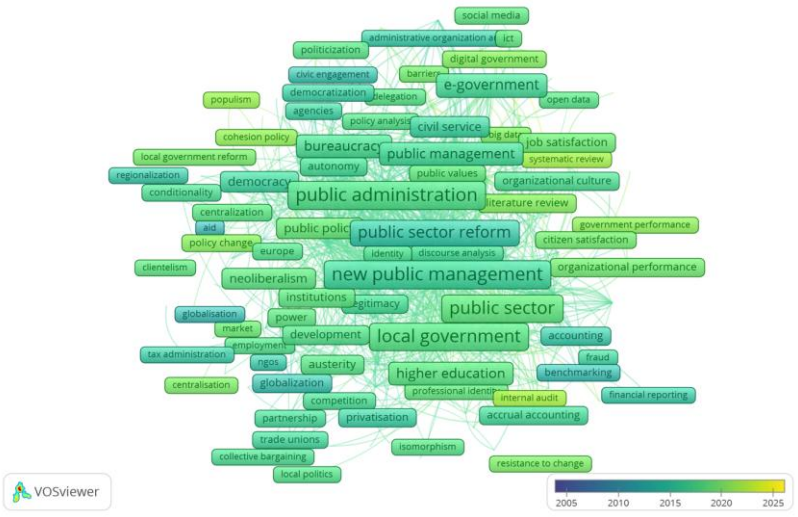


Figure 8: Overlay Map (Average Publication Year). Available at https://bit.ly/4cCqHGG
(Source: Researchers' work)

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

The VOSviewer overlay visualization maps the average publication year of keywords using a colour gradient from earlier (cool) to more recent (warm), illustrating the thematic evolution of public service reform research. To facilitate interpretation, the findings are organised into three phases corresponding to the publication trends identified in Section 4.1: Phase 1 (2005–2015), Phase 2 (2016–2020), and Phase 3 (2021–2025). During Phase 1, the field focused on foundational concepts including *public sector organisation*, *public sector reform*, and New Public Management (NPM), with NPM emerging as the dominant keyword (370 occurrences; link strength 716) within Cluster 3 (Performance Systems and Institutional Frameworks). Phase 2 marked the diversification of the field towards governance and human-centred reform, with increasing prominence of *governance*, *performance management*, *human resource management*, *accountability*, *collaboration*, *public value*, and *public service motivation*. During this period, Clusters 1 (Governance and Accountability) and 2 (Human Capital and Capacity Building) matured, while Cluster 5 (Digital Transformation and E-Government) began to emerge through themes such as *digital government* and New Public Governance.

In Phase 3 (2021–2025), digital transformation became the dominant research direction, characterised by themes such as *co-creation*, *artificial intelligence*, and *digital transformation*. Notably, artificial intelligence is increasingly associated with public value, reflecting growing attention to accountability, ethics, and citizen participation rather than purely technical efficiency (Meijer et al., 2021; Wirtz et al., 2019). At the same time, *digital transformation* maintains a strong co-occurrence with New Public Management, indicating that digital governance builds upon rather than replaces NPM principles of efficiency, performance, and accountability. Overall, the thematic evolution demonstrates a clear progression from institutional reform in Phase 1, to governance and human capital in Phase 2, and towards integrated digital governance in Phase 3, highlighting the complementary evolution of New Public Management, New Public Governance, and Digital Era Governance.

Discussion

The Evolution of Public Service Reform

The bibliometric findings indicate that public service reform has evolved through theoretical expansion rather than paradigm replacement. In the keyword co-occurrence analysis, "New Public Management" is the most frequent theoretical keyword, with 370 occurrences, 255 links, and a total link strength of 716. This provides the specific bibliometric basis for describing NPM as the most prominent theoretical reference point in the analysed network. At the same time, themes associated with governance, accountability, e-government, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, co-creation, and innovation have become increasingly visible. The evidence therefore suggests continuity alongside change: established managerial concerns remain strongly connected while collaborative and digital themes broaden the reform agenda.

This evolutionary pattern is consistent with broader developments in public administration theory. Early reforms focused on improving organisational performance and efficiency through NPM (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), before expanding towards collaborative governance and public value under New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006). More recently, Digital Era Governance has further transformed public administration through artificial intelligence, digital platforms, big data, and data-driven decision-making (Mergel et al., 2019; Meijer et al., 2021). Collectively, the findings suggest that public service reform

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101
should be understood as a cumulative and adaptive process in which digital governance complements rather than replaces earlier managerial reforms, providing empirical support for the proposed Evolution of Public Service Reform Framework.

The Persistent Role of New Public Management in Contemporary Reform Discourse

A key finding of this study is that New Public Management (NPM) remains the most prominent keyword, with 370 occurrences and a link strength of 716, while maintaining strong connections with digital transformation, the newest research theme. This suggests that public service reform evolves through layering and adaptation rather than paradigm replacement (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011; Lodge & Gill, 2011). Although digital governance has gained increasing attention, many contemporary reforms continue to build upon NPM principles of efficiency, performance measurement, and accountability through the use of data-driven and digital technologies (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Wirtz et al., 2019). These findings support the view that NPM remains an enduring and adaptive foundation of public administration, increasingly enriched by interdisciplinary perspectives, and highlight the need for integrated reform frameworks that recognise both continuity and change (Hood & Dixon, 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Greve et al., 2016; Torfing et al., 2020).

Global Inequalities in the Production of Public Service Reform Knowledge

The country productivity results (Section 4.4) and co-authorship network (Section 4.5) show that public service reform knowledge remains unevenly distributed and largely dominated by a small group of high-income Western and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. The United Kingdom, United States, and Australia lead in both research output and international collaboration, while many influential authors are also affiliated with European and Anglophone institutions. These countries possess stable administrative systems and strong links to New Public Management traditions, which continue to shape global understanding of public service reform (Andrews et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 2013). However, reform approaches are highly context-dependent and may not be fully transferable to developing countries that face different political, institutional, and administrative realities (Grindle, 2010).

The findings also indicate growing participation from Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia, as well as African countries including South Africa and Ghana, suggesting a gradual expansion of the reform knowledge base (Donthu et al., 2021; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). This development is important because public service reform remains highly relevant in developing countries, where challenges related to administrative capacity, digital transformation, governance quality, and institutional resilience continue to be significant. Nevertheless, the field still relies heavily on perspectives and experiences from developed and OECD countries. Therefore, there is a strong need for more inclusive research that better reflects diverse governance environments and strengthens scholarly contributions from the Global South (Andrews et al., 2017; Christensen & Fan, 2016).

Toward a New Integrated Reform Perspective

The combined findings from the keyword cluster analysis (Section 4.7) and thematic evolution map (Section 4.8) indicate that public service reform is evolving towards a more integrated theoretical perspective. Between 2005 and 2025, the literature progressed from traditional

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

bureaucratic administration to New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG), and more recently Digital Era Governance, with increasing emphasis on digital transformation, sustainability, and citizen-centred governance. Throughout this evolution, NPM has remained an institutional bridge by continuing to shape reform through efficiency, performance measurement, and accountability while supporting newer governance approaches (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). This evolution also reflects a shift towards greater citizen participation in the co-design and co-production of public value.

Recent themes further reinforce this transition. Keywords such as co-creation reflect the collaborative principles of NPG, while artificial intelligence, digital transformation, and public value demonstrate how digital technologies are increasingly embedded within public administration while remaining closely connected to NPM principles of efficiency and performance (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Moore, 1995; Hood, 1991). These findings suggest that contemporary public service reform is characterised by continuity rather than replacement, requiring an integrated perspective that combines managerial efficiency, collaborative governance, and digital transformation (Bryson et al., 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Christensen & Lægreid, 2011).

Accordingly, this study proposes the *Evolution of Public Service Reform Model* with three interrelated and overlapping dimensions. The first, Institutional Reform, captures the enduring NPM-related emphasis on performance systems, strategic management, accountability, and institutional arrangements. The second, Human and Governance Capital, brings together NPG and Public Value concerns such as collaboration, leadership, human resource management, public service motivation, and citizen-oriented governance. The third, Digital Transformation and Innovation, reflects digitalisation, artificial intelligence, open data, digital platforms, and collaborative innovation. The relationship among the dimensions is cumulative: later collaborative and digital capabilities build on, modify, and interact with earlier managerial arrangements. Unlike frameworks that present NPM, NPG, and DEG mainly as successive paradigms, the proposed framework uses bibliometric evidence to show their continuing coexistence and interdependence. Its theoretical contribution is therefore to explain reform evolution through layering, interaction, and adaptation rather than through straightforward paradigm replacement.

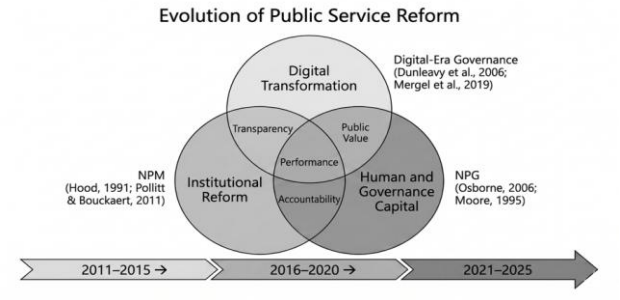


Figure 9: Evolution of Public Service Reform Model

(Source: Researchers' work)

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

Implications

This study makes theoretical and methodological contributions by proposing the *Evolution of Public Service Reform Framework*. Its novelty lies not simply in arranging NPM, NPG, and DEG in chronological order, but in explaining how their underlying logics remain connected within contemporary reform. Bibliometric evidence from 9,679 publications shows a persistent managerial core alongside increasingly prominent collaborative and digital themes. The framework translates this pattern into three overlapping dimensions—Institutional Reform, Human and Governance Capital, and Digital Transformation and Innovation—and positions accountability, performance, public value, and transparency as linking principles across them. This offers a more integrated understanding of reform evolution than approaches that treat each paradigm as a separate stage, and it demonstrates how bibliometric mapping can support theory development as well as descriptive knowledge mapping.

The findings also provide practical implications for researchers and policymakers. Future research should move beyond examining individual reform paradigms towards integrated analyses that capture the interaction between managerial, governance, and technological dimensions. For policymakers, the findings suggest that successful digital transformation depends not only on technological investment but also on organisational capability, leadership, governance capacity, and human capital. This is particularly important for developing countries, where sustainable reform requires balancing efficiency, collaboration, and digital innovation within a coherent public service reform agenda rather than treating digital governance as a stand-alone initiative.

Future Research Directions, Limitations, Conclusion

Future Research Directions

This study highlights several directions for future research. First, greater attention should be given to the governance of artificial intelligence (AI) in public service reform. Although AI emerged as one of the fastest-growing research themes during 2021–2025, existing studies primarily emphasise efficiency rather than broader issues of algorithmic governance, accountability, participation, and digital rights. Future bibliometric and empirical studies should therefore examine how AI reshapes public administration by integrating perspectives from regulatory governance, digital rights, and participatory democracy (Wirtz et al., 2019; Meijer et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018). Second, climate governance and sustainability remain underrepresented in the literature despite their growing importance. Future research should investigate how governments incorporate climate adaptation, net-zero policies, and environmental resilience into public service reform, particularly in developing countries where institutional capacity remains a significant challenge (Torfing et al., 2020). In addition, future studies should expand empirical evidence from developing countries, where public service reform remains comparatively underexplored. Greater recognition of Global South institutions as contributors to theory and innovation, rather than solely adopters of Western frameworks, would enrich the field. Finally, the growing prominence of co-creation suggests a promising avenue for future research. Further empirical investigations across both the Global North and Global South are needed to understand how collaborative governance and citizen participation shape contemporary public service reform in different institutional contexts.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 1075-1101

Limitation

This study has three limitations. First, it uses only the Scopus database, which means some relevant studies in other databases or grey literature are not included, leading to partial coverage of the field. Second, the focus on English language publications excludes important work published in other languages, which may underrepresent non-English-speaking research communities and reinforce existing imbalances in the literature. Third, bibliometric methods are inherently quantitative and cannot capture the full depth of ideas within individual studies. The results therefore show broad patterns and structures rather than detailed interpretive meaning (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

Conclusion

This study mapped public service reform research from 2005 to 2025 using 9,679 Scopus indexed articles. The findings show steady growth in the field and a clear evolution from institutional concerns to human centred and digital focused reforms. New Public Management remains a dominant framework and continues to shape current thinking through its adaptation within digital transformation. The field is also highly concentrated in a small number of high-income countries, while much of the Global South remains underrepresented in knowledge production. Five key themes structure the literature: governance and accountability, human capital, institutional framework, socioeconomic governance, and digital transformation. These are increasingly converging into an integrated reform agenda captured in the evolution of public service reform model. Emerging topics such as artificial intelligence, co creation, and climate governance show that the field is entering a new phase where efficiency, participation, and technology must be considered together. This study therefore provides both a map of how the field has developed and a model to guide future research and practice in public service reform.

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Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Shamsul Azri was responsible for the conceptualization and methodology of the study. Dr. Wan Mohd Hasif responsible for overall supervision of the study. Prof. Rosmini handled interpretation of results. Prof Fauziah and Dr. Ong contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) "The author(s) declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used during the preparation of this manuscript. The tool(s) were used: Grammarly. The tool(s) were used for grammar improvement. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and verified by the author(s), who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the manuscript."

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